

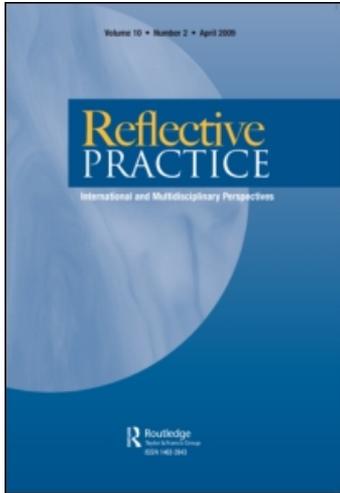
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Reflective learning in sport: a case study of a senior level triathlete

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This paper attempts to highlight the influence of integrating reflective practice into the training programme of an elite athlete and thus outline the pertinence of reflective practice in the development of athletic performance. A case study with an elite senior level triathlete is presented in order to examine how a structured approach to reflective practice can be incorporated as a method of advancing evaluative skills and increasing levels of self-awareness. Findings from this case study support the notion that reflective practice can be used to holistically aid athletic performance. Evidence was found for an increase in self-awareness and evaluative skills, and supports the notion that reflective practice should be considered as a component for athlete development. Consequently, applied sport psychologists must develop their own understanding of reflective practice and the way that it can be integrated into the support services they offer.

Keywords: mental skills; education; reflective practice; performance

Introduction: framing reflective practice within applied sport psychology

The emergence of reflective practice as an approach to professional training and development within Applied Sport Psychology (ASP) has been met with growing research interest (e.g. Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004; Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002; Holt & Streat, 2001; Tonn & Harmison, 2004). Further, the integration of reflective practice as a requirement for neophyte practitioners engaging in the British Association of Sport & Exercise Sciences (BASES) Supervised Experience and Accreditation programmes demonstrates the importance currently being placed on developing applied sport psychologists who are able to engage in reflection, learn from their experiences, and consequently address issues concerning the effectiveness of their practice (cf. BASES, 2009). Indeed, recent research has highlighted the notion that reflective practice can improve self-awareness and generate knowledge-in-action that can enhance the delivery of ASP support (cf. Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007). However, despite consistent anecdotal (e.g. Tonn & Harmison, 2004), and more recently empirical (e.g. Cropley et al., 2007) support for the assimilation of reflective practice into ASP practice, there still appears to be equivocal understanding of how to develop reflective skills, engage in the process of reflection, and as to the holistic benefit reflective practice can have on ‘effective practice’ for practitioners and their athletes alike. Therefore, there remains a clear need for greater research effort into understanding the links between reflective practice and the development of ASP practice.

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Although the emerging body of research within ASP has tended to focus on the utility of reflective practice for ASP practitioners, recent associated research has demonstrated that it may also be beneficial for ASP practitioners to move beyond the traditional constituents of mental skills training programmes (e.g. self-talk, imagery, goal-setting) to develop their client's ability to use reflective practice (e.g. Hanton, Cropley, & Lee, 2009; Hanton, Cropley, Neil, Mellalieu, & Miles, 2007). Certainly, the training and competition schedules of athletes provide a vast opportunity for gaining experience, yet little emphasis is commonly placed on helping athletes to understand frameworks that facilitate learning from such experiences. Hence, developing an athlete's knowledge, understanding and ability to use reflective practice could potentially have significant effects on athletic performance. Indeed, Hanton et al. (2007) suggested that, 'Sport psychologists should be aware that efforts must be taken by the athlete to reflect thoroughly on positive incidents to ensure that a successful psychological profile can be maintained for future incidents' (p. 50). Further, in support of Hanton et al.'s (2007) findings, Hanton et al. (2009) uncovered that by reflecting, athletes are able to generate knowledge and understanding of their competitive experiences. It was reported that this knowledge and understanding can then be carried into subsequent incidents by athletes and used to rationalise competitive anxiety symptoms. In doing so, the findings of both studies indicated that athletes are more likely to be able to adopt a positive psychological profile during competition (e.g. positive interpretations of symptoms associated with anxiety, high levels of control, and high levels of confidence). Such factors have consistently been associated with successful performance within the sport psychology literature (e.g. Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996; Orlick, 2007; Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

The findings of both Hanton et al. (2007) and Hanton et al. (2009) have highlighted that by engaging in a process of reflection-on-action (cf. Schön, 1983), athletes may be able to initiate developmental changes based on the experiential knowledge they gain in attempts to perform more successfully both mentally and physically. Thus, it would seem permissible to consider the introduction of reflective practice into the mental skills training programmes (cf. Weinberg & Gould, 2007) that ASP practitioners deliver to athletes in attempts to improve athletic performance and enhance their mental health and psychological well-being. When further considering the validity of suggestions to integrate reflective practice into the repertoire of psychological skills used by an athlete, it is additionally important to consider the findings of Hanton and Jones (1999), who revealed that strategies which athletes used to effectively cope with stressful situations were developed when learning from different competitive experiences. These findings stress the importance of experiential learning and so echo the suggestions of Kolb (1984) who professed that learning is, 'A process whereby new knowledge is created through the combination of grasping, reflecting upon and transforming experiences' (p. 41). Despite such support for the integration of reflective practice into an athlete's repertoire of psychological skills, little evidence is available upon which informed decisions can be made about the way in which reflective practice is best introduced to athletes and utilised by them as an aid to better understanding performance.

In lieu of recent calls in the applied sport psychology literature for the greater use of alternative methods of qualitative inquiry, which presently reports drawing upon authors' highly personalised experiential accounts in attempts to extend our knowledge and understanding of specific phenomena (e.g. Sparkes, 2000), an increase in the number of biographies and narratives of the self has been observed (e.g. Cropley

et al., 2007; Gilbourne, 2002; Tonn & Harmison, 2004). Authors have expressed that embracing different research paradigms will encourage creativity in finding the best strategies to answer the myriad of questions in sport psychology, thus increasing our knowledge and understanding of the application of psychological concepts (Brustad, 2002; Krane & Baird, 2005). In light of this, and adhering to the comments of Andersen (2000), who suggested that current literature does not provide adequate examples of what 'real-life' sport psychology looks and feels like, this paper attempts to add to valuable anecdotal reports from sport psychologists in the field (e.g. Bull, 1997; Gordon, 1990; Yukelson, 2001). Indeed, to develop and highlight the influence of athletes engaging in reflective practice on their performance it is necessary for applied practitioners to share their knowledge and experiences. As reflective methods and strategies evolve and new ideas emerge in the applied world, communication between practitioners to bridge the gap between theory and practice is essential if the field is to develop. Consequently, the current paper aims to share with the reader a personal experience of implementing and using reflective practice as an approach to develop an effective evaluative method for performance in a 19-year-old elite, senior triathlete. The athlete participating in the current case study was, at the time of the support being provided, a British, international standard triathlete, with realistic aspirations of competing at World Cup level at the end of 2009 and aims to compete at the London Olympics (2012) and Commonwealth Games in Glasgow (2014). In order to capture the essence of the support offered to Tom¹ and to inform other practitioners of the uses of reflective practice in the field, the paper intends to take a narrative approach, with the first author speaking in the first person to describe to the reader her experiences with Tom. Such an approach is thought to allow the reader the chance to empathise with the experiences gained by the ASP practitioner and the athlete in attempts to successfully adopt reflective practice as an aid to athletic performance.

Applied sport psychology support

The consultant

At the time of writing, I (the first author) was a full-time applied sport psychologist whose experience in working with athletes had developed over the previous six years. The first four years of my career was mainly centred on working with teams and individuals at local, club and national level whilst studying for a PhD. Subsequently, I secured a full-time position within High Performance Sport where I supported athletes at national, international, Olympic and Paralympic level for nearly two years. All of these experiences contributed to my BASES Supervised Experience and Accreditation portfolio of work. In terms of philosophical approaches to sport psychology, I have always been predominantly humanistic orientated, which is centred on the premise that each individual has the ability to cope with stress, to achieve what they desire and to control their lives (cf. Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1974). The humanistic perspective considers the person as a whole and incorporates the notion of self-concept, which is the individual's own perceptions and assessment of their own abilities, behaviour and personality (King, 2007). It is through this approach that I believe I can best encourage an athlete to tap into increasing their own levels of self-awareness. At times, however, I have been required to adopt a more cognitive-behavioural approach as I appreciate that how athletes perform in competition and training may be influenced by what they are thinking and feeling. This was

particularly the case when working within High Performance Sport, as it was not uncommon for athletes and coaches to come to me with pre-determined issues and problems that needed resolving in a manner more suited to cognitive-behavioural therapy. Nevertheless, as my experience increased and my knowledge developed, I have been attracted back towards the more humanistic, person-centred approach, mainly for a personal preference for this way of thinking and delivering support, but I also remain open to the influences of other philosophical approaches. It is my belief that the development, evolution and openness to a range of philosophical approaches has aided my ability to 'think outside the box' and introduce a range of alternative interventions, including the use of reflective practice to athletes, as opposed to following more traditional approaches to working with the myriad of problems associated with the athletes to whom I have provided applied sport psychology support. I am currently in the process of submitting my final report and case study to receive BASES Accreditation.

Background to the athlete and consultancy context

Tom is a 19-year-old senior international level triathlete who had been competing for three years, held national championship titles, and had realistic aspirations to compete at Olympic level in 2012 at the time the support was being provided. Tom first came to me six months prior to this experience, prompted by his coach and not of his own accord. From discussions with the coach, it was reported that Tom was difficult to work with at times, prone to disrupting the training group, and generally being overly critical of his performance regardless of positive feedback from the coach. In addition to having some specific issues, it was communicated that Tom was an extremely talented athlete with all the make-up that the coach considered essential for an athlete to succeed (e.g. commitment, determination, physical strength) but it was reported that Tom lacked some of the mental skills that the coach believed would be needed to take him to the 'next level'.

Tom's impression of sport psychology was clear from the outset. He did not believe sport psychology could work and neither did he want my help. So instead of pushing my thoughts and views of sport psychology onto the athlete, we talked. Given my lack of experience of working within the sport of triathlon, I encouraged Tom to educate, inform and enlighten me on his sport. We talked about triathlon, how it works, what the most difficult aspects of it are, what he loved and hated about it, and slowly Tom began to open up. After two sessions Tom revealed that the reason he was not keen on coming to see me was attributed to his lack of knowledge and understanding about sport psychology and how it could be of any benefit to his performance. He admitted that he did not fully know what sport psychology really was and what specifically I could do for him. However, Tom agreed that he was a highly critical athlete who had trouble analysing his own performance effectively.

Tom's training sessions were highly intense and usually consisted of three per day (one swimming session, one bike session and one running session) lasting a total average of between four to six hours per day. Tom was currently failing to evaluate his training sessions in a rational manner and tended to view sessions as being either successful or unsuccessful, or to use Tom's words 'excellent' or 'unbelievably rubbish'. He appeared to have no formal (or informal) way of assessing his performance and reported that he frequently allowed thoughts of a poor session to play on

his mind for hours and hours following a training session, and usually for the rest of the day. Suddenly Tom and I had a place to start the ASP support process.

Introducing reflective practice: reflective methods

Tom had made me aware of an upcoming 30-day training camp in Spain where he would not be able to directly receive ASP support. It was at this stage that I thought about the value that encouraging Tom to engage in reflective practice might have. This was borne out of my personal use of reflective practice in attempts to critically examine and learn from my consultancy experiences with a view to making informed decisions regarding the effectiveness of the ASP service I provide. Consequently, it became clear that by introducing Tom to reflective practice and developing his commitment to the process he might be more able to decisively assess, understand, and improve his performance through experiential learning. Thus, it was agreed that he would maintain a reflective diary during his European training camp and that we would meet on his return to the UK to debrief both his training incidents and his experiences of adopting reflective practice.

My attempts to use reflective practice with athletes have been met with varied enthusiasm. Some have found the process too 'time consuming'; others have found the process 'boring' and 'a waste of time'. Nevertheless, this may have been a direct result of the way in which I introduced it to the athletes and the way in which we discussed they should engage in the process. However, with a select few the influence of reflective practice has been invaluable and even an uplifting experience. For example, one Taekwondo athlete reported that it helped him, 'put things into perspective and not beat himself up about little mistakes in training'. In addition, the use of reflective practice has been reported to make many clients I introduce it to more 'self-aware' as athletes. Such increases in understanding athletic identity have consistently helped athletes to improve and maintain confidence and motivation.

As a result of these past experiences it was decided that to provide Tom with an understanding of the process of reflective practice and in attempts to structure his reflections and thus ensure he was not simply mulling over his experiences (cf. Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Neville, 2001) Gibbs' (1988) cyclical model of reflection would be used. Indeed, Platzer, Blake and Snelling (1997) identified that learning through reflection is more potent if there is an understanding of frameworks that encourage a structural process to guide the act of reflection. Gibbs' reflective cycle encourages users to think systematically about the phases of an experience or activity and orients the user for further action. Further, the cyclical nature of Gibbs' model extenuates the ongoing process of reflection and learning and was therefore deemed the most appropriate method for the athlete to use at this time. It is important to mention that a variety of frameworks are available to practitioners wishing to be guided in their reflections (e.g. Chapman, 2006, reflective diary framework; Johns, 1994, structured model for reflective practice; Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper, 2001, model for reflexive practice). However, due to the first author's previous experiences and knowledge of how to implement Gibbs' model, it was deemed the most appropriate method given the little amount of time available to introduce the athlete to a different approach.

An initial session was used to educate Tom on the history, uses, models and potential benefits of reflective practice. A follow-up session was then conducted to produce triathlon specific reflective examples as a guide on how to use the model and thus

provide some points of reference once he was ready to try and reflect on his own. By taking the time to explain and inform the athlete about my rationale for using reflective practice and how it worked, Tom was more eager to engage in reflective activity, and he admitted that he could see how it could potentially help. A brief final session was then completed in order to outline how Tom should use the reflective process and discuss the types of things he may consider reflecting upon (e.g. positive and negative training experiences; internal aspects of performance such as thoughts and feelings; critical relationships with coaches and support staff; external influences such as organisation and time management). It was suggested that Tom completed his structured reflective diary at the end of every training day so that the full training camp experience could be considered.

Three days after returning from Spain, Tom came to see me to talk about how the diary had been of use. I was genuinely amazed at how much it had assisted Tom evaluate his training experiences and in contrast to the guarded athlete he was at first, Tom spoke openly and clearly about how training had gone in Spain. The information he provided me with about his training was more balanced and evaluations of his own performance were more rational. Accordingly, in order to examine Tom's reflective experiences in greater depth an interview was arranged within a week of Tom's return to the UK so that the effect of retrospection could be reduced (cf. Patton, 2002).

Results

Understanding the value of reflective practice for athletic development

This section presents the interview (40 minutes in duration), conducted with Tom focusing on the experience he had with reflective practice and in particular the method outlined previously. In line with recent calls for more diverse research methodologies and in attempts to allow the reader to immerse themselves within the athlete's experience (Sparkes, 1998; Woodman & Hardy, 2001) the interview has been transcribed and is presented verbatim. Importantly, Tom was sent a copy of the interview transcript before its presentation in this manuscript to ensure it provides a true representation of his experiences (cf. Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). The sport psychologist's questions and comments are italicised for ease of reading, with the athlete's comments in normal type. It is proposed that such an approach will better allow the reader to understand the potential issues associated with encouraging athlete's to adopt reflective practice, as well as the potential benefits that can be gained from such a process.

Interview

Do you want to describe briefly how you used reflective practice and what you used it for?

Well when I was in Spain for 30 days of fun and excitement, I basically kept a diary of how every session went, and just my thoughts and feelings about what went wrong and what went right and why it went wrong and why it went right, and how I could change it next time. So I just filled it out every night and then as the days went on I could look back on it and see whether I was actually improving or if I was just making the same silly mistakes over and over again.

What were your initial thoughts when I said that we were going to use reflective practice, what did you think to begin with?

I was slightly unsure that I could actually use it for the majority of the sessions; I thought it would be ok if something went wrong, but you sort of realised that when you were out there and when you were writing it ... well when you were writing down like what went right it was sort of a good thing. It was good because you have got it in your mind next time, so for the same session you can be like, "Right I did that right the last time so I know I can do it and I may as well do it again". So you sort of iron out the mistakes by making sure that what you did right last time was right this time.

So would you say that your impression of reflective practice changed as you started to use it?

Yeah I suppose because when I first got it I didn't really understand too much about it and whether it would help or not. But definitely, it just sort of made you see that the big mistakes that you think you are making in training are actually really small mistakes and it just puts it into perspective, just puts everything into context. It just shows you that you are moving forward, even though you can go away from a session feeling bad, but when you think about it, it was just some silly little mistake that you did.

So, you were saying to me before that you filled it in during the evening. Do you think that it was good to have a little bit of time from completing a session to doing your reflections to give you time to think about it?

I think doing it at night was probably the smart thing to do, because me personally I do make sweeping statements so if I was to fill it in straight after the session I would be like, "Oh that was an unbelievably crap session", and I wouldn't have written why it was bad or if there was anything that was good about it. So it sort of gave me time to calm down and think about what actually happened and put like less emotion if you know what I mean?

Yes, so would you be saying that if you filled it in straight away it would be like too much raw emotion?

Too much raw emotion ... yeah ... too much raw emotion in it.

Ok, so there's not an awful lot out there on reflective practice for athletes, so if you were saying to someone else about using it, what sort of time frame would you say is good or would you recommend from finishing a session and reflecting on it. Is there an ultimate time?

You can't fill it in 2 or 3 days later, because you will have totally forgot what went wrong and you will just totally skim it. So I would say that night time is ideal because you can just sit down and relax and then think about it ... and you haven't got anymore training to do for the rest of the day so you aren't like rushing it or trying to fill it in fast. Just take some time to do it.

I then talked a little bit to the athlete about the use of Gibbs' model as a guideline for reflection and asked whether Tom found it helpful to have something as a guide. Tom replied:

I think having something, especially for the first 3 or 4 days, to refer to so you actually put more detail into it than you normally would because before you aren't really thinking about it too much.

So do you think it was good to have that as a bit of a guide at least to get you started?

Yeah definitely, because I suppose before if I wrote it down without looking at it (Gibbs' model) then I don't think that I would have really thought about what to do next time. I would have wrote down what occurred but I wouldn't have wrote down a plan about what to do next time if it went wrong, so I would have just faced the same situation again without any consideration about what to do.

I then go on to explain to Tom that Gibbs model is a simple structured model to help guide reflections but there are probably some improvements or changes that could be made to it. Did he think it was a good guide? To which Tom replies:

Yeah definitely well especially in my situation! I was out there by myself I didn't like have a psychologist to hand so I didn't have the expertise of a psychologist to help me fill things in. So then it was up to me to use my own devices and use my own skills and thoughts.

And would you say that it's now a skill that you have learnt to use yourself?

Yes, because I think even during training sessions, now I can think a lot more clearly about what is actually happening and there are fewer 'over-reactions' now.

And do you think that this has been helped through this reflective process?

Yes, I think the main thing that I have gotten out of it is actually being able to put everything into perspective, and to not get too carried away. Like if just one little thing that went wrong in training ... I sort of felt before that if something went wrong in training it would probably screw me up for the rest of the session, whereas now I find it a lot easier to move on from it and carry on with the session.

And would you say that this is directly linked to this reflective process?

I think the whole experience has made me a more aware athlete and I think to move on to the next stage you have to be constantly aware of how you are feeling and why you are feeling those things, and what to do in certain circumstances. So the more I engaged in the process, the smarter an athlete I became.

So would you say that reflective practice was a learning tool for you for strategies and triggers for you to perform in training?

Yes, especially during the longer sessions. I sort of noticed that towards the end of a long session I would be focusing on finishing too much and then the last half an hour of a session would just be a blur and the only thing that I would be focusing on would be finishing and just getting it over with. Whereas towards the end of the training camp, there was more focus in the last half hour on the technical aspects and everything and this helped me get the maximum benefit out of that last half hour, instead of it just being a drag.

And is that something that you picked up by reflecting? Would you say you probably knew it before hand but only really picked up on it through actually reflecting and thinking about your performance?

Yeah definitely, especially during the long run sessions, thinking technical wise towards the end, it made the time go past quicker but technically you ended up getting a better session. Whereas before I would have gone out and just like tuned out completely, so you would get the session done but technically wise it wouldn't be the greatest. Whereas

by doing this process I was able to sort of technically improve just because I was more aware of things.

You said at first you were probably a bit, "How is this actually going to work", but can you now see that reflective practice has been of help?

It's definitely helped! I also think that just having a clear image of what you have been through allows you to see what you are able to sacrifice and what you are willing to sacrifice and it sort of makes you more determined to carry on. So I would say that in terms of motivation it is a good thing as well so yeah it has definitely helped.

Would you encourage other athletes to use reflective practice and if so what would you say to them?

I would definitely encourage them, I don't know exactly what I would say to them but just that it's worth a shot. I saw within a few days how it would help me and I would just say that it gives you a clearer picture of what you are actually doing and what you are actually achieving and why you aren't achieving certain things and how to move on. I noticed that a stumbling block for me was that there would be some sessions I'd go out the door thinking I was slightly tired, but I would still be expecting to perform 100%, whereas towards the end I knew that if I was tired that I wouldn't be able to perform as well as I had hoped, but that it wasn't the end of the world and that I would still get benefits from the session. So it just allowed me to train more effectively. I would just tell an athlete that, at the end of the day, no matter how you approach it (reflective practice) if you do it properly you will get benefits and it will allow you to train more effectively.

Some people don't like using structured methods of reflective practice because they say it takes so long to complete, what are your thoughts on that and do you think that is a reason not to try it?

Well it only takes like 15 minutes ... like a lot of athletes go away from session thinking about it but its all jumbled up, even though you are not consciously writing things down, subconsciously your mind is a mess from it. I know that before, when I had a bad session it would be in my mind for the rest of the day, so even by writing about it, it allowed me to get it all out and then allowed me to draw a line under it. So in some aspects, it actually made the whole process shorter.

So do you think writing it down is a good process then, rather than just thinking about it?

Yeah, by writing it you do have to think more about it. I know you have talked about using a video camera but I would just be prone to saying the first thing that pops into my head because of the emotions, and I wouldn't fully mean it but I would occasionally just make a sweeping statement, but by really thinking about it you are actually engaging yourself a lot more to it.

So as an overall picture of reflective practice would you say it was of benefit to you?

Yeah because I came back from the 30 days in Spain and 30 days of filling it out and came back probably a better athlete. I would say I'm a better athlete to coach so from the coaching aspects I would say I'm more understanding about what's actually going on.

Would you say there are any negatives to reflective practice and the process you used?

I wouldn't say there are any negatives. I would say if you hadn't given me the sheet (Gibbs' model) beforehand and told me to write about the positives and the negatives then I might of just focused in on the negatives and then the whole entire diary would have just be full of negatives.

Because some people say that the structure is good and others say that they would prefer the freedom to write about whatever they want, would you say the structure helped you focus on certain things?

I'd say the structure definitely helped because there would be times that I wouldn't be struggling about what to write down, but I wouldn't know how to write it down if you know what I mean, and what way to write it down. But by referring to the structure ... for example, I wouldn't just say why it went wrong but also what external circumstances there were, whereas if I'd just been left to write I would have probably just wrote, "Its rubbish because blah blah blah". It just sort of made you analyse everything a bit better. So I would look back at the structure every couple of days just to make sure that I was putting down everything appropriately, and to make sure there were positives and negatives and why things went well and why things didn't, and what I would change next time what other circumstances there was that might have created these problems.

So, would you say you used reflective practice to reflect on your training sessions in the day, and then you also used what you had written to look back on?

Yeah definitely, because like it was a 30-day block of training that I was doing split into three by 10 days worth, so each 10 days was like the peak of the last 10 days. So, before I would start each training day, I could look back the previous 10 days and see what I did during that day, and what went right and what went wrong and why that certain things went wrong, so I would be able to start that day off being able to remember why the last 10 days didn't go so perfect. At the start of the morning I had an idea of what could go wrong, but I also had the knowledge about what to change so it didn't go wrong. So I would start the morning off with more opportunities to succeed.

OK, so by reflecting you almost had more information at the start of the second 10-day block that could help you?

Yeah, just because when you are doing similar sessions, the same sort of circumstances can occur so by having an idea of what to change about them then I didn't fall into the same trap so I would have a better chance of having a really good session second time around.

You mentioned earlier that you are now also able to reflect in the sessions, do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Well since I have been doing it, if something bad has occurred in training, even during it, I can be more open-minded and I don't get as carried away and I can analyse the problem a lot better during the actual session and try to think of ways of overcoming that problem.

And would you say that the process that we have worked together on has helped you be a bit better at that?

Definitely because I think that writing it down at night it gave me the skill of analysing stuff, so I was able to take that and use it to analyse during the sessions, so it was like

the next progressive stage and it's just allowed me to get through training sessions a lot easier now.

Would you say that that's maybe how you could develop your reflective practice skills to the next level, by reflection in training sessions as well as after them?

Yes, because the sessions that I do are so long, some of them are three hours plus, so if you aren't feeling great or something bad occurs in the first half hour then instead of it messing you around for the next three hours and for the whole session just to go completely down the drain, then you can sort of understand what is it that is wrong, and maybe change your goals for the session, so that at the end of the 3 hours you leave it positive instead of before where I would have left it negative or just given up.

So overall would you say it's been a good process to learn about?

Yeah, ultimately it would be great if you could take something like this into a race because the race itself is two hours long, so instead of being completely despondent because the first 10 or 15 minutes haven't gone great, and you know that ultimately you aren't going to finish where you want to be, if you can get over the problem, if you know what I mean, and by reflecting slightly on it and analysing the situation and how you can improve it then that would be good.

Do you think you could and would start to use this when you start competing this season?

I think I will definitely start reflecting on a race afterwards, and write about it, what went right about the race and what went wrong and what I would do differently, just so I can get an idea of how to use it for future competition. It's bound to happen that the same racing circumstances unfold between different races so I can be more aware about what to do in each different situation if I reflect upon it.

And, finally, what recommendations would you give to someone who thinks that they don't want to try reflective practice?

I would encourage anyone who thinks it's not really worth their time to do it. It only takes 15–20 minutes let's be honest, and nobody is so busy that they don't have 15 minutes at some point during the day, and ultimately you really start to learn about yourself and your performances which helps to make you a stronger competitor.

Discussion and implications

Research into, and the application of, reflective practice with an athlete population is still in its infancy, but the current case study offers strong support for its implementation, with particular reference to reflection being used as a discourse to assist athletes evaluate performance in an effective manner and become more aware of themselves as athletes. Importantly, helping athletes to become self-aware has been demonstrated to aid athletes in more effective arousal control (Sherman & Poczwadowski, 2000); improved self-confidence (Weinberg & Gould, 2007); more successful goal-setting (Zimmerman, 2002); and self-actualisation (Hogg, 1995). Thus, support is provided from this case that reflection can be used to holistically aid athletic performance as well as corroborating suggestions that attentiveness is needed by sport psychologists in order to encourage the athlete to reflect on competitive experiences (e.g. Hanton et al., 2007).

This case study further reveals the benefits of reflecting on less positive incidents, such as a negative training session, or more specifically a negative aspect of a given training session. In this sense it appears that reflective practice may encourage athletes to engage in active problem-based learning in an attempt to deal with such issues effectively and move on from the experience rather than allowing it to fester and influence the remainder of the training session. For instance, Tom highlighted that prior to using reflective practice he would allow the thoughts of a negative training session to linger on his mind for the rest of the day. However, having engaged in the reflective process, he was able to use the information that he gained from the session and take steps to avoid the negative aspects of it happening again in the future. This would support the ideas of Daudelin (1996) and Barnett and O'Mahony (2006), who suggest that the process of reflective practice is initiated when individuals become aware of or concerned with an incident, problem or event; possible solutions and consequences are considered; and finally, a preferred course of action is determined. Therefore, the findings of this study provide some evidence to demonstrate that there is a case for encouraging athletes to reflect on less positive experiences as athletes are more likely to become efficient at resolving conflict and thus more independent performers. This notion is substantiated somewhat by research emanating from the field of education that highlights the potential of developing conflict resolution skills through the use of reflective practice (cf. Gillespie & Chick, 2001). Therefore, mental skills for athletes may need to move beyond the original notions of goal setting, relaxation, imagery and self-talk to incorporate more advanced self-evaluative skills. Without a formalised method of examining their experiences, athletes lack the skills that are required to understand their own performance and as a result become reliant on the coach for feedback, which may ultimately hinder improvements in performance. Significantly, the participant described in this case study acknowledged that he became a '*smarter athlete*' from engaging in the process of reflective practice, and demonstrated that the use of reflection had a positive impact as a performance evaluation tool.

However, it is important to note that Tom was not instructed to reflect only on negative experiences, but was encouraged throughout to engage in reflective practice to explore positive experiences as well. Indeed, focusing on strengths and positive aspects of performance, as well as interpreting experiences positively will serve to enhance the confidence of the athlete; a characteristic consistently associated with successful performance (cf. Bandura, 1997). In addition, reflecting on positive experiences is suggested to afford athletes the opportunity to build on their achievements by understanding how positive behaviours can be maintained and empowering athletes to make necessary changes to behaviour to improve further (e.g. Scanlan & Chernomas, 1997). Accordingly, when introducing reflective practice to their clients, ASP practitioners must ensure that they are explicit with regard to the use and focus of reflection so that athletes examine both positive and negative experiences.

One of the key components to gaining the athlete's interest in the process of reflection is educating and informing the athlete correctly about the use of reflective practice and how it can be of specific benefit to their performance. Researchers have argued that reflecting effectively is 'a highly skilled activity' that must be developed and nurtured (Andrews, Gidman, & Humphreys, 1998). Therefore, it would seem comprehensible to suggest that education is a fundamental aspect of encouraging the use of reflective practice in athletes (Knowles et al., 2001). In addition, Russell (2005) indicated that, 'Fostering reflective practice requires far more than telling people to reflect and then simply hoping for the best. I now believe that reflective practice can and

should be taught explicitly, directly, thoughtfully and patiently' (p. 203). Certainly, the current case study demonstrates that an educational approach has a positive impact on the employment of reflective practice and consequently on performance. Nevertheless, ASP practitioners must be aware that reflective skills cannot be taken for granted and a stringent educational and developmental process must be delivered. In order to provide such a service, it is recognised that educators not only need to be skilled in reflecting but also need to be competent in facilitating the reflectiveness of others (Andrews et al., 1998). In this situation, the first author was by no means an 'expert reflector' but has spent considerable time exploring reflective practice, developing reflective skills, and engaging in the process, which provided first-hand experience of the application of reflective practice. Thus, more informed decisions about the didactic aspects of the support provided could be made. However, such educational methods require further empirical attention in order to understand the specific effects of educational programmes on athlete's abilities to reflect effectively and the subsequent reflective learning outcomes athletes obtain as a direct result of improving their reflective practice knowledge and skills. Indeed, the ASP consultant and the work she conducted that is outlined in this case study does not profess to have answered all of the questions surrounding the development of effective reflective practitioners. Instead, the case study presents initial ideas regarding the way in which reflective processes can be adopted by athletes and thus present a variety of avenues for future research.

In summary, the use of reflective practice is considered necessary in order to sustain and build winning cultures among our more advanced British athletes. Elite level athletes demand more knowledge, more education and more information about how to advance both their physical and mental performance, and the use of reflective practice could be just one of the mental skills introduced to allow this to take place. Although effective reflection requires considerable investment of time (cf. Andrews et al., 1998) the potential benefits of engaging in the process have been consistently highlighted in literature emanating from a variety of fields, and through this case study are supported as an approach to athletic development. However, ASP practitioners need to be convinced of the value and worth of reflection if they are to encourage athletes to truly 'buy into' and engage in the process. With further exploration into the integration of reflective practice into an athlete's repertoire of mental skills, knowledge of the process is likely to increase, as is our understanding as to how reflective practice fits into athletic performance, and methods can be refined and specialised to better suit the application of reflective in sport. Thus, existing problems associated with reflective practice and the 'non-believer' can be reduced.

Note

1. In order to maintain confidentiality the athlete's name and personal details (where appropriate) have been changed throughout this manuscript.

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