Age and expertise: Issues when working with performers and their support system –

moving beyond "teaching Grandma to suck eggs".

Tim Holder

Department of Sport and Exercise Science

University of Chichester

UK

T.Holder@chi.ac.uk

0044 1243816227

Background Factors in Applied Practice in Great Britain

Within any applied sport psychology practitioners working context there will be a range of expectations and boundaries placed upon that practice for the protection of the client, practitioner and, ultimately the profession. Within most geographical locations the local Professional Association and their associated requirements for their profession will be laid out clearly and guidance documents provided to assist practitioners. Within Great Britain such assistance has been significantly developed within the last 30 years, firstly through the work of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (a governing body reflecting the needs of practitioners within sport science disciplines of biomechanics, physiology and psychology) and, more recently the British Psychological Society (BPS). The BPS has a structure that incorporates divisional status representing sub-disciplines of psychology. Within the Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology members can work towards Chartered status as Sport and Exercise Psychologists. Within the last ten years this has meant that the specific title of a Sport and Exercise Psychologist has been protected: this means that only those with the appropriate background knowledge, qualifications, training and experience are able to legally use the title. This has, in 2009, been supplemented by a regulatory body named the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). This body holds a register of those suitably qualified and able to practice under the title Sport and Exercise Psychologist. The title of Performance Psychologist has no similar register or control at this point (2013) in Great Britain. BASES has recently (2011) changed the titles of its accredited practitioners from discipline specific titles including psychology to a more generic Sport and Exercise

Scientist in order to reflect the professional training requirements now set out and

protected by the BPS and HCPC.

The most important, and relevant feature of these quality assurance procedures (beyond the protection of title) is the provision of codes of conduct and ethics. These serve to provide a framework within which all applied practice should be carried out and helps to protect client, practitioner and the profession alike (BASES, 2009; BPS, 2009). Training within Great Britain to attain Chartered and HCPC registered status comprises a BPS approved undergraduate and postgraduate (Stage 1) program of study and a further period of supervised practice of over two years (Stage 2). A rigorous system for ensuring the quality of those completing Stage 2 is in place. These include the use of an extensive oral examination (Viva Voce) and written reports incorporating case studies as well as supervisor reports. A significant contributor to training is the use of reflection in and on practice which is embedded within the systems to aid practitioner development (Cropley, Hanton, Miles & Niven, 2010).

Within Great Britain there is also a further requirement for working with children and vulnerable adults where a check is made on the background of an individual to ensure that there is an assessment of the individual's suitability to work with prospective clients. This process is called a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) (formally Criminal Records Bureau) check.

The focus of this chapter is on the impact of age and expertise of clients on the applied practitioner. The above information (relevant to issues in regards to training and practice in the U.K.) provides some contextual information relevant to issues that may emerge for practitioners when dealing with young athletes as well as considerations

relevant to performer expertise levels.

Age

Age Related Principles and Possible Assumptions

When first working with young performers (defined as under the age of 18) there are a number of assumptions and principles that may assist in the development of applied practice with this subgroup and are presented to provide a "testing ground" when working with specific clients (i.e. how accurately do the assumptions fit what a practitioner experiences).

- When working with youth performers there are significant implications for ensuring a safe environment for both the client and practitioner and a requirement for a clear explanation of the confidentiality of information (see BPS codes of ethics and conduct for further clarification).
- Young performers have a limited experience and understanding of sport psychology principles and strategies (this assumption can be challenged by some cases where their self understanding and insights into what impacts their performance are clear and well developed).
- Their intellectual capacity and language capabilities can significantly impact applied practice approaches.

Applied Practice with Youth Athletes

Implementing Educational group sessions: Working with Under 12 Table

Tennis players. A development squad of performers below the age of 12 was established within the national program for the English Table Tennis Association and sport psychology was incorporated into the program at weekend training camps. The

challenges of working with this age group are substantial in relation to their development

as highlighted in Life Development models of applied practice (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1995) and the need to understand the impact of their emotional, physical, cognitive and social development on applied practice methods and approaches to delivery.

The three most significant adaptations of applied practice were:

1) The use of small groups (4 or 5) to deliver educational input. This number creates a sense of comfort and ease that significantly aided the amount and quality of discussions. In addition to this factor the small groups assist the performers in learning from each other through examples they may use and the variety of experiences that they may have had to draw on at that particular age. The opportunity to share understanding aligned the session approach well with the overall intention to educate.

2) In order to take into account the limitations of attention and intellectual development the sessions were critically focused on the discussion of one key component of the psychology of table tennis performance (e.g. concentration between points, pre game nerves, etc.). This ensured that the duration of the sessions were limited to a maximum of 20 minutes and often were completed within 15 minutes. An additional element of importance became clear in relation to the style of delivery of the content within the short time frame. A number of metaphor devices were used in the sessions to help the young performers relate to the content under discussion (e.g. Lindsay, Thomas & Douglas, 2010). For example, when discussing self-talk the metaphor of the angel and devil cartoon characters sitting on their shoulders and whispering into their ears enhanced the effectiveness of the sessions in attaining and maintaining performers' attention (Orlick and McCaffrey, 1991).

3) Lastly, the importance of the venue for the delivery of the sessions was also

critical to overall effectiveness and in recognition of ethical practice concerns. The positioning of the performers so that they could be seen by the coaches and other athletes ensured that delivery could be monitored. This helps protect the applied practitioner from any concerns over what was happening in the session. The athletes, most importantly, also had visual and auditory cues through others in the squad performing behind them that helped them to subconsciously connect the discussion to the sport.

Individual client work: individual tennis player (age 10 years). ***An individual*** client aged 10 sought assistance with enhancing performance and emotional control issues through his coach and parents. The two most important characteristics of applied practice in this scenario were:

1) Working with and through the parents and coach. The possibility of incorporating the work with the client in conjunction with both a parent and the performer's main coach was grasped in order to enhance the effectiveness of any interventions (e.g. Harwood and Knight, 2009). The strategies being adopted with the client were discussed with the parent who had some responsibility in monitoring the use of strategies in competitive play (e.g. parking). The coach was also made fully aware of the use of particular strategies and could reinforce them within their coaching when appropriate.

2) The integration of such strategies into learning environments has been offered as a suggestion in previous literature (e.g. Sinclair and Sinclair, 1994) and assists in the development of skills to be applied within competitive contexts. The incorporation of practical strategies into the performance context certainly helps the performer to both

understand fully when and how to integrate a strategy but also offers clear opportunities

to develop the use of the strategy and receive feedback in order to develop its effectiveness further (Visek, Harris, & Blom, 2009).

Expertise

Expertise Related Principles and Possible Assumptions

When working with performers with expertise in a sport (mostly adult populations) there are a number of assumptions and principles that may assist in the development of applied practice. Once more these assumptions and principles are valuable in maintaining awareness of important considerations and biases to be wary of in applied practice.

- Experience and motor expertise are intrinsically linked (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993); often this may not be the case for aspects of psychological skills development.
- Expert performers will be able to readily make the links between the psychological factors of importance in their sport and actual sporting performance.
- Expert performers will be fully aware of the factors influencing the psychology of their sporting performance.
- Psychological habits are established and are more resistant to change or development.

Applied Practice with Experts

Working with elite, full time performers. Within Great Britain there are a number of professional sportspeople who are either paid by their club or organization or who receive funding from their governing body as part of a World Class Performance

Program. For these individuals there are a number of implications for the applied

practitioner of which the two following factors have consistently been important to consider in the author's practice:

1) The elite, expert performer has a number of stressors to consider that do not correspond precisely to those of other performers. There is a wealth of literature attesting to the additional stressors of elite performers emanating from a number of environmental, personal, leadership and team sources including funding, accommodation, travel, injury, coaching style and team communication (e.g. Fletcher & Hanton, 2003). Applied practitioners need to understand and use strategies to assist in responding to these unique circumstances. One such approach has been put forward in the shape of contextual intelligence where the detailed examination of the context within which the performers are training and competing is analyzed. The resulting information can be an invaluable resource in helping to define the prevalent attitudes and dynamics within a squad or group as well as the lines of influence that can be utilized to guide applied practice in relation to who can effect change most readily (Brown, Gould, & Foster, 2005).

2) The understanding by the performers of the psychology of their performance is almost always very well established at an elite level. As a result there is likely resistance to new methods and an implication for applied practitioners to develop skills of persuasion to assist in the "buy in" for a different approach (Green, Morgan, & Manley, 2012). For example, a number of past and current clients have underestimated the impact that interpersonal communication can have on their relationships with fellow performers and ultimately on their effectiveness as a performer. One individual, having worked on assertiveness skills (Burke, 2010), developed a much stronger performance focus as well

as performance related confidence that had been lacking and was more motivated to

other processes of change that were influential on performance.

Working with Expert Coaches. The sports coaching profession has made significant steps forward during the time that the author has been in applied practice (Robinson, 2010). The incorporation of psychological materials within coach qualifications and coach education programs has made a significant impact on the dissemination of information to client groups, such as coaches. This has resulted in hugely varied backgrounds of coaches in terms of their understanding of, and confidence in, integrating psychology into performance environments based on their coaching qualifications and expertise.

Recently, the opportunity to work with some expert middle distance athletics coaches who meet as a mentoring group and embrace the benefits of developing communities of practice arose (Culver & Trudel, 2008). The challenges as an applied practitioner were many with such an expert group, but the following features stood out as key reflections on developing work with expert coaches.

1) Specificity of content. Coaches were well educated in the strategies adopted within sport psychology. However, the real challenge in effectively applying strategies with performers is often found in the details rather than a broad conceptual understanding. The group expressed a wish to discuss goal setting. During planning, through discussion with the mentoring group coordinator, it was clear that to maximize the session impact a particular feature of goal setting would form the basis of the session: namely goal difficulty. This single feature of the complex goal setting process was chosen as the athletics coaches were challenged constantly by the combination of dealing

with athletes who were developing at a rapid pace showing quick improvements in fitness

and times as well as performers who were thwarted in their development by ongoing or acute injuries. This challenge was felt to be highly significant to both performers and coaches due to the powerful measurement methods used within the sport to assess progress: namely time. How the coaches could deal with the analysis of optimizing challenge in the goals based on the difficulty level became the key focus of debate.

2) Style of delivery and duration of session. The style of delivery was adapted in concert with the mentoring nature of the group, as well as the intention to share good practice and to learn from each other,. The session delivery was informal and facilitated by the sport psychologist to maximize input from the coaches themselves and draw upon their extensive experiences. This approach, with such expert coaches, recognizes a respect for their knowledge and encourages a sharing of information and expertise which would not be apparent in a more didactic style (Gould, Petlichkoff, Hodge, & Simons, 1990; Clement & Shannon, 2009). The session duration (90 minutes) allowed for such a style to be used and for full and detailed debates to be conducted within the deliberately limited scope of the session onto goal difficulty.

Working with Parents (of expert performers). Whilst working with expert coaches can create challenges based on a range of background expertise in psychological factors, the variety of background understanding and knowledge within parents of expert performers is of a much greater magnitude. Some parents are very well versed in the psychology of sporting performance based on dual roles as coaches or even ex-international athletes who have worked on their own performance from a psychological perspective. Other parents are naive and fearful of this aspect of their offspring's sporting

involvement. They may not have even had access or interest in a basic understanding of

the important psychological concepts let alone having to apply them within sport.

When dealing with the challenge of influencing the parents of expert performers the following key applied approaches can assist the impact on this important subgroup:

1) Education of parents of expert performers can be achieved to establish a base of understanding of what sport psychology involvement might encompass. This educative process through workshops, newsletters, online blogs etc. may avoid some difficult conversations with fearful parents challenging applied practitioners at training camps by querying in aggressive tones "what are you doing to my son?" (this exact question was posed to the author in an early career experience by a parent of an expert youth performer in the public bar area at a national training camp venue with rather accusatory implications!). The use of educational workshops at major events within the sport (where parents are often present) has, in the author's experience, limited effectiveness due to the parents who may benefit most from such opportunities being the least likely to choose to attend such voluntary sessions. Making such sessions compulsory for parents to attend is much more likely to be successful for parents of funded athletes where attendance can be built into expectations.

2) With the inherent limitations of organized parent education events (or newsletter style communications) the author has regularly chosen to incorporate an extension of the benefits of "hanging around" (Giges, 2000) for enhancing effectiveness of contact by applied practitioners *with performers* to enhance contact *with parents*. The seemingly "accidental" discussions that can be engineered with parents at training or competitive events are opportunities that can be grasped by the applied practitioner when

in attendance. These opportunities are informal methods that can be effective at

enhancing parent understanding and eliminating possible concerns or misunderstandings that may occur and, in some cases, that may negatively impact the service delivery being offered to the performers themselves. This informal, accidental approach often helps to gain parents' trust and respect and, where appropriate, gain their assistance in reinforcing key strategies (see previous section example with young tennis player).

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to draw together a range of applied sport psychology practice implications resulting from the individual difference factors of age and expertise. Taking into account the limitations of a short discussion, this chapter focused attention on particular experiential factors salient within the work of the author's applied practice but which should be of relevance to applied practitioners working within the sporting realm. It is clear that some of the issues highlighted exemplify the old adage of trying to "teach Grandma to suck eggs" a metaphor for teaching someone with experience how to do something that they have done for a lifetime! Applied practice constantly challenges practitioners due to the variety of ages and expertise that they work alongside and the rather unpredictable levels of expertise that can exist regarding the psychology of sporting performance. This becomes apparent during applied practice in attitudes suggesting: "I don't need it and I already do it" (sucking eggs) to "I've never heard of it and certainly don't think I can do it" (naivety).

For the applied practitioner to maximize effectiveness not only should they challenge preconceived notions based purely in age and sporting expertise but work to establish links to support systems such as coaches and parents. These links will develop

working practices that draw on expertise in an interdisciplinary and multifaceted manner

in the quest to optimize the client's performance. .

Take-Home Messages

- Always consider ethical concerns specific to a subgroup (e.g. youth performers) as part of planning consultancy activity.
- Utilize familiar, established relationships athletes have with parents and coaches to reinforce applied practice.
- Take time to engage in conversations with important members in the athlete's life (e.g. parent, sibling) to aid their understanding of your role and develop extended trust within the performer's circle of influence.
- Challenge your assumptions of the lack of understanding in the young or enhanced understanding in the expert about the psychology of sporting performance.
- Always try to understand the full range of complex factors influencing sporting performance in order to pinpoint more clearly the focus of an intervention.
- In educational sessions a facilitative style can enhance the sharing of good practice from coaches and athletes and significantly supplement content provided by an applied practitioner.

References

BASES (2009). Code of conduct. Retrieved from http://www.bases.org.uk/corecode/search/search.aspx?term=code%20of%20conduct

BPS (2009). Code of ethics and conduct. Retrieved from www.bps.org.uk/system/files/.../code_of_ethics_and_conduct.pdf

Brown, C. H., Gould, G., & Foster, S. (2005). A framework for developing contextual intelligence (CI). *The Sport Psychologist, 19*, 51-62.

Burke, K. L. (2010). Constructive communication. In S. J. Hanrahan, & M. B. Anderson, (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of sport psychology: A comprehensive guide for students and practioners*. (pp: 315-324). Oxon: Routledge.

Clement, D., & Shannon, V. (2009). The impact of a workshop on athletic training students' sport psychology behaviors. *The Sport Psychologist, 23*, 504-522.

Cropley, B., Hanton, S., Miles, A., & Niven, A. (2010). The value of reflective practice in professional development: An applied sport psychology review. *Sport Science Review, 19 (3-4),* 179-208.

Culver, D., & Trudel, P. (2008). Clarifying the concept of communities of practice in sport. *International Journal of Sport Science and Coaching, 3(1),* 1-10.

Danish, S. J., Petitpas, A., & Hale, B. D. (1995). Psychological interventions: A life development model. In S. M. Murphy (Ed.), *Sport psychology interventions*. (pp. 19-38). Champaign, Il.: Human Kinetics.

Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R. T., & Tesch-Romer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate

practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological Review, 100*, 363-

406.

Fletcher, D., & Hanton, S. (2003). Sources of organizational stress in elite sports performers. *The Sport Psychologist, 17*, 175-195.

Giges, B. (2000). Removing psychological barriers: Clearing the way. In M. Andersen, (Ed.), *Doing sport psychology*. (pp: 17-32). Champaign: Il. : Human Kinetics.

Gould, D., Petlichkoff, L., Hodge, K., & Simons, J. (1990). Evaluating the effectiveness of a psychological skills educational workshop. *The Sport Psychologist, 4*, 249–260.

Green, M., Morgan, G., & Manley, A. (2012). Elite rugby league players' attitudes towards sport psychology consulting. *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review, 8(1)*, 32-44.

Harwood, C. & Knight, C. (2009). Understanding parental stressors: An investigation of British tennis parents. *Journal of Sport Sciences, 27(4),* 339-351.

Lindsey, P., Thomas, O., & Douglas, G. (2010). A framework to explore and transform client-generated metaphors in applied sport psychology. *The Sport Psychologist, 24*, 97-112.

Orlick, T., & McCaffrey, N. (1991). Mental training with children for sport and life. *The Sport Psychologist, 5*, 322-334.

Robinson, P. E. (2010). *Foundations of sports coaching*. London: Routledge.

Visek, A.J., Harris, B.S. & Blom, L.C. (2009). Doing sport psychology: A youth sport consulting model for practitioners. *The Sport Psychologist, 23*, 271-291.

Schinke, R.J., Battochio, R.C., Dube, T.V., Lidor, R., Tenenbaum, Lane, A.M. (2012).

Adaptation processes affecting performance in elite sport. *Journal of Clinical*

Sport Psychology, *6*, 180-195.