



The use of sport psychology and of the use of mental skills training in English cricket has been recently well documented and now has created more media attention and interest since the emergence of research on the enigma of the term 'mental toughness' by the consultant psychologist of the ECB and chair of the Science and Medicine Advisory Group Dr. Steve Bull along with self-employed sport psychology consultants all of whom work within the ECB psychology support programme.

According to Bull, Sharnbrook, James & Brooks (2003) different sports provide different exemplars of the mentally tough performer. The researchers provide the example the 'final putt' in golf mental toughness, highlighted by the mind-set required by the golfer to maintain his/her self-control at the critical moment in order to sink the short putt required to win the Ryder Cup. They compare this with the mental toughness required by the likes of Michael Schumacher to be mentally strong enough to take the calculated risks required to win in high-speed, high risk motor sport.

So from the cricket perspective what is mental toughness? Bull et al., (2003) give the example of the high intensity between batter and bowler and actually revel in the situation and the example is given in the memorable duel between Michael Atherton of England and Allan Donald of South Africa in the 1998 Trent Bridge Test match.

Recently a definition has been developed by Jones, Hanton & Connaughton (2002) that 'mental toughness is having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to:

- Generally, cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competitions, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer

- Specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident and in control under pressure.' (p.209).

Certainly sport psychologists alike and this was voiced by Bull et. al (2003) that indeed it could be argued that by utilising and implementing sufficient mental skills training the skills might develop the required 'positive attributes and thus again result in a mentally tough performer.' (p.4) However as Bull et al., (2003) do highlight not all athletes 'who are exposed to mental skills training and adhere to it sufficiently, are mentally tough' (p.5).

The Role of the Sport Psychologist in County Cricket – How to Improve Your Mental Approach in Cricket

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

(Oliver Wendell Holmes)

As a sport psychology consultant working with both First team county players and Academy players it is my role to provide psychological support for players to improve their self-awareness as players to enable them to improve their performance and develop themselves as players and professionals. Providing the players with more tools and mental coping strategies to enable them to deal with situations in a better and more productive way. As well as coaching them specific skills to change unproductive behaviours that inhibit their performance and get in the way of not allowing themselves to fulfil their potential. Or indeed developing an understanding as to what is their perception of underperformance and of their 'beliefs/attitudes' of their individual performance or under-performing relating to 'self-expectation' and of significant others.

The role of the sport psychologist is a complex one and one that entails working within many different levels, working with the players, coaches and managers. The role of the sport psychologist is multifaceted and it is *not solely the role* of the sport psychologist to be brought in 'just because something is wrong' which has previously been the case and previously thought. The sport psychologist/consultant can assist performance and improve all levels of awareness, indeed mental skills training and the psychological aspects are an integral part of the overall sport science support programme.

What is mental skills training/psychological skills training?

Mental skills training re-enforces physical, technical and tactical training with a view to further improving performance. It divides into:

- i) Individual work
- ii) Relationship work (i.e., pairs/units (bowlers, batters' fielding left and right side/full team).

This can be further divided into:

- Individual performance work
- Team performance work

Using mental skills training for team development can create and enhance team spirit and individual 'awareness', which leads to better team awareness. The cricketers learn to be aware of what they personally do well and keep doing more of and learn how to 'be and to play even better than before.' Players become aware of how to reach a higher personal standard, which will improve the overall team standard and performance- as well as become aware of becoming aware of what the player's personally need to do for themselves and for each other.

This can be achieved by changing player attitudes; beliefs (*I can be better and maintain it!*) and change the pattern of the performance of the team- to reach a new and higher level of performance.

The sport psychologist is and can be the preventative measure for reducing the onset of injuries and certain lifestyle issues from occurring, such as external stress and parental/ peer pressure and influences. These may include holding certain parental workshops and coach workshop to enhance the knowledge base and improve the player environment, such as for example holding a parental 'Expectation's and positive re-enforcement feedback workshop.'

The sport psychologist works closely with the coaches and develops ways in which to integrate the technical aspects and mental aspects as much as possible. Mental skills training can enhance the technical side through the use of imagery and visualisation, and focusing more on the 'feel' of the shot and picturing the perfect shot in your mind to use and work with the coaches to improve the technical aspects.

I have used the concept of periodisation whilst working with First Team and Academy players and this has been taken from the field of physiology. Whereby this technique has been employed to enhance athletic performance for some

time to allow athletes to taper and reach their optimum state, physically. The main idea is to gradually decrease volume while gradually increasing intensity. Periodisation refers to changes and variations in the training program over a distinct period of time. The first phase is characterised by high volume (meetings and topics covered) and low intensity. The next three phases, volume is decreased and intensity is increased (more in-depth personal player awareness until the preparation phase). The preparation phase is individually specific, integrating the work covered such as the interventions in order to get the player into the best possible performance state 'mind set' for him to perform at his optimum and best for himself and for the team.

The psychological periodisation model entailed *four* stages;

Periodisation would be used building up to pre-season:

1. Assessment & introduction
2. Implementation of Psychological support
3. Player maintenance
4. Pre-season preparation

My aim as the sport psychologist

To provide psychological support and provide life skills for the cricketers in this instance so the Academy players as well as performance based work. To be available when required and on site when possible to assist player development from a psychological perspective and to improve player self-awareness that can assist in improving performance.

Whilst I am on site I encourage the full use of the sport psychologist. To provide skills to enable to cope with the transition from junior to senior/professional cricket as well as coaching invaluable life skills to cope with increased pressure and status of being a professional cricketer. In addition, I work closely with the coaches and players providing feedback and performance suggestions based on observations and discussion with the player and coach concerned and integrate the technical/tactical aspects with the psychological skills aspects when and where appropriate. **Delivery of psychological skills training in County Cricket. How were the psychological training programs structured and implemented?**

Individual work

The players had individual psychological skills training programs and meetings, whereby they were assessed via the cricket mental skills assessment tool. The initial step was assessing the players; they were tested on specific psychological skills relevant to cricket. The results of the mental skills assessment tool, which were unique for the individual player, were then used as a baseline and indication of the specific psychological skills that may require developing. More importantly the meetings focused upon developing player self-awareness so the psychological skills training could be coached and implemented. A client centred/ humanistic approach was used for the delivery of the individual psychological skills training and support which created a less rigid structure and one that encouraged more of open forum whereby current and 'live' performance topics and areas could be discussed and actioned there and then if required, e.g., **perception of earlier 'poor' batting performance.**

Group work

The psychological skills group workshops were based on a more traditionally based educational model, providing group skills workshops on the following topics such as; **Confidence, Dealing with Success and Failure, Anxiety and Stress, Underperformance - how to deal with it and Preparation.** The workshops were interactive and encouraged the players and coaches to work with and understand each other to provide solutions for each of the topic areas. The solutions or ideas that arose from the workshops could then be transferred and transposed into the technical areas and then applied immediately in net practice.

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