

Psychology in Sports Coaching

Theory and practice

**Adam R. Nicholls and
Leigh Jones**



Psychology in Sports Coaching

Theory and practice

Adam R. Nicholls and Leigh Jones



First published 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2013 Adam R. Nicholls and Leigh Jones

The right of Adam R. Nicholls and Leigh Jones to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Nicholls, Adam R.

Psychology in sports coaching : theory and practice / by Adam Nicholls and Leigh Jones.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Coaching (Athletics) – Psychological aspects. 2. Sports – Psychological aspects. I. Jones, Leigh. II. Title.

GV711.N54 2013

796.07'7-dc23

2012006093

ISBN: 978-0-415-62598-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-62599-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-10271-8 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman

by HWA Text and Data Management, London



Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

To my lovely niece Daisy, may you always receive excellent coaching!

– Adam

To my son Sam, I hope this in some way inspires you.

– Leigh

Psychology in Sports Coaching

Have you ever wondered how athletes learn and make use of the feedback they are given by their coach, or how a coach could make his or her feedback more effective for athletes?

Psychology in Sports Coaching has been written specifically for students studying coaching who want to improve their understanding of incorporating psychology into coaching practice. As such, it provides information on how coaches establish the psychological needs of athletes in order for them to provide psychological interventions, such as mental imagery, mental toughness training, and coping effectiveness training.

This book also provides the reader with information on enhancing the awareness of athletes and the relationships that occur between the coach and the athlete. It explains how coaches can coach children, adolescents, adults and athletes with learning disabilities. These groups of athletes have different learning styles, are motivated by different factors and prefer instructions to be administered differently. So, it is important that coaches tailor their coaching based on the athlete they coach, as this has the potential to enhance the performance and enjoyment of the players that are being coached.

Essential reading for all students of sports coaching and sport psychology, and for practising sports coaches, this book will help develop and extend coaching expertise.

Adam R. Nicholls is Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Hull, UK. He is a Health Professions Council-registered sport and exercise psychologist, who has published over 40 scientific papers on the areas of stress, coping, emotions, and mental toughness. Much of his research has featured international and professional athletes.

Leigh Jones is National Coach Development Manager for the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union and National XV's Head Coach. He is a BASES-accredited sport and exercise scientist with 20 years' applied experience in the UK as a professional coach.

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>ix</i>
Introduction	1
PART I	
Identifying the psychological needs of athletes	7
1 Conducting needs analysis interviews	9
2 Using questionnaires to assess the needs of athletes	14
PART II	
How to help athletes: mental skills training	19
3 Mental imagery	21
4 Mental toughness training	33
5 Maximising sport confidence	45
6 Coping effectiveness training	56
7 Choking prevention training	68
8 The injured athlete	75

PART III	
Facilitating awareness	87
9 Goal setting	89
10 Performance profiling	98
PART IV	
Coaching different populations	107
11 Coaching children	109
12 Coaching adolescents	121
13 Coaching adults	134
14 Coaching athletes with learning disabilities	144
PART V	
Relationships and support	157
15 The coach–athlete relationship	159
16 Understanding and building team cohesion	168
17 Providing social support	178
PART VI	
Concluding thoughts	185
18 Ethics, referrals and the Health Professions Council	187
<i>References</i>	<i>191</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>213</i>

Illustrations

Figures

5.1	Completed confidence profile for a soccer player	51
6.1	The symptoms of stress	61
6.2	Why athletes experience stress: demands vs. resources to cope	62
7.1	Physical symptoms associated with choking	69
7.2	Psychological symptoms associated with choking	69
10.1	Example of a completed performance profile	101
10.2	Team performance profile for June	104
10.3	Team performance profile for April	104
16.1	The four-dimensional model of group cohesion	169

Tables

2.1	A sample of questionnaires from the sport psychology literature	17
5.1	A soccer player's view about what he or she needs to be confident about to be successful in soccer	49
5.2	Ranking and meaning of the 12 most important qualities to be confident in	49
5.3	Completed sources of confidence table for a soccer player	50
6.1	Controllable versus uncontrollable stressor checklist	64
10.1	An example of the qualities a soccer player identified as being important in his or her sport	100
10.2	Ranking the qualities and providing a meaning	101
16.1	Factors that influence task and social cohesion	170

Introduction

This book has specifically been written to help students studying coaching to understand the psychological principles of coaching to maximise coaching effectiveness. The purpose of this introduction is to explain:

- Sports coaching: its purpose, what it is, and how it differs from teaching
- What sport psychology is and isn't and its synergy with coaching
- Contexts in which coaches and sport psychologists work together
- Contexts in which coaches might prefer not to work with a sport psychologist
- The benefits of incorporating psychology within coaching
- Psychology and an athlete's ability
- The structure and contents of this book
- How to get the most out of this book
- Chapter features.

Sports coaching: its purpose, what it is, and how it differs from teaching

According to Lyle (2011), the purpose of sports coaching is to improve the performance of an athlete or sports team. Providing a definition of sports coaching that fully encapsulates what it is, can be somewhat problematic and goes much beyond this introduction. There are a number of extensive commentaries regarding what sport coaching is and how it can be conceptualised (Cushion, 2007a, 2007b; Lyle, 2007).

For the purposes of this book, sport coaching refers to the process in which a person or people attempt to improve the sporting performance of an athlete or team in competition, by manipulating the behaviour and creating practice environments that facilitate improvement. This person or people, are often given the title of 'coach', and perform a multitude of roles (Lyle, 2011). Indeed, Lyle (2011) stated that the coach provides technical advice to his or her athlete or team with the sole purpose of helping an athlete or team achieve better performances and thus results when competing. In addition to providing technical support, Côté and Gilbert (2009) also suggested that sport coaches provide leadership, motivation, and education to their athletes. Although the primary role of coaches

2 Introduction

who engage in sports coaching is performance enhancement, sport coaching also has the potential to enhance the psychological well-being of athletes by making sport a positive experience for athletes (Côté *et al.*, 2010).

Coaching is different from teaching. Sport coaching refers to the process of preparing an athlete or team to perform within a sports competition, whereas teaching refers to developing a person's skills not for competitive purposes (Lyle, 2011). As such, sport coaching is concerned primarily with performance enhancement within competitive sport.

What sport psychology is and isn't and its synergy with coaching

Psychology refers to the scientific analysis of the way human beings behave, think, and feel. As such, sport psychology refers to the scientific analysis of the way humans behave, think, and feel within sporting contexts, such as training and competition. According to Nicholls and Callard (2012) there are two primary goals of sport psychology: (1) to ensure the psychological well-being of athletes and (2) maximise performance. As such, sport psychology and coaching have a common purpose: performance maximisation of athletes or sports teams. Unlike sport psychology, coaching is not primarily concerned with maximising psychological well-being. However, coaching has the potential to improve well-being by creating positive experiences for athletes (Côté *et al.*, 2010). As such, coaching and sport psychology complement each other nicely, so it could be argued that one of the roles a coach should play should involve an element of psychology, to enhance performance above and beyond what technical training drills may achieve alone.

Some coaches may be sceptical of sport psychology, partly due to the negative attention that this discipline receives or a coach's negative experiences of sport psychology. There are many unqualified individuals working in professional sport who pose as sport psychologists. These individuals will not be sufficiently trained to provide an adequate service and may cause more harm than good. Such individuals may give coaches and athletes unrealistic expectations regarding what sport psychology can achieve.

It is important that coaches realise that sport psychology is not an instant cure for the problems an athlete may be encountering. As stated by Nicholls and Callard (2012), teaching an athlete mental skills is not like waving a magic wand in front of his or her face, that will instantly transform the athlete or team into world beaters. However, sport psychology involves teaching athletes a variety of mental skills, which when practised can help athletes improve their performance and boost mental well-being.

Contexts in which coaches and sport psychologists work together

Coaches and sport psychologists may work together when athletes from individual sports such as tennis or golf employ both a coach and a sport psychologist. In other circumstances, coaches may employ the sport psychologist to work with his

or her team. Generally, a coach would employ a sport psychologist when he or she feels that the athlete or team are suffering from psychological problems (e.g. anxiety) that are having a negative impact on performance. The sport psychologist would work with the athlete or team to help with anxiety, which could then result in performance being increased when the full effects of the sport psychology sessions are observed.

Additionally, coaches might work exclusively with sport psychologists, so the sport psychologist does not have any contact with the athletes, but provides information to the coach who relays that information. For example, the sport psychologist might help with matters such as how to provide more effective instructions, feedback, and communication strategies. There are a number of sport psychologists who work exclusively in this capacity. As such, there are a number of contexts in which coaches and sport psychologists may work alongside one another.

Contexts in which coaches might prefer not to work with a sport psychologist

Although coaches can employ sport psychologists themselves to help their athletes, there may be some instances in which coaches are reluctant to introduce a sport psychologist to his or her team or athlete. For example, a coach may be reticent to hire a sport psychologist if he or she has just started coaching an athlete or team, because the coach may feel that the sport psychologist could in some ways undermine his or her relationship with the team or athletes. Some athletes might not feel comfortable talking about their feelings or problems with sport psychologists who they do not know, and would prefer to speak to their coach. In these instances, coaches might prefer not to employ a sport psychologist, even though the team or athlete could benefit from mental training. In these instances, coaches could provide psychological training themselves and incorporate psychology within their coaching.

The benefits of incorporating psychology within coaching

Coaches invest lots of time learning about how to improve the technical skills of their players or athletes through many different drills, how to improve the fitness or conditioning of their players, and how they can teach different tactics or strategies to enhance performance. Perhaps less time is spent learning and understanding how a coach can apply psychological principles within their coaching. Using psychology in coaching is something that has been, on the whole, ignored in many coaching manuals. This is a shame because there are so many athletes that could benefit from being taught different psychological skills. For example, there are many athletes who perform well in training, but struggle to transfer their performance to competition settings. Physiologically or technically the athlete has not changed, but perhaps these athletes struggle psychologically and could benefit from a coach providing them with some psychological training.

Incorporating psychology within coaching enables the coach to become more effective by improving the quality of his or her coaching, which will have numerous benefits for players including increased enjoyment and performance.

Psychology and an athlete's ability

Psychology is not just for elite athletes, and athletes at all levels ranging from beginners to Olympic champions can potentially benefit from psychology. Therefore, coaches who coach club-level tennis players to those who coach international rugby union teams can help their players by incorporating psychology within their coaching and some of the principles advocated in this book.

The structure and contents of this book

This book has been written for students who study coaching, and who want to learn more about applying sport psychology principles to coaching. This book provides the reader with an understanding of how coaches can apply psychological principles to their coaching to maximise the enjoyment, learning, and performance of the athletes that are coached. The book is presented in six parts:

Part I: Identifying the psychological needs of athletes

This part of the book provides information on the techniques that coaches can use to assess the needs of their athletes, to establish which mental skills training interventions to deliver. As such, Part I provides information on how coaches can conduct interviews (Chapter 1) and use questionnaires (Chapter 2). Some athletes may prefer to talk more than other athletes, whereas others may prefer writing their answers down in the form of questionnaires.

Part II: How to help athletes: mental skills training

Part II describes different mental skill training techniques and provides practical advice on how a coach can deploy a range of psychological skills such as mental imagery (Chapter 3), developing mental toughness (Chapter 4), maximising confidence (Chapter 5), coping effectiveness training (Chapter 6), in addition to choking prevention training (Chapter 7), and helping injured athletes (Chapter 8). These chapters contain scientific evidence that underpins their usefulness and are also supported by sample dialogue to give the coach additional understanding of how to deploy such psychological skills.

Part III: Facilitating awareness

In this part, information is provided on how the coach can assess what the athlete would like to achieve in his or sport through helping the athlete set different goals (Chapter 9) and performance standards that the player wants to achieve through performance profiling (Chapter 10).

Part IV: Coaching different populations

This section of the book provides information on considering the needs of the athlete and how this should influence coaching sessions. There is a chapter on coaching children (Chapter 11), adolescents (Chapter 12), adults (Chapter 13), and athletes with learning disabilities (Chapter 14). These chapters provide information on the different learning styles athletes of different ages have and how this could influence how they are coached. Furthermore, information on how to provide effective feedback, instruction, motivation, reduce dropout rates, and coaching behaviour are other factors that are considered within this part of the book.

Part V: Relationships and support

Part V provides information on the coach–athlete relationship and how the coach can build a strong relationship with the athlete (Chapter 15). This part also contains information on how the coach can build cohesion in team settings (Chapter 16) and can provide social support to athletes (Chapter 17).

Part VI: Concluding thoughts

Chapter 18 considers ethical issues around coaches providing sport psychology, information on the regulation of sport and exercise psychologists, referrals, and practical implications.

Chapter features

Each chapter is set out in same format and includes:

Purpose of the chapter

Every chapter outlines its purposes at the very beginning.

Case studies

All of the chapters, excluding Chapter 18, contain a case study to give the reader a deeper insight and understanding of how coaches can use sport psychology within their coaching. There is also a case study reflection for each case study, that highlights some of the key implications. Thus, this book provides both a theoretical and applied understanding of the psychological principles for coaching.

Summary points

Each chapter contains a series of bullet points that summarise the key points in the chapter.

Practice exam questions

Each chapter contains five practice exam questions, which will allow the student to practise answering questions, and thus will be very helpful for revision.

Critical thinking questions: applying theory to coaching practice

Every chapter concludes with five critical thinking questions. These critical thinking questions will assess how the knowledge gained in the chapter can be transferred to real life coaching scenarios.

Part I

Identifying the psychological needs of athletes

1 Conducting needs analysis interviews

The aim of this chapter is to provide coaches with information regarding how they can establish the psychological needs of an athlete, so that an appropriate intervention can be devised. Information is provided on:

- the purpose of interviewing athletes;
- the interview guide;
- encouraging athletes to open up;
- listening;
- avoiding mind reading.

The purpose of interviewing athletes

An interview involves the coach asking a series of questions and listening to the athlete's responses with the aim of trying to gain more knowledge about the needs of the athlete and the problems that he or she is experiencing (Bernstein and Nietzel, 1980). Furthermore, a coach's judgement regarding what psychological training the athlete requires can be gathered from an interview (Bernstein and Nietzel, 1980; Taylor and Schneider, 1992). In order for coaches to attain in-depth information from the athlete, coaches can develop an interview guide.

The interview guide

Taylor and Schneider (1992) developed an interview guide for sport psychologists who want to interview their athletes, which has been adapted in this chapter for coaches to use. This is an excellent guide, although some aspects of their guide (i.e. athletes being asked to describe their athletic status, family, and health) might not be necessary, given that most coaches will generally know more about their athlete than a sport psychologist. The interview is based on the coach asking questions about understanding the problem, building a more detailed understanding, influences and consequences, changes prior to the problem starting, and important life events.

It is important that coaches realise this is just a guide and that the coach does not have to follow the guide regimentally. That is, the coach might want to change the order of the questions, or he or she might not want to ask all of the questions.