

The mental game in sport: the role of self-awareness

It's becoming increasingly evident that the psychological principles underlying human sporting performance, such as mental toughness, mindset and motivation, are just as important as the physical ones.

"There is no cure and no improving of the world that does not begin with the individual himself."

– Carl Jung



In fact, when all things are equal, be it skill, coaching quality or fitness, it's the mental game that makes the difference between winning and losing. It's therefore no surprise we're seeing increasing numbers of high profile athletes revealing they work with sport psychologists. But how do athletes go about developing their mental game? How do they work with sport psychologists in order to unlock these key psychological principles and improve performance? While this involves a number of different factors, Insights believes the key is self-awareness: it's self-awareness that underpins our cognitive-behavioural processes and allows us as human beings to alter our behaviours, perceptions and attitudes so that we can realise our true potential¹.

So, what is self-awareness?

A bit of science ...


Science tells us that the act of being 'self-aware', i.e. the

process of self-evaluation and reflection, uses multiple sub-components within different regions of the brain²⁻⁵. It allows us to understand not only our own strengths and weaknesses but also how others perceive us⁶⁻⁸.

This anticipation of how others perceive us is known as 'other awareness'⁹; understanding how our behaviours impact others, and vice versa, how others' behaviours impact us, can help to develop our own self-awareness. It is this concept of self-awareness that sets us as human beings apart from all other species¹⁰⁻¹².

Why is self-awareness important in sport?

We often forget that athletes are humans first, and with that, they're both inherently gifted and flawed. In that sense, they're no different from the rest of us. We all have our own unique set of beliefs, values, behaviours and characteristics which makes us fundamentally different from everyone else. By reflecting and evaluating what these are, we're able to understand



ourselves better and this can often provide an ‘unlock’ to a variety of situations. It goes without saying, that in order to bring about any kind of change, we first need to understand what needs changing and why;¹³⁻¹⁴ the first step requires an understanding of oneself.

“You are a human being before you’re a cricketer. You have to develop the human being before you develop the athlete.”

– Chris Marshall, England Cricket Board

Let’s take a specific example. A top cricketer has recently lost batting form and their self-efficacy has reduced as a result. The sport psychologist and athlete work together to understand what’s going on and what they can do to resolve the issue. Various conversations with the athlete, coach and teammates, combined with observations during training, reveal negative self-talk both internally and overtly when under pressure. While negative self-talk isn’t always harmful to performance¹⁵, in a sport like cricket, where high levels of concentration are required¹⁶, negative self-talk can distract from the batting, and instil feelings of doubt, which could explain the athlete’s lower levels of self-efficacy¹⁷.

“Anyone coaching or developing anyone ... your first job is to understand them and help them understand themselves. Insights Discovery is a really effective tool for accelerating that process.”

– James Bell, former RFU Lead Psychologist

To resolve these issues, the sport psychologist continues to work with the athlete to gain a deeper awareness of what they’re saying to themselves, and how often, in order to develop an intervention aimed at first reframing the negative self-talk and secondly incorporating it into a pre-performance routine that increases focus when batting. Self-awareness was the key here; it enabled the athlete to uncover the general underlying tendency to use negative self-talk when under pressure, and begin to understand how that was negatively impacting their performance. This allowed the athlete and sport psychologist to work together to bring about the required behavioural change: in this case, reframing the negative self-talk. Now that the cricketer has increased self-awareness regarding how they talk to themselves, it may lead them to explore how they talk to others and how that impacts their relationships on and off the pitch.

“If you understand yourself better, you’ll become a better player. If you’re a better bloke all round, you’re more likely to become a better player. You’ll understand the best way to communicate and recognise how you impact on others.”

– Chris Marshall, England Cricket Board

Insights application of self-awareness

At Insights, we believe self-awareness is the basis for all human endeavour and an essential requirement for sporting excellence. We therefore provide an offering aimed at enhancing individuals' levels of self-awareness through the lens of Jungian typology, known as Insights Discovery. Using the Insights Discovery profile like a mirror, individuals are provided with a description of how they appear in the world, (how they see themselves) and how others may see them. This knowledge combined with the desire to understand more about themselves and others enables individuals to increase their levels of self-awareness: the application of this helps individuals better understand their strengths and weaknesses¹⁸ as well as become more aware of emotions and how they can impact others¹⁹. In our everyday lives this translates to higher levels of understanding about self and others that can lead us to actionable and directed changes for better personal relationships. In sport, Insights Discovery has served and continues to serve many additional purposes. A few of these identified by sport psychologists and high performance coaching staff are:

- **Immediate impact:** allowing coaches to get to know athletes in a very short space of time including understanding their individual preferences
- **Communication:** developing a common language that's effective and simple to use
- **Leadership:** developing an awareness of different leadership styles and how that can change in high-pressure environments; including how decision making is affected
- **Resilience:** Enhancing an understanding of how individuals respond to stress/pressure, which, combined with other interventions, can develop resilience

- Athlete preparation
- Connection and building relationships
- Highlighting potential 'blind spots'

“Insights Discovery has been a very useful tool as often clubs will get players from a variety of social, economic and educational backgrounds – yet everyone gets it. The straightforward manner of Insights is appealing and it increases caregiver sensitivity.”

– James Bell, former RFU Lead Psychologist

About the author



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