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# A lesson learned in time: Advice shared by experienced sport psychologists

Alister McCormick & Carla Meijen

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**S**OMEONE ONCE TOLD ME (Alister) that asking a carefully-prepared question is an effective way of making a good impression during a job interview. As I approached completion of the Stage 2 Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology (BPS Stage 2), I dedicated time to preparing a question that I could ask the experienced sport psychologists who were leading my *viva*. As the *viva* drew to a close, one of my assessors enquired if I had any questions, and I decided to ask the following: Would you be willing to share any lessons or insights about sport psychology practice that you learned through your years of experience? The quality of the shared advice was the motivation behind initiating this project; I wanted to circulate experienced sport psychologists' 'gems' of advice so that other sport psychologists can learn from them.

Advice, recommendations, and best-practice guidelines are widely available in the sport psychology literature, as well as the literature of related disciplines such as counselling. This literature offers guidance on a vast range of applied practice issues, including ethical practice (Moore, 2003), reflective practice (Anderson, Knowles & Gilbourne, 2004), working with athletes of the opposite sex (Henschen, 1991; Yambor & Connelly, 1991), consulting with youth athletes (Visek, Harris & Blom, 2013), working with athletes at the Olympic Games (McCann, 2011), and evaluating effectiveness (Martindale & Collins, 2007). Some of the guidance available to a sport psychologist reflects the lessons that experienced sport psychology practitioners learned through their years of practice. For example, Fifer et

al. (2008) reflected on 'what works when working with athletes' and offered advice on gaining entry, assessment, programme delivery, and approaching major competitions. Similarly, Simons and Andersen (1995) interviewed 11 experienced sport psychology professionals, and these professionals shared valuable insights into their entry into the field, the evolution of their approach to service delivery, lessons they learned from specific consultancy situations or extensive experience, and effective approaches to service delivery. These professionals also offered advice for both new and experienced practitioners.

Through experience, sport psychologists will learn countless valuable lessons, and many of these lessons will be shared through journal articles, books, workshops, conferences, supervision, and informal discussion. Some lessons, however, are likely to stand out vividly to a psychologist because they made a valuable difference to how they practise. The present project focuses on these outstanding lessons. In essence, sport psychologists were asked to share their most valuable advice about any aspect of sport psychology client work (as opposed to research or teaching) with other sport psychologists.

## Contributors

Chartered Psychologists in the UK who were judged to have extensive experience were contacted by email, and 14 provided a contribution. Thirteen contributors are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), eight have experience supervising candidates enrolled on

BPS Stage 2, and five have experience as BPS Stage 2 assessors. Including supervised practise, they have been practising as sport psychology practitioners for between 11 and 28 years (mean  $\pm$  SD = 19  $\pm$  5). Two contributors chose to anonymise their contribution.

### Contribution instructions

Using an online survey, contacted sport psychologists were asked the following question:

We would like to learn about a highly valuable lesson or insight (a 'gem' of advice) about sport psychology application that you learned through your years of practising as a sport psychologist. We are interested in a lesson or insight that came with experience and that has a positive impact on your practice. We are particularly interested in a lesson that other sport psychologists would be wise to learn and that is not commonly referred to in the sport psychology literature.

We would prefer to publish respondents' full answers. Therefore, please provide sufficient detail so that your answer will 'stand alone'. So that we have room to present the full responses of all participants, please restrict your response to one or two paragraphs, totalling approximately 200 to 400 words. You could provide examples to illustrate your answer.

### Mark Wilson (University of Exeter)

I think that one of the biggest things you learn with experience is that some of the 'tips' that you read about when you were starting out are absolutely critical to good practice. For example, waiting for the *but* is the idea that a client may talk around about how fine they are feeling and then say 'but...'. What comes after the *but* is usually starting to get to the crux of the matter. 'I'm feeling fine, but...'. Other examples include 'It's not all about mental skills training' and 'listen more than you speak'.

When I started out, I really liked relying on some sort of structure, which mental skills

training does give you, and I felt that it was important to offer advice as I wanted to 'help' and 'sell' the importance of psychology. It was almost a case of, 'I am not sure what your "problem" is, but better concentration skills will help!' Even though I tried to be a good listener, I was always in a rush to get round to delivering the magic bullet. I think patience is, therefore, a key skill – it takes patience to put together a holistic picture of the athlete based on what you hear and what you observe. More frequently now, I really do wait out the early sparring with a new client. There will come a time when they will reveal the important information and you just have to be ready to hear it. I know it is a bit of a cliché, but this nearly always tends to be while doing something else (e.g. on a run, in the car, walking around the supermarket) rather than in a formal meeting. I now think that much of what I do when I am at a competition or training camp is hang around and wait for one of these moments to present itself. For example, I was recently working with a client at a world championships, which was not going as well as it could have for the athlete. Everything was very emotionally charged and she was struggling to remain upbeat during briefings and debriefings. I felt that I was not able to even try and help as I hoped to, as these fixed opportunities to talk were very specific to strategy and process goals, etc. (as they should be), and included the coach and sometimes other support staff. Finally, three days in, she asked me if I wanted to go shopping to a sports store with her. I knew this was the 'in' I was looking for and we had a great and honest discussion in the car there and as we walked around the store. It was clear that while she was saying the right things in the meetings (sticking to process, etc.) she didn't really believe in it and was struggling to live up to her own expectations. I don't believe the sort of honest discussion that followed would have happened if we had not gone for a drive. I have had similar experiences while jogging or cycling with clients at training camps/tournaments and

always try to make myself available for these moments just in case. This might be when the 'work' happens.

**Dave Alcock**  
(University of the West of England)

This response is a written summary of an audio-recorded Skype conversation. Dave has confirmed the accuracy of this summary.

The most powerful lesson that I've learned is that it's not *what you know*, it's *how you are* that's the important thing during your work with athletes. Once practitioners have the baseline knowledge that is acquired through training (e.g. BPS Stages 1 and 2), 'topping up' knowledge is fairly straightforward. For example, if I begin working with a trampolinist, I can study sport-specific literature whilst recognising that there are generic psychological issues that cut across most sports, and I can ask the athlete to tell me about their world (indeed, I am passionately interested in their description of this world, and I have found that learning about the sport through the athlete nurtures the development of our relationship). I also think that it is ok to tell the athlete, 'I don't know, but I can find out', which can convey honesty and disabuse the athlete of this notion that the sport psychologist is a fountain of all knowledge who is going to help them do X, Y, and Z. Gathering knowledge and determining what to do should not be the biggest issues. I have noticed with new practitioners and trainees that there seems to be a constant perceived pressure or even desire on their part to *do* and to be *doing*. When I take my trainees out to observe intake interviews, or when I give them the opportunity to run these intake interviews, it is inevitable that they'll say, 'we can do this', 'we could try that', or 'the athlete needs this', and I'm constantly saying, 'Whoa, slow down, just slow down'. For me, what they need to be doing is finding a way of being with the athlete, as opposed to finding a way of doing things with or to the athlete. You've got space, you've got time (especially if you've got the luxury of knowing that you're going

to be there for the season), and you can model a controlled, paced, considered way forward to the athlete. What is really important, however, is finding a way of being with the athlete, and very little of the available training or literature gives you insights into this (Mark Andersen's publications are amongst the exceptions). You have to go into counselling and psychotherapy literature where training is experiential, includes role playing, and supports you in becoming comfortable with who you are and becoming comfortable in the presence of others.

How can you develop *how you are*? I believe that a supervisory relationship (including peer supervision) can be a central anchor point in which you could start to develop your sense of who you are and how you are in an athlete-psychologist relationship. The reflective element of practise is also very important. Potential Stage 2 candidates should, therefore, recognise the importance of selecting a suitable and compatible supervisor, and they should spend time interviewing and quizzing potential supervisors. Additionally, sport psychologists could consider developmental courses and conferences (e.g. counselling and insight-focused courses) that are not necessarily overtly about sport psychology that will encourage them to spend a bit of time thinking 'yeah, it's not just about the athlete, it's about me as well'. You might have an encyclopaedia of knowledge in one area of sport psychology, but if you haven't got a good sense of who you are as a person and how to be with an athlete, then that knowledge will count for fuck all. The athlete simply won't engage with you.

**Richard Cox (independent consultant)**

I believe that all aspiring sport psychologists have to learn to put their client FIRST in every respect. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done because of the anxieties inevitably caused by the lack of belief in what they, the sport psychologists, are doing. Their focus of attention in the early stages of their development will be mainly on them-

selves in terms of how they look, how they sound, or are they doing the ‘right things’? This type of focus quickly gives way to one that is mainly on their knowledge base (Am I presenting accurate and detailed information? Will my client believe that I know what I am talking about? Am I impressive enough? Am I ‘blinding them with science’?). Why do these anxieties exist? Because of a lack of proper training in working with clients. Most ‘training’ in sport psychology takes place in Higher Education establishments and is often led by lecturers who have done little in the way of practice-based work with clients outside their place of employment and are, therefore, poorly equipped to mentor their students in this type of work. This is not their fault because it is seldom part of their job description – and it has to be said that this state of affairs is improving steadily – but there is still a long way to go before neophyte practitioners can reach the third stage of development, which is where their focus of attention shifts from themselves to their clients exclusively. Thus, my advice to all aspiring sport psychologists is to find yourselves an experienced practitioner who is willing to allow you to sit in on client-centred sessions and who will discuss with you what has happened from a theoretical baseline and how he, or she, believes the client has been helped. An open-minded mentor is vitally important for young people in the profession if they are to develop their professional skills to a high level, and I would even offer the same advice to experienced sport psychologists because I believe there is a need to share good practice across the profession.

**Caroline Marlow  
(independent consultant)**

The second most important lesson I have learnt is that practices aimed at ‘being client-centred’, ‘building rapport’, ‘having empathy’, and ‘being congruent’ have made the most positive contribution to my support work. THE most important lesson that I have learnt, however, is that these terms are far

easier to say that you do, than they actually are to do. Despite seeing myself as a ‘good egg’ and a natural ‘people person’, I have found such terms to be complex friends, the achievement of which require constant attention, consideration and practice. Over time, I have come to understand that becoming client-centred (and the other foundational components) is achieved through particular ways of seeing and working within the world, and thus the athlete. It is only once these are firmly embedded within your beliefs and values, that they can begin to consistently and appropriately permeate through to your actions and behaviours. I have, therefore, come to realise that I need to constantly challenge my assumptions: what I think to be true; what I think I know about a particular athlete, a sport, a situation; what sport psychology support is or should be. I have done this through reflective practice and the active exploration of different philosophical approaches and support methods. Each provides a different way of viewing the client, and my relationship and purpose with them, allowing me to slowly (and sometimes painfully) peel back the layers of how I consider myself and others. The more I do this, the more client-centred I believe I have become. I have become more perceptive of, and receptive to, the person behind the athlete. I can locate them more clearly in their situation; I have greater flexibility in understanding and supporting their needs. This has enabled me to better trust myself to act as a facilitator, to trust my own intuition of what guiding approach or technique to use, to listen, to rapportfully challenge, but most of all to enable the client to assume the role of expert, and to be the fundamental force in their own future development. I have found such an approach enables the athlete to better explore and communicate their own situation, to find their own most efficacious solutions, and to gain a consequential sense of empowerment and growth. I find the quest to be client-centred both stimulating and frustrating. It will, however, continue...

**Marc Jones (Staffordshire University)**

One of the big challenges I have found working as a consultant is controlling my desire that a solution to the issue presented should emerge in the first session with a client, and that I should be 'good enough' to be able to come up with a solution in the first session. So my most valuable lesson is, do not expect a solution to the issue presented to emerge in the first session, and make that clear to the client and most importantly to yourself. I appreciate that this is not a new suggestion but it was (is) something I have found a challenge and, on occasions, reduced my effectiveness as a consultant.

To explain, I would think clients have come to see me as the 'expert' and, as the 'expert', I should know the 'answers'. To demonstrate my 'expertise', the quicker I can come up with the 'answer' the better. This faulty thinking is a bit of a caricature but probably closer to the truth than I care to admit. Particularly in writing. I have found it reduces my effectiveness as a consultant because, if I was engaged in a version of this faulty thinking, I start to feel under pressure to 'suggest something' and I listen less to the client. So some of the strategies I have found useful to deal with this include telling the client in the first session that all I want to do is gather some information to understand them and their sport. I explicitly say I will not make suggestions during this session but will go away and consider how we can work on the issue together and present the plan to the client for their thoughts. While this manages clients' expectations, it really has a far greater effect on mine and allows me to relax and gather the information I need. I also find I can approach issues better when I have had time to think and reflect either on my own or often with colleagues. So I am a better consultant because of this process but I need to remind myself of this with each new consultation.

**Ian Maynard**

**(Sheffield Hallam University)**

1. You have two ears and one mouth. Hence, as a sport psychologist you should try to listen for about twice as much time as you speak. I find young practitioners tend to talk too much – a classic sign of anxiety!
2. Be specific – sport specific, position specific, individual specific, context specific, and so on. If your advice is not totally relevant to the client (i.e. unique to their needs), you won't keep them for very long as a client.

**Mark Nesti**

**(Liverpool John Moores University)**

The most important factor in my development as a sport psychologist has come from being able to pursue a broad approach to my academic development. This was facilitated at the University of Alberta in Canada, and the University of Hull, England, through my postgraduate qualifications, as much of my studying and research focused on mainstream psychology. These educational experiences ensured that my focus was on a wide range of approaches in psychology, and not only restricted to dominant approaches from cognitive or trait psychology as we see in most of sport psychology. For example, it meant that when I studied anxiety I was exposed to a far wider range of views about this concept than we typically encounter in sport psychology. Sport psychology mostly has focused on competitive anxiety; this is a very significant failing in my opinion because much anxiety emerges from other sources, and other perspectives, such as existential psychology, have viewed anxiety as a positive experience during the past 150 years. Those following cognitive psychology approaches in sport only began to accept this in recent times. Existential psychology and other person-centred approaches have been dismissed by some as being either too close to philosophy – something which shows a limited awareness about the history of psychology, which was a part of philosophy for thousands of years, although it can also be studied as a natural science as well.

But most importantly, it is this theoretical grounding that has allowed me to work one-to-one with so many first-team Premier League footballers over my career. I know that a narrow education in cognitive approaches or mental skills training would have prevented me from being effective (and surviving) inside these demanding cultures where I carried out an average of 10 one-to-one meetings each week over nine seasons. Reading, studying, and knowing this material has also allowed me to offer coaches something different to what they could provide for their athletes. Therefore, sport psychologists should be willing to leave the sport psychology section of the library and adventure into the mainstream psychology and philosophy sections (and dare I say theology!).

**Jamie Barker (Staffordshire University)**

During the early stages of my consultancy career, I naïvely believed that sport psychology should be for the tastes of all players and coaches. In carrying this value forward, I would often get somewhat downhearted when my enthusiastic and evangelical approach for sport psychology was not shared. Presently – and I guess to a large extent because I have more experience of being around elite and professional performers – I realise that sport psychology is not for all and should be a choice. Moreover, I have a greater understanding that some players will naturally have the mental and coping strategies that we often prescribe. In sum, I now take a more relaxed approach in presenting my values rather than going for the hard sell. I recognise that my enthusiasm for sport psychology is not shared by everyone and for whatever reasons some athletes do not respond with open arms. I now respect athletes' views more and try not to transfer my beliefs onto them unduly. Further, it is much more beneficial for me to work with those who see value in my services than to spread myself thinly across an entire squad. When I have undertaken one-to-one sessions in the past,

I believed that I had special knowledge or powers to save the athletes from their issues and thus had a real 'saviour complex', or 'Luke Skywalker Syndrome' as I like to call it! In essence, I wanted to help everyone I came into contact with and make a difference to them both as people and sport performers. Because I wanted to work effectively with them all of the time in every session, this often led to poor time management along with me presenting too much information and too many solutions. On reflection and going back to the principles of my approach, I now realise that typically sport psychologists do not 'fix' athletes, but provide support and guidance. To this end, when consulting with athletes I am now keen to establish that my main aims in one-to-one work are to develop self-awareness and self-reflection. By reinforcing this philosophy, I feel more relaxed when working with clients, which in turn has helped me to develop rapport with players and coaches.

**Andy Lane**

**(University of Wolverhampton)**

My suggestion is to acknowledge times when things do not go very well and reflect on this and unpick the reasons why they did and did not work. I can think of several presentations/consultancy sessions where the balance between what the audience wanted and what I was doing was a long way apart. In the early days, I would continue and deliver the material I had prepared. More recently, I change and work out ways to do things differently. The confidence to think on your feet, or worry less about not getting the match perfect is a key part of the difference between then and now. Reflection is often done by describing the events rather than unpacking what worked and what did not. At the point of writing what worked and what did not, it is important to clarify that these are your thoughts at the present time. You can go back to look at these thoughts and rephrase or reevaluate them in the light of new evidence. The key part to this process is a degree of openness.

**Brian Hemmings**  
**(independent consultant)**

I would advocate that all sport psychologists undertake ongoing peer supervision after becoming chartered/registered as it has had a huge impact on my continuing development as a practitioner. I have written about this in my chapter in McCarthy and Jones (2014). Peer supervision is a process whereby two psychologists meet on a regular basis to mutually discuss their practice, to exchange views and ideas, and to discuss the current challenges or issues they face with specific athletes, coaches and situations. This type of ongoing supervision is suggested to promote good practice for the following reasons:

- It helps the psychologist to assess strengths and weaknesses before forming ongoing plans for personal development.
- It identifies the most relevant challenges and opportunities facing the individual.
- It provides guidance on how to influence and manage different athlete relationships.
- It gives impetus to the psychologist to explore and exchange new ideas.
- It enables the psychologist to use self-reflection to inform their practice.
- It provides an ongoing trusting, confidential relationship to discuss individual professional challenges.

It's difficult to say exactly where supervision specifically impacted on a particular consultancy, but rather it gives the practitioner an opportunity to consider possible different avenues of questioning in complex consultancy cases or where a particular client may not be responding to standard interventions. The psychologist can also benefit from the process of sitting with another and merely talking about themselves and having someone listen, much as the athlete encounters, as the relationship itself can be the vehicle for change and growth. Within other psychological and therapeutic disciplines, the use of post-qualification professional supervision has been widely adopted as a sound approach to promoting excellence

through increasing positive change, engaging energy, imagination and commitment, and by instilling resourcefulness.

**Anonymous 1**

My current favourite reflection is that what works with one team, or in one context, is not guaranteed at all to work with another. Some of my best work was done in a team once where I was given a lot of autonomy, and both the staff and players valued my role. I developed some really effective referral systems, player pathways and support systems that proved themselves to be invaluable week in, week out. I subsequently took a role with another team in the same sport, at the same level of competition. Having carefully evolved systems that clearly worked with the previous client, I tried to deploy these systems again. Only the head coach was interested, however, and many other key gatekeepers were not interested in having someone 'mess with their minds'. At the time I was a little confused by this, but with the benefit of hindsight there were clear contextual differences between the teams: from culture to finances to overall visions for the future. I lasted about six months in the second club before leaving, having only really helped some players one-to-one. This experience, and several others, led me to the idea of 'contextual intelligence', which probably does get some research attention in organisational psych, but I reckon not enough. You could do the best, most ethical work in the world, but if the client didn't really want that, you will be deemed to have failed (in their eyes at least!)

**Anonymous 2**

I'm going to draw on an anecdote and vignette to encapsulate a lesson not necessarily from practice, but in drawing on reflections on and beyond practice. First the anecdote. I'm not sure if I'm making this up, or whether this conversation really occurred (I'm making a note to ask), but I seem to recall my father on the eve of my marriage intimating, 'I know I don't have to tell you



this, but keep your cock in your pants'. Given the statistics on infidelity, this anecdote serves to highlight my reticence about offering 'gems' or 'pearls of wisdom'. Second the vignette. This vignette was written as a way of capturing the 'stuff' that I was bringing to sport psychology sessions. And over time, I catch glimpses of different implications for my practice. I invite you to find your own meaning(s) from the vignette below:

This particular A-road is the main thoroughfare between where I live and where I work. The distance between the two is around seven miles. On the mornings in which I drive to work, I occasionally pass a cyclist. As I slow down to manoeuvre around the cyclist, I find myself asking the question, 'Why wouldn't you take the slightly longer, off-road but more scenic route avoiding all the traffic?' On my cycles into work along this off-road, more scenic routeway I congratulate myself on the physical activity I'm taking, notice how much I'm enjoying this activity and pause to reflect on the foolhardiness of those who take the main road with its inherent dangers. Yesterday, I was running late. I got immersed in some writing and then had a protracted conversation I wasn't anticipating. After a couple of minutes, I found myself on this main A-road, wanting to shave some minutes off the cycle home...

What do you understand to be happening in this vignette? What are the implications for your applied practice? The lesson: If I was pressed to offer a 'gem' it would be simply this. Be aware of the lenses that you're wearing, try on some different glasses, but ultimately try and arrive at a pair that you like, feel comfortable with, and can wear with some longevity across a myriad of situations and with a variety of 'uniforms'.

**Paul McCarthy**  
(Glasgow Caledonian University)

For as long as I can remember, I have been captivated by words – words with strange but charming sounds like crepuscular and tendentious, others with subtle spellings like manoeuvre and conscientious or confusing homonyms like date and rose. But their sounds and spellings disguised their true authority over me. Words praised me, inspired me and motivated me; without a moment's notice they criticised me, discouraged me and broke me. Words, then, revealed me to myself. And in my eagerness to know myself, I read. Sometimes athletes wish to know themselves better. They might wish to know why they feel anxious about competing or embarrassed about losing a competition. The sport psychologist acts as a conduit through which this knowledge and understanding may pass. My abiding concern was that if the sport psychologist were the conduit, then all that the athlete receives reflects the sport psychologist's values, beliefs and philosophy of practice. And what if these values, beliefs and philosophy of practice were defective in some way? In fear of my own prejudice and ignorance, I read. I began by reading sport psychology literature but quickly moved toward counselling, economics, politics, psychology, and especially philosophy. I read biographies of great lives within and outside sport as well as English literature, plays and poetry. But it was through reading the latter works that I realised what was missing in me and my practice was a deep understanding about humanity. It seems strange to me now that such a fundamental cornerstone was missing but I guess I didn't know that I didn't know. In the lines of T.S. Elliot (*Little Gidding*), 'Not known, because not looked for, but heard, half-heard, in the stillness between two waves of the sea'. My increasing competence in the humanity of sport helped to explain my constant dilemma about caring and treatment. I thought treatment was caring but actually, caring was treatment. We, as sport psychologists, are privileged to care

for others. We show we care when we listen to understand our clients' stories and help our clients to tell their stories in a way they have not done so before. Their stories offer meaning, insight and self-knowledge. What we say, then, and how we say it, will reveal who we are and how we care. We borrow our words from the voices of those we have read, from their understanding, from their feelings, from their experiences. Their voices are in our heads and I hear them when I speak – 'I, a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made' (*The Laws of God, the Laws of Man* by A.E. Housman).

**Amanda Martindale  
(University of Edinburgh)**

Thank you for the invitation to contribute to this survey/article; I am flattered that I may be considered someone who has a highly valuable lesson or insight to offer! Rather ironically, my 'gem' of advice would probably be to not feel pressured into providing 'gems of advice' and I shall expand on this in a moment. The remit asks for lessons that other sport psychologists would be wise to learn, and on this I cannot comment, as each comes with their own unique learning history, experience, and wisdom. I can, however, reflect on lessons that I have learned through practice and share some of what I have found helpful as a (still) developing practitioner.

As a novice practitioner undertaking my first applied experiences some 15 years ago, I was excited with my newly found needs analysis tools (a dazzling array of performance profiles, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews). I was also excited to learn about all the possible interventions that a sport psychologist could implement (imagery training, goal setting, and pre-performance routines to name a few). What I was much less clear on was how I should/could determine which intervention/s would be most effective based on what

needs. All my searching of the literature at that time did not reveal these much sought after answers! I found resonance with the assertion of Poczwadowski et al. (1998) that we may have neglected discussing the mediating process of issue conceptualisation that occurs between assessing and implementing. I could see that this was where the real 'skill' of the practitioner lay, and yet, I felt very underprepared for this crucial part of the process. I became fascinated by how practitioners develop expertise in professional judgement and decision making and the rest, as they say, is history.

One of the first things I learned was to withstand the pressure (and tendency) to provide immediate answers, quick fixes, and gems or nuggets of advice! I just couldn't be sure these would actually be helpful or effective, however well intended. Fortunately, in our profession, we often have the luxury of time (between sessions for example) to research and analyse the presenting issues. I was encouraged to find that this was common practice in other branches of psychology (e.g. clinical) where there was a strong focus on 'formulating' or 'framing' the case prior to beginning an intervention. The ability to think critically at different levels (e.g. how what I was doing within a session would impact on the intervention, and how that intervention would impact on the overall programme of support and vice versa) was something I found incredibly valuable. This brought the coherence to my work as a scientist-practitioner that I had noticed could so easily have been missing. The process of framing my thinking, making my thinking visible to others (through peer mentoring) and 'checking my arithmetic' is as important to my practice today as it was at the beginning, and I feel very grateful (and privileged) to have been mentored in this process by one of the most eloquent and critically reflective thinkers in our generation of sport psychologists.

### **Reflection – Alister McCormick**

Thank you to all who submitted a contribution towards this article. The responses cover a variety of topics and issues, and I suspect that each reader will take away something different. Having recently completed BPS Stage 2, I found that some patterns in the responses stood out to me. First, numerous contributors touched upon the importance of prioritising the development of interpersonal skills over the acquisition of sport psychology knowledge. Trainee practitioners gain a strong understanding of sport psychology theory, research, counselling frameworks, and interventions during undergraduate and Master's degrees that they can 'top up' throughout their careers. During Stage 2, practitioners learn how to apply this knowledge so that it benefits athletes, coaches, organisations, or teams. The outcomes of service delivery, however, are influenced by much more than what we know. I found this out during Stage 2 when my client work did not seem to play out in the neat-and-tidy manner that it often does in textbook case examples. During Stage 2, my supervisor encouraged me to study a wide range of literature, including counselling and psychotherapy, and we discussed this literature during supervision meetings. This literature helped me to appreciate that my knowledge of sport psychology and theoretical frameworks make only a small contribution to the change process, and that other factors such as client factors (e.g. hope or expectation of improvement), consultant characteristics, and the practitioner-client relationship combine to have a greater impact on outcomes (see Cooper, 2008). Incorporating counselling and psychotherapy into my Stage 2 plan of training offered me the opportunity to learn how I, as a person, influence the process and outcome of sport psychology delivery and to develop facilitatory interpersonal skills such as active listening.

Ian Maynard, Dave Alcock, Mark Wilson, Marc Jones, and Richard Cox encouraged readers to place greater emphasis on

listening to the client and understanding the presenting issue than offering solutions. This and other lessons such as 'talking to the person, not the athlete' (e.g. Lindsay et al., 2007), waiting patiently for the 'real' problem (Mark Wilson's contribution), and focusing on the needs of the individual client (Ian Maynard's contribution) are often stated in the sport psychology literature, and they sound simple. I have found these skills difficult to demonstrate in practice, however. Although I intentionally worked on these skills during the Stage 2 process, there have been occasions where I have slipped back into old habits and undervalued my client's experiences outside of sport or rushed into offering solutions. Supervision and reflective practice have, therefore, been valuable activities during and following Stage 2.

Finally, Amanda Martindale's response is presented at the end as a reminder that there are no one-size-fits-all suggestions for practising psychologists and in recognition that the format of this article understates the experiences and factors that led each sport psychologist to practise in their particular way (see also Martindale & Collins, 2010). Nevertheless, I am optimistic that the responses offer practitioners different perspectives and ideas and that the responses will stimulate readers to reflect on the applicability of each piece of shared advice to their own practice.

### **Reflection – Carla Meijen**

Alister has asked me to comment and reflect on the experiences shared by experienced sport psychology practitioners. When I was reading through the very insightful contributions, it took me back to my first experiences of applied practice. I was lucky enough to spend time and learn from an inspirational sport psychologist after I finished my MSc. It almost goes without saying that I learned an enormous amount during my time working with this sport psychologist. The response from athletes, coaches, and other participants were always positive and I felt

that this was an ideal way of delivering sport psychology. While a lot of what I learned during this period still informs my practice, I have learned that it is important to develop your own method and ways of conducting your practice. It is very tempting to go with what works, but it is equally important to critically evaluate and reflect on how to progress from this and develop your own identity as a practitioner. Perhaps sometimes we are defensive of what we know, and if it works, then why should we try to change it? This does demonstrate the importance of reflective practice in our development as a practitioner and to constantly encourage us to be open for new experiences. It also resonates with the suggestion to seek information and resources elsewhere, outside of the field of (sport) psychology, in areas such as education, physiology, sociology, and other medical professions.

Peer consultation is also an invaluable tool in the process of critical thinking and developing your own identity. Discussing your practice with other sport psychologists at different stages of their career is an invaluable experience that I cannot highlight enough. This will help to develop our critical thinking in a safe and supportive environment, yet at the same time it encourages us to get out of our comfort zone. Learning from practitioners at different stages in their career may also help us to appreciate the value of being patient. I found that – particularly in the first years of my training – my lack of patience interfered with my decision-making processes and communication skills, such as listening. What I have started to learn is that you cannot force behaviour change and sometimes you will need to let go of the structure that you are so used to, which is something mentioned in a number of the ‘gems’ of advice!

### **Five take-away messages for early-career sport psychology practitioners**

To conclude this article, we would like to summarise five take-away messages, in no particular order, that we hope early-career sport psychology practitioners will find useful.

- We encourage prospective Stage 2 candidates to identify what you would like your future supervisor to offer and to spend time finding a supervisor who will meet your needs. This might mean spending time locating, interviewing, and quizzing different supervisors before making a decision that will influence your professional development. For example, based on the responses in this article, you might wish to work with a supervisor who will offer you the opportunity to observe them modelling a particular approach to practice, who will help you to develop skills in reflective practice, or who will support you in developing a sense of *who you are* and *how you are* in the athlete-psychologist relationship.
- Listening is a key skill for sport psychology practitioners, but it is more difficult to be a good listener that you might expect. Dedicate time to developing your listening skills by reading books on counselling skills, attending workshops or courses on counselling skills, and intentionally working on your listening skills during client work and every-day interactions. Your supervisor might help by modelling active listening, arranging role-plays, or providing feedback on audio recordings of your interactions with clients (assuming that your client provides informed consent).
- Be open-minded to what literature from mainstream psychology, counselling and psychotherapy, philosophy, and the arts can offer sport psychology practitioners. Your supervisor could help you to identify valuable texts, but you should also be proactive in locating literature that you think will benefit your development. In my experience, this literature can be

integrated into your BPS Stage 2 plan of training, as long as you can justify it to your supervisor and assessors.

- Be patient when providing psychological assistance. Instead of rushing into providing a solution, take the time to ask questions, to learn about your client, and to develop a relationship. It may take a while for the client to tell you about the 'real' problem or for you to understand the client's situation well enough to identify what you can do to help. As suggested by Marc Jones, consider relieving yourself of some pressure by explaining that you do not expect to offer solutions during the first session.
- The value of supervision endures beyond completion of supervised training. Whilst Brian Hemmings' response sheds light on the benefits of two-person peer supervision meetings, we also have found that a structured approach to group

consultation (conducted as part of our regional network meetings) offers practitioners of different levels of experience the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, to see a client issue from a different perspective, and to take away new ideas.

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