“Caught in the headlights”: A reflective account of the challenges faced by a neophyte practitioner working with a national squad

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Abstract

This article provides a neophyte practitioner’s account of providing psychological support to a national team for the first time. The practitioner felt “caught in the headlights” due to their lack of preparation for the range of organizational issues they encountered. In this confessional tale, experiential knowledge gained by the practitioner is shared through the presentation of self-reflections from the 6-month period they supported the squad. While the practitioner’s time with this national squad was limited, it gave him a sense of the micropolitical landscape of the sporting organization and illuminated some of the complexities and dilemmas that characterize applied sport psychology practice. These reflections are offered to guide other aspiring professionals during their initial training experiences.

Key words: training and development, micropolitical landscape, preparation, national team, organizational stress.
Context

This case study presents an account of the sport psychology support delivered to a national team over the course of six months. At the time, I (the First Author) was a neophyte practitioner, a few months into my supervised practice following the British Psychological Society (BPS) Stage 2 route to accreditation. While I had initial experiences working in collegiate sport, this was my first exposure to a national-level squad. Throughout this process, I was guided by BPS code of conduct and ethical standards and engaged with regular individual and group supervision.

Consulting Philosophy

My consulting philosophy in the early stages of practice was heavily influenced by my academic experience. During the completion of my Master’s degree in Sport and Exercise Psychology, I placed an emphasis on the importance of understanding and developing a philosophical approach to being an effective practitioner. As outlined by Poczwardowski, Sherman and Ravizza (2004), understanding personal and professional philosophy is among the essential prerequisites to effective and ethical practice. Having gained applied experience working in collegiate sport, I had begun to experience greater efficacy in adopting a role as the sport psychologist whereby my focus was understanding, assisting, and supporting the development of the whole person and not just the athlete (cf. Rogers, 1951). I centred my approach on the relationship I could develop with my client(s) and aimed to provide a service characterized by authenticity, demonstrating unconditional positive regard, and showing empathy (see Rogers, 1951; Mearns et al., 2013). I deliberately focused on developing relationships that were collaborative, accepting, genuine, and honoured the unique world in which my client(s) lived (Ivey et al., 2013). With this, my consulting philosophy aligned closely with person-centered principles, which had shifted from earlier in my training, when I would experience a sense of competence and satisfaction from adopting a more direct
approach and felt anxious to provide client(s) with solutions to demonstrate my knowledge
and worth. At the time of this case, I found greater satisfaction in acting as a facilitator,
following the clients higher order directions, on a journey towards self-actualization. The
challenges faced as the practitioner in this case led me to question my person-centered
professional philosophy.

The Case

I was asked to provide psychology support to a national team in a relatively new
discipline within the sport. The coaches had recently formed a skeleton support team, which
they sought to expand to include “performance psychology” support in their hope of
“creating a more holistic coaching structure”. I was initially very surprised to be given a
chance to lead the sport psychology support to national-level athletes given my lack of
experience in this setting, yet I was eager to develop and felt competent enough to work in
this setting under supervision. Moreover, the embryonic stage of development within the new
discipline of the sport meant the work was only appropriate for neophytes given the limited
funding available to the team. I met the coaches and athletes for the first time during a
selection weekend, where the head coach invited me to “get a feel” for the new discipline.

At the time of my first exposure to the squad, they were halfway through the season
and the athletes’ collective aim was to “compete at an international level”. The head coach
mentioned a few of the athletes had “struggled psychologically over the first half of the
season”, hence his desire to “bring in a practitioner” to work with the squad. I was keen to
explore this further and asked the head coach to talk through what he expected from sport
psychology support. During this conversation, the coach named several psychological
concepts (e.g., resilience, confidence, managing pressure) he wanted me to “cover in some
workshops with the athletes”. Psychological support was something that, from the
perspective of the head coach, occurred away from the training environment and was
independent of the coach’s work. I foresaw this being a problem and raised the benefits of working with and through coaches as an emersed member of the coaching team, but this was dismissed immediately by the head coach. This dismissal from the coach took me by surprise. I felt uneasy, unsure whether to challenge this view, as I worried doing so would jeopardise my opportunity to work in elite sport before it had really begun. A further problem I identified was the limited face-to-face contact time with the coaches and athletes. The head coach explained the only opportunity to meet with support staff and athletes would be at training camps which took place once every two months. I felt this delivery structure presented a challenge to me building rapport and momentum with the staff and athletes. I started to feel that the attitude toward sport psychology services may have been to provide a “quick fix” reflected by “token” workshops and superficial athlete screening. I started to question myself, my beliefs about “good practice”, and doubted the impact I could have with such limited integration and time with the squad. Despite these challenges, I was “caught in the headlights” of opportunity and determined to make it work and provide a service that could be built around a seemingly rigid programme. I hoped to expand the sport psychology service, take the head coach on a journey, and embed “good psychology” after “getting my foot in the door”.

I spent a total of six months working with the squad, and in that time, I attended four weekend training camps. To appease the wishes of the head coach, for these camps I would deliver a one-to-one “check-in” session with each athlete followed by a team workshop at each of the upcoming training camps. The remit for the workshops was that I was to cover specific topics: coping with competition anxiety, performing under pressure, resilience, and leadership. Emerging from a seemingly rigid and “token” view of psychological support, I reflected on my poor “contracting”, low contact time, organizational demands, as well as the
attraction of working with a national team that led to my collusion with a limited view of psychological support.

**Relationships, Rapport and Contracting**

**Phase 1. Assessment.** I was invited to attend a training weekend mid-way through the season. All 15 athletes in the squad and 4 support staff attended, which represented a great chance to immerse myself within the culture of the team, undertake some observations, and have some conversations to support a needs analysis that could span individual, team, and organizational levels. Developing an extensive assessment process allows for the collection and integration of a variety of data sources that enable a thorough analysis of the needs of individuals, teams, and organizations (see Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2020).

I arrived at the camp for my first day with some eagerness expecting to familiarize myself with the environment. Yet on arrival the head coach informed me that he had arranged one-to-one consultations with every athlete, each lasting 45 minutes. I was immediately aware that I had not “contracted” effectively, feeling like I was not in control of the service I was providing, and uncertain regarding what other surprises I might encounter. I was directed by the head coach to a room where I would conduct athlete one-to-ones, which was a small box room to the side of the training centre, where the athletes would “be sent” throughout the day “to see me”. I suggested to the head coach it would be useful for me to observe the athletes in their training environment before having a session with them, but the coach was sceptical about the value of me doing so. In line with person-centered principles (Mearns et al., 2013), I approached the one-to-one athlete sessions with a “stripped down” aim to build rapport and lay the foundations for open and honest conversations. To support the athlete in exploring their own journey, I used McAdams’s (1995) life story interview method to invite each athlete to assume the role of storyteller of their life up to the present moment. By doing so, we were able to explore life chapters, critical events, and life challenges, and how these
may have impacted the athlete (McAdams, 1995). The use of life interviews is well supported in the sport psychology literature (Smith et al., 2016) and I felt this method sat well within my emerging philosophy of practice.

Reflecting on the assessment phase, I felt I could have contracted more effectively with the head coach on the importance of a thorough needs analysis. Not wanting to “rock the boat”, I went along with what the coach had planned and his vision for psychological support. As I did not challenge the head coach, I experienced feelings of inauthenticity in our early exchanges and felt discomforted trying to “fit” myself into their environment. I experienced similar feelings to those reported by Wadsworth et al. (2021), where I experienced a sense of wearing clothes that do not fit, that my work just does not feel right, with these thoughts being accompanied with symptoms of anxiety and frustration. At this time, I recalled literature reporting trainee experiences of working in elite sport, and the many practitioner accounts relating to knowing when and how to appropriately challenge others in sport (McDougal et al., 2015; Champ et al., 2020). I share the reflections of Cruickshank et al. (2013), where elite sport organizations can be asserted as ruthless, totalitarian, with unique distributions of power, so practitioners must carefully consider when to challenge and when to refrain. I felt frustrated with myself and I became hesitant to ask for support and I avoided challenging the head coach. I did later raise this challenging relationship in supervision, but on camp I felt I had to “crack on” and “get stuck in”. Indeed, I was never able to establish a good rapport with the head coach because our conversations were brief, formal, and task-focused, and despite my attempts, the coach was not open to working collaboratively to build a more meaningful working relationship. I was – and remained – an outsider.

Reflecting on the process of meeting athletes back-to-back, I was mentally and emotionally fatigued, especially as I had no time in between meetings reflect on the previous consultation and write up notes. Feeling drained, I questioned my own self-care and was later
disappointed that I prioritized the wellbeing of others before looking after myself. I felt the quality of the sessions deteriorated as the day progressed, and by the last few, was simply “getting through” them with my ability to actively engage in the session compromised and resulting in a lack of individuality. I was frustrated with myself for allowing this to happen and resolved to change approach. First, I attempted to observe the athletes in training, aiming to further develop my nascent relationships and build an understanding of their individual needs (Fifer et al., 2008). Second, I strove to engage in informal conversations with athletes throughout the weekend. What I craved was to be meaningfully embedded within the system I was supporting and the opportunity to establish credibility and effective relationships. Yet, this may have been an unrealistic expectation given the lack of contact time with the squad, my ‘outsider’ status, and the difficulties encountered when contracting with the head coach.

Phase 2. Mutual Sharing with Athletes. During our initial one to one conversations, athletes raised with me concerns relating to the culture and the environment of the team. Some athletes described feeling “disconnected” from the sport and experienced moral disengagement due the behaviours of the staff (Guvendi & Isim, 2019). The athletes continued to raise issues relating to the structure of sessions, which they perceived to be wholly coach-led and “incompatible” with their own desires and beliefs (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002). I explored these themes with the coaches in a sensitive manner, seeking their perspective and conscious of managing any countertransference given my own personal uneasiness with the head coach. Contrary to the athletes’ opinions, the coaches were adamant that there were no issues with the team culture and no need to pay attention to these concerns. Collectively, the coaching team insisted I should deliver the workshop on “coping with competition anxiety” and as I felt I had not built a close rapport with coaches, and in a position of subordination unable to challenge their position, I proceeded to deliver the session.
At the start of my workshop on “coping with competition anxiety” with the athletes, I perceived some unrest and palpable tension among the athletes, with one individual declaring he was finding it hard to focus on the content when there was a “cloud hanging over the group”. The athlete continued, stating that he believed there had been a breakdown in communication between the athletes and coaches over the last few months. These disputes were not only caused by unmet expectations and disagreements about training content (Kristiansen et al., 2012), but also by individual behaviours, such as coaches’ rigid and autocratic leadership (Gearity & Metzger, 2017). These views were shared by most of the athlete group and they expressed collective difficulty in focusing on the topic of the session. I felt ethically compelled to provide a space for the athletes to talk to the issues they disclosed. From my philosophical stance, the client is a person first and athlete second, so I used the session to listen to their concerns regarding the coaches, rather than delivering what I now felt would be a superficial, misaligned, and ultimately incongruent workshop. While there is evidence in the current literature to indicate that conflict is likely to occur at some point within the context of the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett, 2003), there is only little evidence-based information available on how coaches and athletes practically approach interpersonal disputes (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Exploring interpersonal strategies, I felt an appropriate first step would be to create a space where the athletes could begin to self-regulate by offering time and opportunity to vent their frustration (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Undertaking two-chair work; with one acting as the coach and the other the athlete, I asked the athlete to pose concerns and questions to each other to help look at the challenges from different perspectives. The aim of this task was to create a space where the athletes could ‘feel heard’, and gain perspective on the situation (Bell et al., 2020). Concerns where shared in this task regarding transparency, trust, support, people management, organization, feedback, and lack of positive reinforcement from the coaches.
Having facilitated an ad hoc team self-disclosure session (Holt & Dunn, 2006), and not delivered anything on “coping with competition anxiety”, my concern was what to do with the information I had been given and my anxiety heightened with the thought that I had potentially “fanned the flames” of discontent between the coaches and athletes. I did try to anonymously share with the coaches a few of the points raised by the athletes, hoping that this honesty and openness would resonate with them and they might experience greater empathy with the athletes (Jowett et al., 2012). Unfortunately, the coaches were dismissive of the athletes concerns and in response placed the blame for such sentiments on the athletes. One of the technical coaches stated, “that’s typical of them, they can’t be trusted”, with the head coach adding in response, “if they took more control nothing would get done”.

On reflection on this phase of the programme, I became increasingly frustrated with the coaches’ lack of receptivity to my challenges or ideas, and there were times when I questioned whether they took me seriously. Specifically, I ruminated over whether my “trainee” status meant they saw me exclusively as an inexperienced, novice practitioner who they could dictate to. I started wondering if my presence was exclusively a symbolic attempt to show care for the athletes. I felt in a difficult position, attempting to appease the head coach who had provided me with the opportunity, while recognizing the ethical obligation and duty of care to respect the athletes’ concerns and advocating for them. There were times when I questioned my worth and the impact I could have without greater traction with the coaches. Throughout this process, I felt I was prioritizing the squad’s needs and neglecting my own self-care in this experience. At no point did I reflect on my own emotions and how the situation was impacting my wellbeing. With the support of my supervisor, I reflected on these events which led to some normalizing of my concerns and taking ownership of my self-care. We debated whether I should continue with the opportunity, but I was determined to try to make progress and remained drawn to the opportunity. I redesigned my next workshop for
the following training camp, which was intended to support athletes and coaches in constructively sharing emotions (Evans et al., 2013).

**Phase 3. Team Reflections and Mutual Sharing with Coaches and Athletes.** Despite the challenges faced during the first camp, I was optimistic that bringing the athletes and coaches together for a session would be beneficial, to begin to clear the air rather than cover over the emerging cracks. With athletes and staff sharing their concerns with me separately, I reflected on the complexity of my role in the system and noted several areas such as the need to shape interpersonal processes, enhancing communication skills, increasing coaching effectiveness, promoting intra-team/-organization relationships via conflict management as possible areas to explore (Langan et al., 2013). Regarding the most pressing concern of athlete-coach conflict, I reflected on my role in the process, and considered the strengths of third-party interventions to manage this conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2020). Guided by academic literature on managing conflict, I sought to use my role as the practitioner in the system to enhance open channels of communication and honesty, as well as providing support and offering assurance (Vealey, 2017; Wachsmuth et al., 2020). To enhance communication between athletes and staff, I utilised a personal disclosure mutual sharing (PDMS) approach to enable athletes to have a voice and share their thoughts and feelings (Holt & Dunn, 2006). When used judiciously, a PDMS approach can enhance team closeness, understanding appreciation, and ultimately foster increases in friendship identity (Dunn & Holt, 2004; Evans et al., 2013). Nevertheless, adopting a PDMS approach with a group of individuals with strong views and limited trust was a challenge. The athletes saw this session as an opportunity to vent, but the coaches reacted to this and there was a battle for “airtime”. This session evidenced some of the micropolitical issues and social fractures present throughout the squad, with athletes and coaches lacking congruence and empathy, and no sense of shared purpose or identity. What surprised me was the lack of emphasis on enhancing self-awareness, ownership, and
responsibility, with the vision of the head coach focused on the “how”, rather than the “what” and ‘why” (Conger & Kanungo, 1998).

Reflecting on my position and status as a neophyte practitioner, I found it difficult to manage so many different perspectives and opinions, and while the experience gave me a sense of the micropolitical landscape of working in elite sport, I was overwhelmed. On reflection, I perhaps should have foreseen how the disconnect between the athletes and coaches would “play out” and might have undertaken the PDMS with smaller groups, allowing one person to speak at a time. Towards the end of the session, I felt frustrated as the session hadn’t gone the way I had hoped. I started ruminating over the impact I could have with a squad that was divided and questioned whether they needed someone with more experience in elite sport. The period between this training weekend and the next camp was challenging. On some days I wanted to call the head coach and say, “I’m sorry I’m going to have to step away”, and other days wanted to meet the challenge.

I took my experiences to my one-to-one and group supervision. The group helped put the situation in perspective and while I felt permission to step away from the work, I decided I would continue with the work, and that I would attempt to encourage the squad to reflect on team values. I planned a session with the goal of developing a charter that both coaches and athletes could refer to with general agreement on shared values, beliefs, and norms, while acknowledging that subgroups existed (Wagstaff et al., 2017).

Phase 4. Team Values, Identity, and “Crisis”. On arrival to the next training weekend, I was anxious about how the session would go. For this workshop, the aim was to identify and build from a common ground between the athletes and coaches by exploring their perceptions on team values. From the earlier needs analysis, many of the athletes didn’t feel “connected” to the squad and felt isolated at training weekends. Hence, there was a collective support for the squad creating a team charter (Byrd & Luthy, 2010), identifying
what values the team might embrace, standards they would expect of each other, and what
behaviors needed to be shown to demonstrate these values. Considering a third-party
perspective on the system (Wachsmuth et al., 2020), I was conscious to facilitate without
imposing to ensure the charter emerged from the squad. Working together, athletes and
coaches identified numerous values, including respect, honesty, be the best you can, and have
fun. I felt they responded well to the session, and for the first time I left the weekend content
with the progress made and confident valuable changes could materialize. Unfortunately,
before I could attend another training camp, I was informed the team had been disbanded due
to a range of organizational and funding issues. During this abrupt ending I noted two
important reflections on this work: 1) the reality of working in elite sport is characterized by
high levels of intentional change due to stakeholder demands for sustained success (Fletcher
& Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2015), and; 2) the precarious nature of sport psychology
work (Gilmore et al. 2018).

Reflections on consulting philosophy and challenges faced

Challenge to congruence

One of the main challenges I faced in this case was a dogmatic pursuit of, and
adherence to, my service philosophy. On meeting the squad, I was working from what I felt
was a coherent philosophy and adjusted my support according to norms and interactions with
coaches and athletes. Yet, at this stage of my development, perhaps it was more a matter of
having a theoretical philosophy that had not been challenged by the realities that were
presented in my practice environment. I felt that to work collaboratively and across varying
levels of the system would enable “good psychology” service delivery to occur, but in
retrospect, I did not contract effectively with the head coach or fully disclose these challenges
in supervision. Despite adhering to my core values and beliefs, it was not enough to be
effective with a squad in crisis (cf. Larsen, 2017). As I experienced these tensions, I became
frustrated with myself, wanting to try and work through problems while ensuring I adhered to
a professional philosophy, but not knowing how to do this. Whenever I reflected on the
experience of working with the squad, I started ruminating around the idea of not being good
enough, being a fraud, and needing to “know” more. My own group supervision supported
me throughout this time with a reflective space to share this experience, and my peers
supported me without judgement and pointed to the importance of self-care during this
difficult experience.

At times, my stubborn desire to show the squad I could rise to the challenge moved
me further away from my service philosophy, as I became anxious to find solutions. While
difficult to admit, my focus was more “internal” and concerned with proving my worth,
rather than “external” and on the needs of the squad (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995). With
this, it may have been an opportunity that came too soon for someone with little experience
of issues of organizational and team level challenges at a national level. I felt, and was,
“caught in the headlights”, wanting to show my worth and excited by the prestige of working
with a squad at national level. On reflection, I may have been better placed approaching
difficult conversations with the head coach, trusting my instincts and, albeit to some degree
avoidantly, stepping away from the opportunity. As such, knowing my limits, looking after
myself, and help seeking are key learning points to take away from this experience.

Micropolitical environment

From the outset, it was evident that social fractures were present throughout the
squad. Athletes and coaches did not see “eye to eye”, and I found it difficult to direct my
attention to several “logics” operating in the organization. The athletes mentioned a few
times that they felt a lack of control and would like more autonomy in planning sessions. The
senior athletes were more vocal on this and had asked for an athlete leadership group to
provide a greater athlete voice, yet this had been rejected on numerous occasions by the
coaches. I could begin to see the individuals in the group focused on their own interests and desires, and this impacted the systems functioning when it came to collaboration and shared vision (Gibson & Groom, 2018). If the coaches had transferred more responsibility to the athletes, it may have helped empower them through ownership and accountability (Hodge et al., 2014). Without this, the squad suffered from a “them” versus “us” outgroup approach and lacked a sense of shared purpose and psychological safety. From a group dynamics perspective (Martin et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2016), and particularly with regard to the social environment, appropriate challenge may have been beneficial, but this was largely avoided by most of the individuals in the environment in case conflict ensued.

Ultimately, there existed a lack of congruence between athletes and coaches and no sense of shared purpose and identity. My hope that team values or a charter would provide the foundation to develop a bond through the squad was misplaced without other fundamental foundation stones and the team struggled to develop any continuity, meaning, distinctiveness and sense of belonging (Thomas et al., 2017). Working in this system felt like a “dynamic and fluid process of forging and re-forging alliances and working relationships” (Cassidy et al., 2016, p. 60), and as a neophyte practitioner I found it difficult to read, initiate, and respond to the inescapably political demands of the sporting workplace. Given the requirements for sport psychologists to practice within such politicised contexts, it is perhaps naïve to believe that they are somehow immune from the challenges and dilemmas that accompany shared endeavours with others (Leftwhich & Leftwhich, 2005). This experience has helped me reflect on the micro political components of power, conflict, and vulnerability featured in day-to-day organizational life, and has advanced my understanding of some of the more tacit and understated challenges that practitioners are likely to encounter working in elite sport (Rowley et al., 2018).

Final Thoughts
While my time with this national squad was limited, it gave me a sense of the micropolitical landscape of elite sporting organizations and enabled me to begin to understand some of the complexities, nuances, and dilemmas of applied sport psychology practice (Rowley et al., 2018). Before starting with the squad, I felt coherent in my service philosophy, but by the end of this experience I recognized I was struggling to provide a service I could be happy with. In some respect, at the start of this journey, I was putting too much pressure on myself to label my practice and adhere to a “school” of psychology. While having a theoretical framework to work from was important for my development, I felt I needed to further reflect on my core beliefs and values and allow a philosophy and method to emerge from that. Moreover, this experience reminded me of the importance of effective contracting and having difficult conversations with key stakeholders, regardless of their power or status.

My ambition when asked to provide support to this squad was to attempt to operate at systemic or organizational level, with members of the whole organization rather than just athletes, to attain and sustain successful outcomes (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Yet, in hindsight this may have been an unrealistic expectation based on the challenges existing throughout the squad and my preparedness for such work. On reflection, I may have ignored some of the complexities associated with integrating myself into a high-performance environment, and my eagerness to impress both parties clouded my judgement and drew me away from the most pressing needs. As discussed by Larsen (2017), practitioners need to integrate the notions of self-reflection and cultural sensitivity into their professional philosophy when entering a professional sports organization, while keeping an eye on several “logics” operating in the organization. With this, it is key neophytes do not expose themselves to this type of context without clear contracting when entering a new service delivery context and are clear in their approach to appropriately challenge individuals within
that system to avoid collusion. Moreover, it is important for practitioners to be aware of their
own limitations, engage in self-care, and show vulnerability in order to prioritize their own
wellbeing before helping others (Quartiroli et al., 2019).

**Key recommendations**

- For practitioners early in their development, it is important to reflect on what type of
  practitioner they want to be, focusing on their core values and beliefs and allowing
  their professional philosophy and method to emerge from such reflections.

- Contracting effectively with the key stakeholders should be prioritized when entering
  a new service delivery context. It is important to establish clear reciprocal
  expectations early on between the practitioner and stakeholders and return to such
  issues repeatedly throughout one’s practice.

- Rather than trying to ‘solve’ problems and offer solutions all at once, practitioners
  should incrementally build momentum after careful formulation and an appreciation
  of the complexity of the client or systemic needs.

- Sometimes it is just not the right “fit” or time in one’s development. Practitioners
  must reflect on the suitability of the practice context for their competence and
  development. It is an important message to know that it is okay to show vulnerability
  and admit to not having answers.

- Practitioners should prioritize self-care. Caring for clients’ needs should not happen at
  the cost of the practitioner’s own wellbeing. Practitioners are strongly encouraged to
  look after themselves first and foremost by adhering to self-care practices.
CAUGHT IN THE HEADLIGHTS

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