

Team Denmark's sport psychology professional philosophy 2.0

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Abstract

In 2008, Team Denmark established a sport psychology team with the aim to enhance the quality and consistency of applied sport psychology services in Danish sport. The team began its work by creating a professional philosophy (Henriksen, Hansen, & Diment, 2011). Since this publication, the team has worked closely with Danish athletes, coaches and sport federations in consultations, training and competitions, including at numerous World and Europeans Championships as well as several Olympic Games. Lessons learnt on the job, the introduction to new theoretical perspectives, insights from supervision, and formal professional education have resulted in the continual development of the team's professional philosophy. The purpose of this article is to present a revised version of Team Denmark's professional philosophy, including: (1) the vision for the team, (2) basic beliefs and values, (3) the psychological theories that interventions are based upon, (4) Team Denmark's Sports Psychological model which describes the content and focus of the team's work and (5) the concrete psychological services that have been delivered. High quality service requires coherence across all five levels of the philosophy.

Keywords: Applied sport psychology, professional practice, researcher-practitioner

Introduction

In 2008, Team Denmark (Denmark's organization for elite sport) decided to strengthen the sport psychology service delivery in Danish elite sport by employing a permanent staff of sport psychologists. One of the first tasks of this team was to develop a professional service philosophy that describes the rationale behind how the team will work, the aim of which was to enhance the quality and consistency of applied sport psychology services. We published this philosophy in the spirit of sharing (Henriksen, Hansen, & Diment, 2011), and the paper was well received by practitioners.

Since we published this first version of the team's professional philosophy, the team has worked closely with Danish athletes, coaches and sport federations including participation at numerous World and Europeans Championships, as well as two Winter Olympic Games and two Summer Olympic Games. The sport psychology services have been in high demand with yearly evaluations (surveys filled in by athletes and coaches monitoring their satisfaction with different services provided by Team Denmark) repeatedly and consistently rating the team's performance high. During these past ten years since the original version of the philosophy was presented, the team has gained extensive practical experience and regularly participated in ongoing professional and personal development activities such as supervision, international conferences, and study trips to other national elite sports organisations. In the spirit of the science-practitioner, lessons learnt on the job, the introduction to new

theoretical perspectives and insights from formal professional education have resulted in the continual evolution and development of the team's professional philosophy. The purpose of this article is to present a revised version of Team Denmark's professional philosophy. Currently there is a mismatch between the popularity of the first paper among young professionals (as witnessed in its use in educational programs, references and people contacting our team for more information) and the fact that we now work from a revised version.

Our intention with the present paper is not to draw out the differences between the first and second version of the philosophy, but rather to present our current thinking and its applied implications. However, key changes in our philosophy include a shift from second to third wave cognitive approaches, an enhanced commitment to working on improving the athletes' environment, a stronger focus on the role of the sporting organizations, more emphasis on athletes' values in sport and life, and an enhanced belief in the importance of sport psychology services during championships. These changes have implications for all levels of the philosophy. We consider this update a consequence of the natural evolution of our work and the philosophy that guides it.

The philosophy is inspired by the recommendations of the Poczwadowski, Sherman, and Ravizza (2004) and is structured in five levels: (1) The first level defines the vision for the team. (2) The second level presents the basic beliefs and values of both the team, and the individual team members. (3) The third level describes the theoretical paradigm and psychological theories that interventions are based upon. (4) The fourth level presents Team Denmark's Sports Psychological model which describes the content

and focus of the team's work. (5) The fifth level describes the concrete psychological services that are delivered. The philosophy is built upon the idea that good sport psychological intervention requires consistency across all five levels of which we have previously provided examples (Henriksen et al., 2011; Henriksen, 2015; Henriksen, 2019; Larsen, 2017a; Larsen, 2017b; Diment, 2014).

Level 1 – The visions and objective of the sport psychology interventions

The sport psychology team is a part of Team Denmark. Team Denmark's overall aim is to make Denmark the "best place in the world to be an elite athlete", and doing this in a socially responsible manner. More specifically, the sport psychology team has the following objectives: 1) to ensure that Danish elite athletes obtain the right mental skills to perform at the highest international level, 2) to create world-class training environments for Danish athletes, 3) to ensure that the individual elite athletes experience meaning and value in life as elite athletes, as well as giving athletes skills to reduce the risk of stress and burn-out throughout their career, 4) to create a common sport psychology language among professionals, coaches and athletes across sports, and 5) to optimise teamwork and create winning cultures on Danish national teams.

Level 2 - Basic beliefs and values

Fundamental to the sport psychological team's work are the beliefs and values about elite sport, athletes, coaches and their performance from a psychological perspective. These assumptions are rarely talked about but drive and direct how we work. When defining the basic beliefs, it is also important to describe how these beliefs guide our approach to working within elite sport. The team's 10 basic beliefs and values are:

1. There are no short cuts. Effective sport psychology demands consistent training that is a natural part of an athlete's daily training. We therefore expect that athletes and coaches take ownership and responsibility for their sport psychological training.
2. Top performance demands solid psychological skills and insight, though despite having the optimal skills, athletes can still experience crisis and adversity. Therefore, we work both on long-term development processes *and* acute interventions.
3. Elite athletes are elite athletes 24/7. Therefore, the team focuses on life as an elite athlete and identity beyond sport.
4. An important part of the sport psychologist's work is to optimize the sporting environment. Therefore, it is important to work not only with the individual athletes, but also the team and organisation around the athlete.
5. Doubt and worry are natural and unavoidable parts of elite sport. Therefore, mental strength is defined as the ability to act in a way that is consistent with values, even when standing face-to-face with difficult thoughts and emotions.
6. Adversity is a natural part of elite sport. Therefore, it is important that adversity, challenges and career transitions do not end in crises, but create opportunities for growth.
7. The coach plays a central role in the integration of sport psychological work in daily training and competition. However, confidentiality is critical for creating good relationships with athletes.

Therefore, it is important to work with athletes on how, and to what degree, the coach can be involved in the work.

8. Good interventions demand good relationships. Therefore, it is crucial to meet the athletes in their environment and strive to be a natural part of the team around the athlete.
9. Championships (e.g., World and European Championships, and the Olympic Games) are like a magnifying glass that amplifies both thoughts and emotions. During these major competitions there are always unexpected challenges which can affect an athlete's performance. Therefore, the sport psychologist plays an important role during competitions.
10. A good sport psychologist is up to date, development orientated, and seeks out new information. Therefore, the team engages in on-going professional development such as receiving supervision, attending conferences, and conducting research and development projects.

These fundamental beliefs and values align with the theoretical framework that guides our work, and which will be presented below.

Level 3 – Theories of intervention

As practitioners we develop our professional philosophies throughout our careers, and usually through small adjustments. Experiences in our working life over the past ten years, however, have sparked an almost paradigmatic shift in our approach. This shift is visible in the theories that underpin our interventions. Today our applied work takes a starting point in acceptance and mindfulness-based approaches (Henriksen, Hansen & Larsen, 2019), subscribes to a humanistic-existential view of the athlete (Nesti, 2004), and involves a key focus on the athletes' environment (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

Mindfulness and acceptance-based approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT, Hayes et al., 2004) and the Mindfulness Acceptance Commitment (MAC) approach (Gardner & Moore, 2007) represent a third wave of cognitive therapy methods. Third wave cognitive therapy is different from a classical cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) approach. A central idea of a classic CBT approach in sport psychology is to change dysfunctional patterns of thought – emotion – behaviour interactions into more functional ones (Beck, 1995). Classic CBT approaches aim to teach athletes to control their internal states, for example to regulate arousal or performance anxiety and to deliberately enter their individual ideal performance state. A classic CBT approach for treating performance anxiety in sports could involve for example mapping negative automatic thoughts and reframing to formulate more rational ones. However, experience gained from delivering sport psychology service at the Olympics (e.g., Henriksen, 2015; Larsen & Henriksen, 2019; see also Henriksen et al., 2019) have convinced us that athletes are rarely able to foresee and map all problematic thoughts in advance or to find their ideal performance state during the unique pressure of the most important events.

Unlike CBT, third wave (ACT) approaches assert that thought suppression and control techniques can trigger a metacognitive scanning process (Purdon, 1999), and that excessive cognitive activity and task-irrelevant focus disrupt performance. Success on a task is related to the degree to which an athlete can accept negative thoughts, physiological arousal and emotions such as anxiety or

anger, and remain engaged in the task, while behaving in accordance with his or her values. Values describe how the athlete wants to behave or “what kind of athlete” he or she wants to be (e.g., “I want to be a constructive leader and teammate, to work hard and to motivate the team during adversity”). In an ACT perspective, practitioners should therefore not help the athletes engage in the futile task of managing and controlling internal states but rather introduce an agenda of willingness to accept negative thoughts and emotions in pursuit of valued ends (Hayes et al., 2004). The aim of the ACT practitioner, therefore, is to provide three key aspects: (a) teaching athletes to open up, to accept, and to be willing to experience the full range of thoughts and emotions that are natural parts of pursuing an elite sports career, (b) teaching athletes to mindfully engage in the present moment, including task-focused attention and (c) helping athletes formulate personal values that describe how they would like to be as an athlete and help them engage in actions that display these values.

Ecological psychology and systems theory.

Systems theory is not one specific theory but rather a scientific tradition that embraces a diverse set of theories. Common to these theories is the idea that most phenomena must be considered in systems; that is, organised wholes which are so complex that they cannot be disassembled into parts without losing their central quality, which is their wholeness (Bateson, 1973; Lewin, 1939). The holistic ecological approach (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) emphasises that humans are embedded in their environment, stresses that development must be understood as a mutual accommodation between the athletes and their context, and depicts the environment as consisting of a series of nested layers that go from the micro- to the macro-environment. Recent research on successful athletic talent development environments (see Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017 for summary) has demonstrated the potential applied significance of adopting a holistic ecological approach that shifts focus from the individual athletes to the environment in which they develop. Applied sport psychologists who adopt this perspective recognize that some sporting environments are more successful than others in helping their athletes develop and perform. Sport psychology practitioners should therefore strive to work holistically and address the whole environment, both in sporting and non-sporting areas, in order to create optimal conditions for the athletes’ performance. This is particularly relevant in the case of environments that are less successful in developing athletes, where the practitioner may help the environments to reappraise their methods and become more successful.

Humanistic and existential psychology

Humanistic Psychology (e.g., Nesti, 2004; Orlick, 1990) sees people as self-actualized, that is, motivated towards goals and able to assume responsibility for their own development. In practice this means that the sports psychology practitioner (SPP) should believe that the athletes are competent and motivated to work on their own problems. Therefore, self-directed tasks (“home assignments”) and a focus on the athlete’s own resources are important consultation methods. The humanistic psychology also draws attention to larger questions of identity, choice, responsibility and meaning, and to career long personal development. In a sport psychological context, it can be said that concrete mental skills are important, but it is equally important to go “back” and examine how the athlete understands himself and whether he or she is experiencing a meaningful career as an elite

athlete. Humanistic psychology also strongly focuses on the relationship between psychologist and client. A central belief is that a relationship characterized by trust, confidence and recognition creates fertile ground for learning and development.

Level 4 – Team Denmark’s Sport Psychological Model

Team Denmark’s Sport Psychology Model creates an overview and describes the content of the team’s work. That is, the model describes the various areas, levels, and themes included in the work with athletes, coaches and federations. The centre of the model contains a triangle representing the athlete. The triangle contains three levels: ‘Identity and drive’, ‘Life as an elite athlete’ and ‘the Mental Wheel’. Athletes are nearly always part of a team. This can be either specific team (e.g., football, handball etc.) or a training group. These teams are represented by ‘Team and training environment’ to the left-hand side of the triangle. Similarly, the athlete is always part of an organization represented by the ‘Federation’ below the triangle. Finally, to the right-hand side of the triangle is the ‘Environment outside of sport’. All these levels of environment influence the athlete’s performance.

Identify and Drive.

The bottom layer in the triangle represents the athlete’s identity and drive and contains four elements: a) self-worth, describing the degree persons value and accept themselves as they are, b) motives, helping athletes to be aware of the motivating factors in their lives and helping athletes to manage conflicting motives, c) values, helping athletes become aware of their own values so they can act in a manner consistent with these values, and (d) typical behaviour, helping athletes become aware of patterns in their behaviour and identify behavioural strengths as well as areas for development.

Life as an elite athlete.

The middle layer refers to tackling life as elite athlete and mastering the life-skills that are needed to be an elite athlete. Recent research has emphasized that sport psychology interventions should include life skills and have a broader focus than simply mental skills (e.g., Jones & Lavallee, 2009). This layer therefore contains four key areas: a) recovery, helping athletes cope with the many stressors of an elite sports career, and to develop recovery strategies to find balance both in the short and long-term, b) planning, refers to time management skills, in particular how an athlete plans and structures his or her everyday life (training, eating, rest, study, and work), c) career development, helping athletes build resources to cope with the challenges they meet during their careers as well as helping them prepare for and handle the transitions that are part of an athletic career, and d) sport-life balance, which reflects the athletes’ ability to balance the demands and ambitions from their sport, social and family life, and education.

The Mental Wheel.

The top layer of the triangle contains the Mental Wheel which represents the key mental skills that are important to perform optimally in both training and competition. Doubt and worry are natural and unavoidable aspects of elite sport. We define mental strength as the ability to act in a way that is consistent with your values despite standing face to face with adversity and experiencing difficult and uncomfortable thoughts and feelings (Henriksen & Hansen,

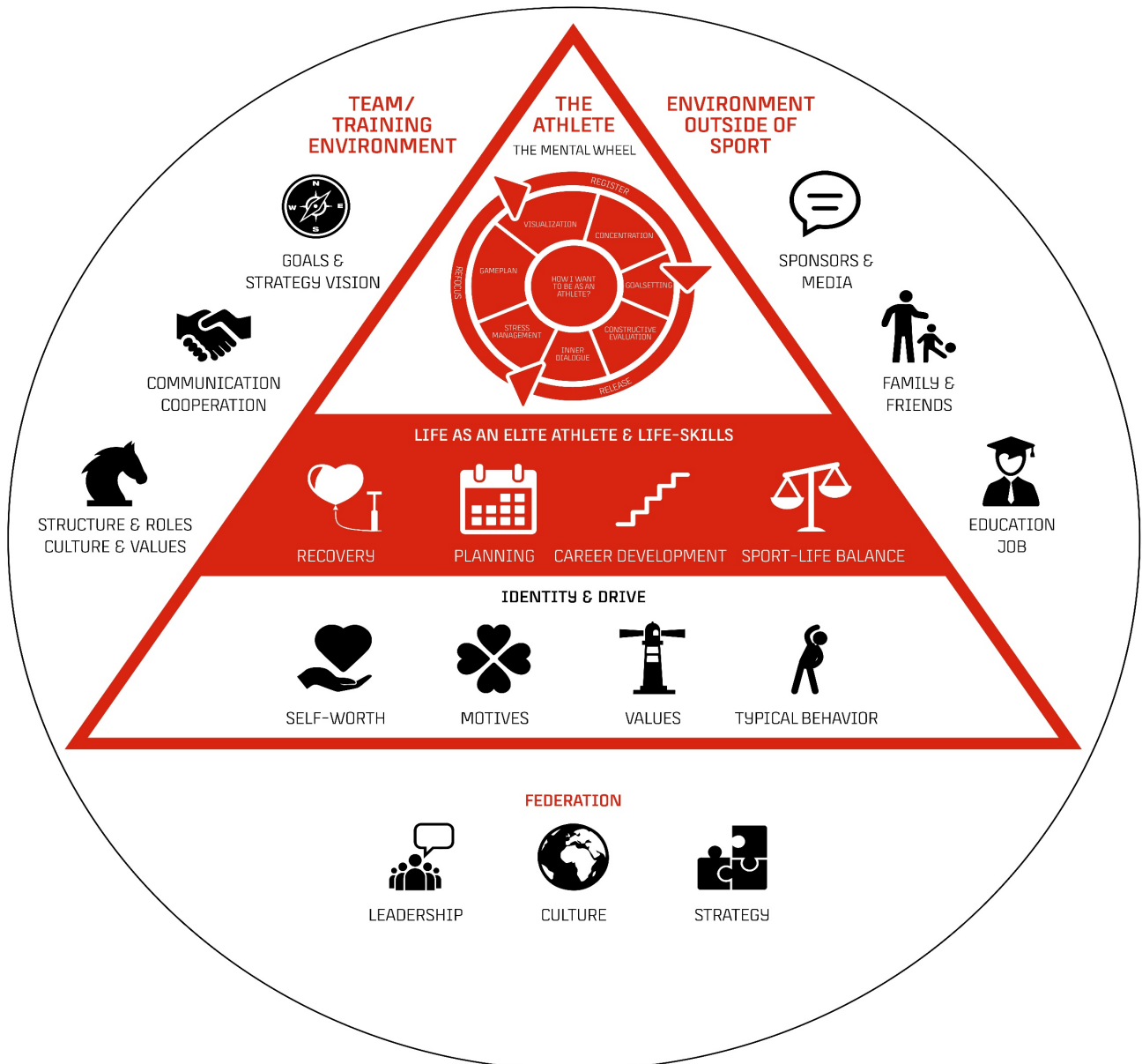


Figure 1: Team Denmark's Sport Psychological Model

2016). This demands that athletes have a solid knowledge and awareness of what they stand for as an athlete. To assist in the development of mental strength we work from what we call the 3R-Model (Register - Release - Refocus) as well as seven central psychological capacities (concentration, goalsetting, constructive evaluation, inner dialogue, stress management, game-plan and visualization) (Henriksen, Hansen, & Larsen, 2020; Highman, Harwood, & Hall, 2007; Orlick, 1990). We realize that these psychological capacities were first described within a classic sport psychology tradition heavily influenced by CBT, but at the same time most, if not all, psychology traditions use goal setting and somehow address thoughts. The difference is in the approach. For example, working on inner dialogue from an ACT perspective, we aim to change the athletes' relationships with their thoughts rather than the content of their thoughts.

The 3R- Model

In competition situations athletes are constantly at risk at being 'captured' by unproductive thoughts and emotions (Henriksen et al., 2019), often resulting in loss of focus. The ability to be aware and register when this happens, and then direct focus back to the task or values is an important skill. This process involved three skills that can be trained separately or in unison:

1. Register: Be aware of the thoughts, feelings and bodily reactions that take your focus away from the task at hand or the type of person you want to be.
2. Release: To accept these 'uncomfortable' elements instead of trying to fight against them
3. Refocus: To direct your attention back to the task or re-establish contact with your values.

Team / Training environment.

An athlete is always part of a team. A team can be everything from a doubles pair in badminton, an eight-man crew in rowing, or a 20-player football squad. It is also important to see a training group as a team as individual team members are often dependent on each other and have a common goal of being the best they can be. The three principles in developing an effective team are: a) A culture comprised of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2004), clearly defined goals, and shared values, b) clearly defined, understood and accepted sporting, social and leadership roles, and c) observable actions that are consistent with the team's values, goals and roles.

Federation.

Athletes and teams are part of a greater organization, typical a sports federation. The sports federations play a role in determining the economic support to athletes, training facilities, effective communication to athletes, team selection and planning of travel to camps and competition. These areas have a large influence on the athletes' daily life and their ability to refocus during competition. Therefore, it is important to work with the sports federation on an organizational level. It is important to work with: a) leadership, working with the coach or sports manager as a cultural leader (Henriksen, Storm & Larsen, 2018), b) culture, defining clear values and actions that are consistent with these values (Henriksen, 2015), and c) strategies, developing effective processes and strategies in areas such as team selection and support/rewards to athletes (Henriksen et al., 2018).

Environment outside of sport.

The right side of the triangle contains various external factors which affect the athlete. Sport psychology interventions need to include an understanding of the athlete's overall environment and his or her relationships with people outside of the sporting environment (Côté, 1999; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Athletes often have ambitions in other areas of their lives (e.g., job, education, etc.) and potential conflicts between these areas and the athlete's sporting ambitions can create stress. In addition to this, there might be people that have a vested interest in the athletes' career (e.g., media or sponsors) that demand time and energy from the athlete. An important role of the SPP is to help athletes create balance and develop strategies to manage these external factors.

Level 5 – Sport Psychological Services and Methods

While Team Denmark's sports psychological services aim to integrate all levels of the Sports Psychology Model when working practically with athletes, not all athletes are the same and therefore interventions typically target some of the areas described in the model more elaborately and

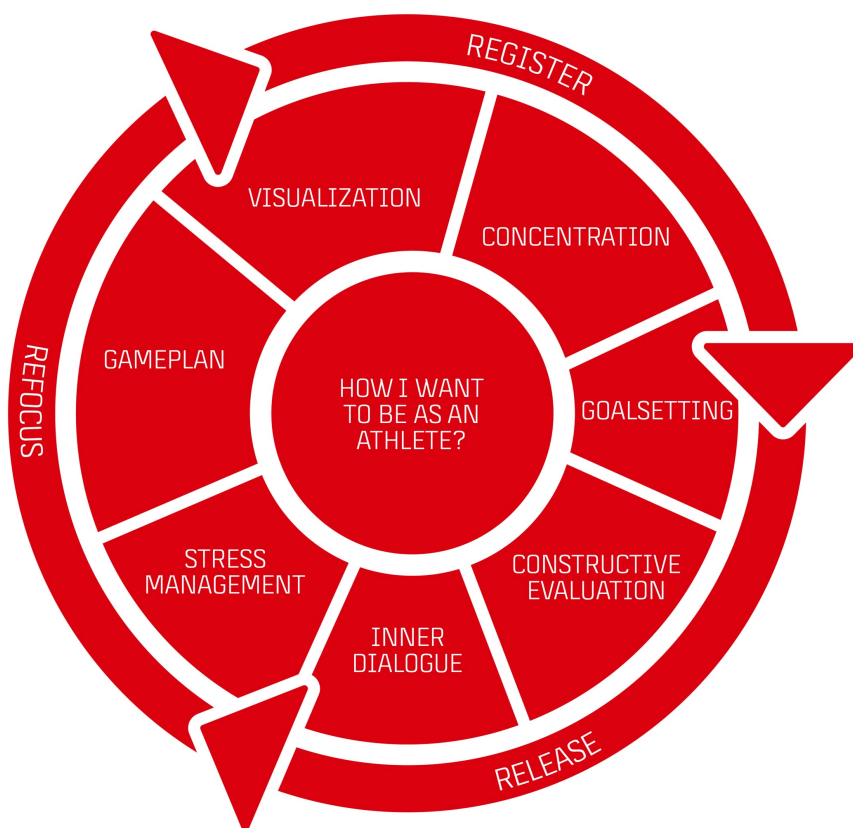


Figure 2: The mental wheel

before other areas. From the perspective of a professional philosophy, it is critical that all the levels of the philosophy are consistent. This means that the specific services offered should reflect the vision and objections, basic assumptions, interventions theories, and key areas of content described in the previous sections. Specifically, the sport psychology services include:

1. Working with the individual: This includes working with individual athletes, coaches and sports managers to develop their skills and competencies. This work can be done via individual consultations, facilitating group sparring or supervision, workshops aimed at developing the individual's personal skills, as well as being present at training and competitions.
2. Working with the team or group: The aim is to focus on the key elements to developing an effective team. This can be done through team workshops, training of skills using exercises in the daily training environment, as well as observation and feedback during training and competition.
3. Working with the federation: To optimize culture, leadership and strategies at federation-level, we work with individual sparing/coaching with coaches and sports managers, as well as programs with various leadership groups within the federations.
4. Working across environments: To optimize relationships and cooperation across the various environments around the athlete. This can include meetings or workshops involving athletes,

coaches, family members, or educational institutions.

The Professional Philosophy in Action

The philosophy is built upon the idea that good sport psychological intervention requires consistency across all five levels. To illustrate this consistency, and to summarize the key elements of each of the five levels, we now present a case of an intervention with an elite rower. Ethical rules were followed via the use of European Federation of Psychologists' Associations ethical guidelines. Accordingly, the data have been anonymised so that no unambiguous conclusions can be drawn about the athlete's identity. Because gender is irrelevant in this context, even the athlete's gender may not be accurately reported.

Jenny is a 21-year-old elite rower currently training in Copenhagen. Jenny's season goal is the world championships later in the year. Jenny has recently been experiencing high levels of stress and has been struggling to balance sporting, university and family/social commitments. She approached a SPP to help with managing these areas of her life. At the initial stages of the consulting process the practitioner helped her to clarify the objectives of the intervention (Level 1). Referring to the professional philosophy, the practitioner had two main objectives in mind: 1) *To ensure that Danish elite athletes obtain the right mental skills to perform at the highest international level*, 2) *to ensure that the individual elite athletes experience meaning and value in life as elite athletes, as well as giving athletes skills to reduce the risk of stress and burn-out throughout their career*. The practitioner explained and discussed these with the Jenny, and the two then formulated more specific versions of these two goals for Jenny: 1) To help Jenny develop the practical skills to plan and balance the many demands in her life, and 2) to develop a stronger sense of self and clarity over what she wants from her sporting career.

When the objectives of the intervention were clarified, the SPP reflected on his own basic beliefs and values (Level 2). In Jenny's situation both #3 *"Elite athletes are elite athletes 24/7. Therefore, the team focuses on life as an elite athlete and identity beyond sport"*, and #6 *"Adversity is a natural part of elite sport. Therefore, it is important that adversity, challenges and career transitions do not end in crises, but create opportunities for growth"* are important. These two beliefs are closely linked with Acceptance and Commitment Treatment (ACT) and Systems Theory (Level 3). From an ACT perspective it was important to work with Jenny to (a) help her to open up, to accept, and to be willing to experience the full range of thoughts and emotions that are a natural part of balancing conflicting demands when pursuing an elite sports career, (b) mindfully engage in the present moment, including task-focused attention, and (c) formulate personal values that describe how she would like to be as a person, and to make values-based decisions. Similarly, from a systems perspective it was important to work holistically and address the whole environment, both in sporting and non-sporting environments. This included working with the training culture or developing relationships with key people in Jenny's sporting, academic or family lives.

In Jenny's case, the basic beliefs and interventions theories served mainly as a platform for the practitioner to work from and were not explained in detail to Jenny before the intervention. They were, however, referred to when identifying the focus areas of the intervention (Level 4). Team Denmark's Sport Psychological Model is often the face of the professional philosophy and presented to athletes and coaches as a tool to initiate an effective

dialogue and identify potential areas for development. When discussing the model with Jenny the concept of her being embedded in both *Team / Training environment* and *Environment outside of sport* resonated with her. Therefore, the importance of engaging key people in her life such as coaches, teammates, teachers and family members was emphasised. Similarly, when discussing *Identify and Drive*, the SPP highlighted the importance of developing well-defined personal values. Finally, the reality of *Life as an elite athlete* also emphasised the importance of developing effective planning and life-balance skills. In this example Team Denmark's Sport Psychological Model was used as an effective method to engage Jenny in the therapeutic process. Although not all aspects of the model were explored, discussing the various levels in the model allowed Jenny to identify areas that gave meaning for her and her challenging situation.

On the service level (Level 5) the intervention included working with Jenny as an individual (e.g., consultations using values cards to define personal values), working with her sporting team (e.g., workshops focusing on team roles and shared expectations), and working across environments (e.g., group meetings to develop communication strategies between the key people in Jenny's sporting, school and family environments).

Reflecting on the case it was apparent that Jenny benefited from the sport psychological support. She developed practical skills such as planning her daily life and communicating with the key people in her life, but also a greater understanding of herself and the reasons why she invests time and energy into her sporting career. This greater self-insight took a significant length of time. It can take time to progress from formulating personal values to living these values and making values-based decisions. Working consistently across all levels in the philosophy is critical. Jenny experienced this consistency in two ways: 1) an understanding of not only the focus of the intervention, but also why it is was important to work in this way, and 2) a consistency in terminology and methodology presented by the SPP.

Reflections

A professional philosophy shapes the way a practitioner works. It provides consistency and coherence to the interventions and in many ways provides "answers" to difficult questions around the content and organization of an intervention. Whereas a professional philosophy is most often described as fundamental for practice of a practitioner (Poczwadowski et al., 2004), we formulated a common philosophy to strengthen the way the team worked. In the initial phase, agreeing to such a philosophy required many discussions and a willingness to compromise. This was a difficult but also a rewarding task that sparked many fruitful discussions (Henriksen et al., 2011) and consolidated the professionalism of the team. In the long run, having a common philosophy to work from proved to be an advantage. First, it helped create a common psychological language in Danish elite sport. Second, it made it easier for the team to collaborate on common projects. Third, it made it easier for a practitioner to work with an individual athlete from a sport, where the primary practitioner was doing group level interventions in the cases where this was deemed an advantage (e.g., some athletes prefer a practitioner of their own gender), knowing that the individual and group work would concur. Fourth, we have since the inception of the team received new members. The selection and onboarding process have been facilitated by having a common philosophy. We have been able to discuss how we work and select people who share the basic ideas

and we have used the philosophy to provide clear expectations to the new team members. Finally, the ongoing revision of the shared philosophy has provided a good platform for ongoing professional development through peer consultation, case discussions, and through seeking out professional development activities that strategically fit with the way we work.

A shared philosophy can also have potential drawbacks. There are several ways to practice sport psychology, and much research has demonstrated that the therapeutic alliance is more important for a successful 1-on-1 intervention than the specific choice of method or strategy

(Sharp, Hodge & Danish, 2015). One might argue, therefore, that sharing a philosophy could mean that a skilled practitioner working from another perspective would not join the team. We find, however, that successful sport psychology in a professional organisation is about much more than successful individual consultations. In a dynamic world, where coaches and managers shift, where practitioners cooperate and help each other, and where practitioners even swap sports, we find that a coherent and consistent approach to sport psychology within the organization provides much-needed stability.

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