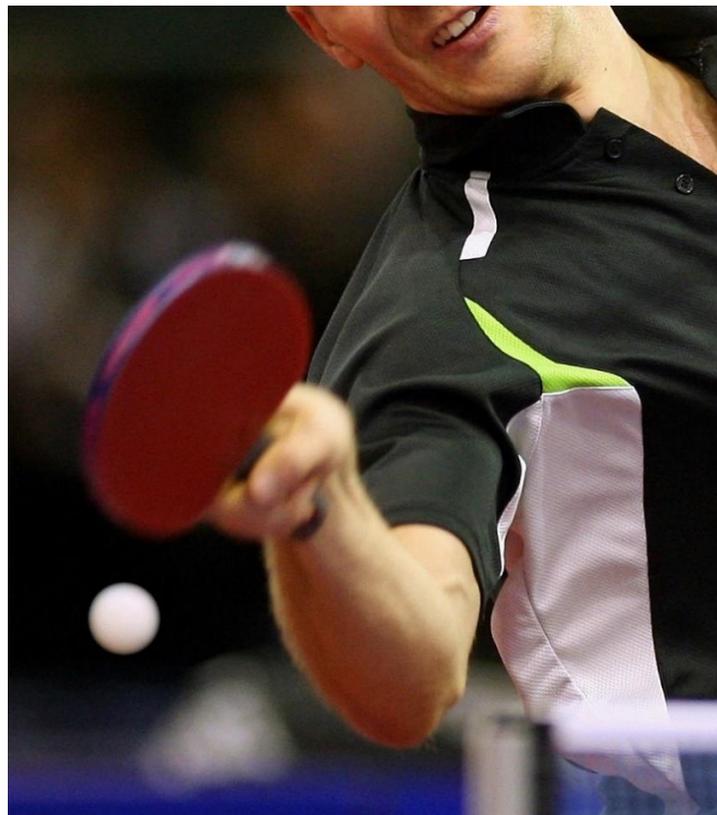

Psychology for performance enhancement



Professional philosophy, methods and services

Understand evidence-based work behind high-performance development



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Visions and objectives

Goals of sport psychology services

Massive research and practical experience show that performance excellence develops out of solid relationships, high quality practices, and robust psychological skills to deal with the pressure of competition. Such culture requires an active and dialogue-based leadership, characterized by mutual collaboration, carefully planned and supervised practices, and mental strength to perform optimally when it matters the most.

The purpose of this paper is to make a professional philosophy and evidence-based sport psychology work visible for organizations, coaches, athletes, parents and other personnel interested in performance enhancement. You will briefly read about theories that promote human change, a sport psychology model now used by several Olympic organizations, and a step-by-step intervention framework taking place in the work between the consultant and the client (athlete, coach or team).

Visions and objectives with the sport psychology work is to:

- Assist coaches and athletes with psychological knowledge and practical tools to perform optimally on national and international level
- Support coaches and athletes to develop and maintain a world-class training culture on daily bases. Promote deliberate practice that is highly relevant for competition performance
- Teach athletes to develop fast perception and decision-making skills, which is by World champions is seen as one major factor leading to excellent table tennis performance
- Help athletes to practice self-leadership, make independent choices, collaborate with others and take personal responsibility regarding *what one is* and *what one wants to become*
- Support coaches and athletes with structures and effective leadership-tools that makes learning and performance processes visible, measurable and modifiable
- Assist athletes in developing an identity and meaning in life, which is broader than the sport itself, and thereof, developing life-skills to find balance between sports and life, and prevent stress and burn-out
- Help coaches and athletes to develop a performance culture based on solid collaborations, mutual learning and effective goal-oriented feedback
- Support coaches in the development of sharp coaching skills during matches, and thereof, increasing their impact on player's game performance, and ultimately, the outcome
- Provide parents with relational competence and communication skills that empower their youngster's self-determination, enjoyment and achievement beliefs

Psychology and sport performance

Core assumptions and beliefs

- Performance success requires dedication, collaboration and effort. Coaches and athletes develop best when they take common responsibility for the psychological aspects of leadership, mutual learning and performance.
- Coaches have a powerful impact on athletes' motivation and performance. Coaches are *change agents* – the way they design and conduct practice sessions, will strongly influence athletes' skill acquisition and achievement beliefs. We help coaches optimize the impact they have on their athletes.
- Peak performance requires sharp psychological skills. Athletes need to understand how the way they think influence their emotions and decision making, which in turn directly affect 'here-and-now' performance. We work with both acute initiatives and long-term interventions.
- Setbacks, uncertainty and worry is the nature of elite sports. Athletes need to develop a *mindset* where they see adversity as building blocks of learning and develop coping strategies to deal with both success and failure.
- Solid performances require solid relationships. Coaches and athletes need to work in close collaboration where 'goals' and 'mastery criteria' are clear, visible and measurable. Constructive evaluations of *goals* and its *impact* on performance is the heart of achievement.
- Athletes learn and develop more efficiently when they take responsibility for their own progress. An active and dialogue-based leadership characterized by encouragement and instructional feedback that supports athletes' self-determination and ownership, is fundamental.
- Athletes are embedded in the environment. Providing the 'right' support require understanding of the 'whole athlete' and the relationships he or she is involved in, both inside and outside of the sporting environment.
- Reaching high levels of performance over time, require an identity which has a broader meaning than table tennis itself. Although proper commitment and personal drive are central, athlete's self-esteem should not depend on performance outcome.
- Being mentally strong means to live and act in line with personal values. The choices we make and the effort we put into our actions reflect what is important to us. Performance success is therefore a matter of choice.
- Parents play a major role in how young athletes approach achievement. The more engaged and supportive parents are in the life of athletes, the higher well-being and stronger desire to reach personal goals will they experience.

Theories of intervention

Influences from psychology

Sport psychology interventions are based on solid research about how we learn and promote changes in human development. The work combines different theories, that complement each other, helping us to understand how athletes and coaches think, act and react, and how a consultant can design an intervention that can optimize and sustain peak performance and personal growth.

Mutual interplay between thoughts, feelings and performance

The cognitive psychology tradition emphasizes a mutual interplay between thoughts, emotions, physiology and behavior. The athlete's thoughts have a powerful impact on performance. For instance, when an athlete feels nervous, it is not necessarily because he or she is about to lose control, but because the athlete interprets it that way. By identifying and re-structuring thinking patterns (e.g., where to direct attention), the athlete can implement new strategies and optimize performance. One key task of the sport psychologist is to educate the athlete (and the coach) to understand how thinking patterns affect emotional responses (e.g., stress, self-confidence), which in turn guide decision making (e.g., game-plans) and action, and how modification of these thoughts can help the athlete to gain control over the performance process. Keeping in mind that unpleasant emotions is a natural part of sports, learning to deal with these requires a changed mindset, exposure and deliberate practice. Helping the athlete to identify and regulate own thinking patterns and emotions, and make independent decisions during competitions, is a major factor leading to long-term success, and therefore, one core mission of the sport psychologist.

Athlete's identity, personal meaning and self-belief

The humanistic psychology highlights that human beings are inherently motivated to reach personal goals and are eager to take responsibility for their own development. A core assumption of the sport psychologist is that athletes are active and willing to work independently to achieve positive changes. Therefore, 'home-assignments' are one key aspect of interventions, as means for helping the athlete to become aware of own values, preferences,

strengths and areas of untapped potential. The humanistic approach emphasizes personal identity and meaning. Although it is well documented that robust psychological skills are essential for quality practices and performing under pressure, the efficiency of these skills are influenced by how the athlete experiences meaning and value with the athletic career (do I have the drive and belief, do I get the support I need). The humanistic perspective highlights also the quality of the therapeutic relationship between the consultant and the client, as crucial for effective interventions. Relationships characterized by mutual trust, openness and support are also fundamental conditions for all coaches (and parents) who aim to empower athlete development.

Solid performance development requires solid relationships

The systemic psychology tradition is a complex interaction between several disciplines, with emphasis on the 'whole system', following the premise that the whole is greater than the sum of all parts. A major recognition is that the athlete is embedded in an environment and is influenced by the relationships within these environments, both inside and outside of sports. One task of the sport psychologist is to work with vital relationships that surrounds the athlete and create optimal conditions for athlete's well-being and motivation. For instance, if an athlete is in conflict with her demanding father, she may find it difficult to fully engage in performing during competition. Focusing only on how she performs, we will not be able to understand her fully, and therefore failing to provide the support she truly needs. The sport psychologist may therefore invest time and energy in something, which is not directly related to performance. Furthermore, as the coach is assumed to have a strong impact on the athlete's psychological state (e.g., self-belief, fear of failure), the coach plays a central role in understanding how trust levels in the coach-athlete relationship influence the athlete's engagement, functioning, and ultimately, performance. Therefore, another core task of the sport psychologist is to involve and support the coach in building strong coach-athlete relationships powered by mutual trust, openness and free of judgment.

The sport psychology model

The interplay between the environment, personal identity and mental skills

The model was developed by sport psychologists within the Danish Olympic organization and applied on different National teams. The model describes different areas and layers that affect the athlete that may be involved in the sport psychology work. The triangle represents the athlete, including three layers: *personality and identity*, *life as an elite athlete and life-skills*, and *mental skills*. The circle represents the environments that the athlete is involved in, both inside and outside of sports.

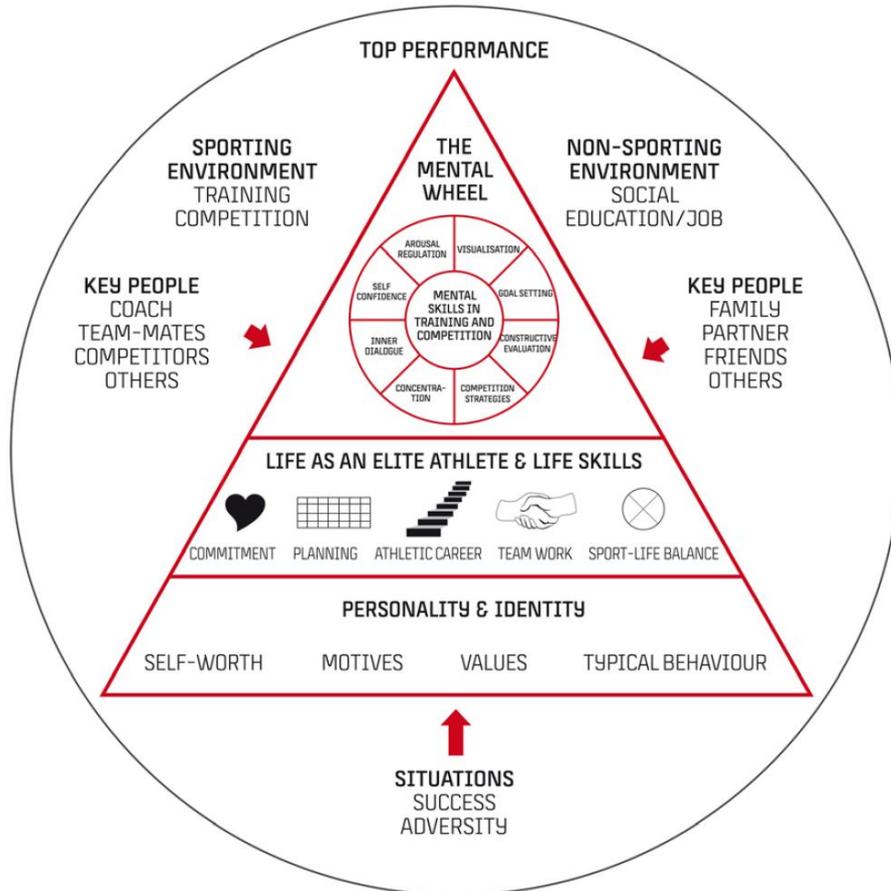


Figure 1. The Team Denmark sport psychology model (in Henriksen, Hansen, & Diment, 2011).

Personality and identity

Personality is about the unique ways in which each of us think, feel and behave that give us direction and meaning in life. Identity refers to how we define and understand ourselves, our values and how we typically behave.

Self-worth. Appreciating and valuing ourselves as we are is the core of self-worth. The self-worth of the athlete should not depend on achievement. One key task of the consultant is to help athletes to differentiate self-worth from self-confidence.

Motives. Although elite athletes often have a strong drive to reach success, they also have opposing motives (studies, family, personal interests). Athletes need to be

aware of various motives and how these influence choices and consequences on career development.

Values. Values reflect what we personally value in our lives. The way we think, act and the choices we make reflect our beliefs in what has meaning to us. Being aware of own values has a strong impact on performance development.

Typical behavior. World-class athletes demonstrate consistency of specific behaviors on both practice and competitions, which are closely linked to their values, self-determined choices and sport personality.

Life as an elite athlete and life-skills

The middle layer reflects the essence of being an elite athlete and having the necessary life-skills to deal with life challenges as an elite athlete.

Commitment. Commitment is about having a mindset characterized by self-determination and devotion to make the right priorities that enhance performance growth on short- and long-term.

Planning. Successful athletes manage their time efficiently in a way that benefits their career development. This include planning days and weeks with training, rest, study or work, and socializing with family and friends.

Athletic career. Career development involves progression across different phases (e.g., from junior to senior), which has its challenges both inside and outside sports. Coping with these demands makes the difference between growth or crisis.

Teamwork. Working with other people is one core characteristic of long-term development. Athletes need communication and cooperation skills in order to work effectively with coaches, team-mates and other key personnel.

Sport-life balance. Although achievements require full commitment and dedication, elite athletes who succeed are those who can successfully combine the demands of sport with social / family life as well as job and education.

The mental wheel

Within the upper layer is the mental wheel, which consists of eight key mental skills athletes need to master in order to practice with high quality on daily bases and to deal with the heat of competition.

Goal-setting. Goal setting has a tremendous impact on learning and performance. Elite athletes have specific result goals, however, athletes who reach excellence are those who achieve high 'game-related' process goals.

Self-confidence. The most consistent finding within performance research is the relationship between self-confidence and performance. World-class athletes have high expectations of themselves and guide themselves through positive self-talk and imagery.

Competition strategies. Solid preparations ahead of competition that include 'pre-performance routines'

and 'within game strategies' are necessary in order to find the right focus and self-belief to perform well.

Constructive evaluation. Being aware of the how chosen goals and strategies influence skill acquisition and performance progress is critical. Athletes need to know what helps them improve, and what does not.

Arousal regulation. Athletes have their unique arousal level at which they perform optimally. Finding the right balance between activation, tension and relaxation is essential to maximize 'here-and-now' performance.

Concentration. Optimal concentration is about athlete's ability to block out distraction, hold intense focus on the task at hand and the ability to shift attention when something unexpected happens.

Visualization. Visualization refers to the use of our senses to create and re-create experiences in our mind. Top athletes empower their motivation and confidence as they can see themselves succeed with a task before they actually do it.

Self-talk. Self-talk is the voice taking place in our mind. It plays a major role in learning and performance as it affects cognitions (strategies) and emotional reactions (worry), which in turn guide decision-making and shot execution.

External influences

There are several factors outside the triangle that affect the athlete, which include the sporting environment (coaches, team-mates) and non-sporting environment (parents, partner, education). Successful interventions require working with the 'whole athlete', which implies understanding the relationships that surround the athlete within these environments.

Sporting environment. Athletes and coaches learn and perform at their best when they feel supported and challenged by each other. Assisting coaches in building solid relationships, where knowledge and 'success factors' are shared by all, helping to establish a fine balance between learning and performance climate, is one key mission in the sport psychology work.

Non-sporting environment. In order to perform well in sports, athletes (and coaches) need to feel secure outside of sports. Promoting multiple identity and balanced lifestyle between education / work and social life / personal interests is another key task to empower athlete's well-being, growth and performance.

The intervention framework

Making changes step by step

The present framework is a guiding map taking place between sport psychologist and the client (athlete or coach, individual or group). The framework combines several therapeutic traditions with the aim to empower the client to achieve desired changes. The psychodynamic tradition targets unconscious processes and change by bringing insight into personal motives. The behavioral approach focuses on observable behavior and change through learning by modelling. The cognitive tradition targets thought processes and change through how one perceives and interprets the world. The humanistic approach focuses on subjective experience and change through supporting the individual's inherent motivation to fulfill his or her potential.

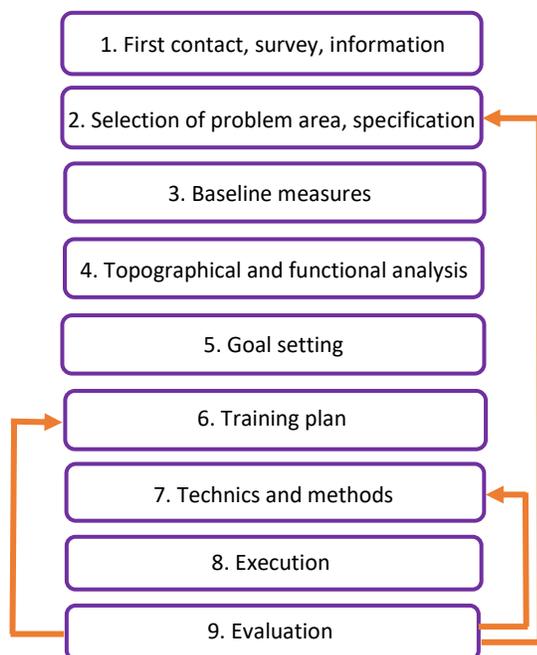


Figure 2. Specific steps in the development of a work relationship between the sport psychologist and the athlete (Schujers, 2009).

1. First contact, survey and information aim to establish trust and partnership for collaboration. The consultant shares his background, experience, ethical aspects and how an intervention may look like. The athlete is invited to share present experiences, needs and expectations.

2. Selection of problem area and specification intend to identify athlete's issues and areas of need improvement. The athlete reveals current experiences to specify areas that may facilitate performance enhancement.

3. Baseline measures assess personality characteristics and psychological skills (i.e. motivation, performance strategies, relational dynamics). An individualized profile serves as a starting point for the intervention process.

4. Topographical and functional analysis aim to reveal athlete's thoughts and emotions in specific situations or events, and create a broader understanding for issues perceived by the athlete and a base for the dialogue about the goal-setting process.

5. Goal setting aims to reach a common understanding, acceptance and decision upon *goals* and *success criteria* (with S.M.A.R.T. guidelines), that the athlete is willing to commit to in order to achieve desired changes.

6. Training plan with clear goals and strategies will act as an action plan toward changes. Understanding the effect new training goals and strategies have on desired changes, is central for effective intervention.

7. Technics and methods aim to restructure thinking, behavioral and reactional patterns of the athlete. Changes take place as the athlete actively practices new attitudes and strategies and reflects how these influence the quality of practice on daily bases.

8. Execution intends to implement new thinking and behavioral patterns into high performance situations. A new mindset and behavior reflect the ways in which the athlete deals with setbacks and makes decisions under pressure.

9. Evaluation is the final step where the consultant and the athlete evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention based on athlete's goals and expectations. Furthermore, the athlete evaluates the effectiveness of the consultant, followed by mutual feedback for future progress.

Services

Helping you to realize your potential

Sport psychology services are directed to individuals (athletes, coaches, parents) and groups (teams, families) and may include both short-term and long-term interventions. The ultimate purpose is to bring evidence-based knowledge close into the practical everyday life of coaches, athletes and other people involved in performance development.

	Working with the individual (athlete, coach)	Working with groups (teams of athletes, coaches)	Working with organizations (clubs, associations)
Content	<p>Identity development Self-awareness regarding personal values, choices, self-determination and life-skills to optimize sport-life balance.</p> <p>Psychological skills <i>High-quality practices</i> Promote quality practices through goal-setting, attentional control, self-evaluation, arousal regulation etc.</p> <p><i>Dealing with pressure</i> Mental skills to deal with pressure such as competition routines, game strategies, stress management etc.</p>	<p>Team development Establish a collective mindset that helps members to strive together towards common goals and support each other during setbacks.</p> <p>Trusting relationships Create meaningful communication that makes personality preferences, goals and mastery criteria visible for all members.</p> <p>Team performance skills Support the coach to perform under pressure through effective coaching skills to enhance team performance.</p>	<p>Performance culture Educate leaders and coaches to build environments that promote higher learning and performance progress of all athletes.</p> <p>Collaborative processes Help leaders and coaches to build bridges and share common visions, goals and success factors to achieve long-term success.</p> <p>Coaches as facilitators Assist coach-teams in creating structures which enhance athletes' skill mastery for higher achievements.</p>
Form	<p>Individual interventions Individual counselling, psychometric testing, observations during practice and competitions.</p> <p>Group interventions Group counselling, focus-groups, educational courses and workshops for coaches and athletes.</p>	<p>Workshops for teams Group counselling and practical drills to improve communication skills and collaboration among team-members.</p>	<p>Individual interventions Individual counselling with leaders and coaches to build collaborative structures within cultures.</p> <p>Group interventions Group counseling and workshops with leaders and coaches creating lasting changes in performance.</p>

Exceptions

Although elite athletes and coaches face self-doubts and emotional challenges at times (i.e. performance anxiety, stress, hopelessness), clients who suffer from depression, eating disorders or other severe psychological disorders will be kindly referred to a clinical psychologist.

About me

Background and competencies

Istvan Moldovan M.Sc. Psychology & Sports

- Motivation and performance
- Coaching effectiveness
- Parental support



I am a former National team table tennis player, represented Norway on all European- and World Championships 1997-2007. Formerly employed by the Norwegian Olympic Committee, I counsel athletes, coaches and parents with the aim to create best possible conditions which optimize motivation, well-being and performance.

Areas of competence

- Performance enhancement
- Motivational processes
- Goal-setting and evaluation
- Attentional control
- Anxiety management
- Building confidence
- Dealing with pressure
- Career development
- Perception and decision-making
- Building trusting relationships
- Leadership effectiveness

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