Abstract

Performance profiling is a widely used assessment and monitoring method within the field of sport psychology. As a client-centered tool, it helps athletes, coaches, and practitioners identify the characteristics perceived necessary for successful performance. However, traditional methods of performance profiling are not always appropriate for younger athletes or for application outside of an office or classroom. In line with recommendations from previous research, this article presents the experiences of a trainee sport and exercise psychologist during the development and implementation of a novel, team performance profiling activity. The activity was introduced in a workshop delivered to a youth soccer team to determine the content of three additional workshops. During the activity, the soccer players collaborated to identify the best soccer player in the world (i.e., Lionel Messi) and the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that enabled him to be successful. Then, as a team, they rated their abilities with regards to the identified behaviors, feelings, and thoughts on a scale of 1 to 5 in relation to Lionel Messi, to identify their potential strengths and areas for improvement. For a visual representation of the ratings, colored cones were used. The trainee's experiences highlight the challenges of adapting traditional sport psychology tools.

Keywords: Applied Sport Psychology; Performance Profiling; Soccer; Trainee Experiences; Youth Athletes.

Implementing a Novel Team Performance Profiling Activity with Young Athletes

Performance profiling (PP) is a holistic, autonomy-supportive, and client-centered assessment tool used by sport psychologists to help athletes identify the mental skills and qualities that they deem important for a successful performance (Butler & Hardy, 1992). PP was originally developed by Butler and Hardy (1992), and whilst variations of the process have been developed (Bird et al., 2021), the standard process for use in a group or team follows three phases. In phase one, the idea of PP is introduced as a tool to reveal how the group is feeling about their current performance. In phase two, the group is asked, "What, in your opinion, are the qualities or characteristics of an elite athlete in your sport/position?" (Butler & Hardy, 1992, p. 256). A group discussion then facilitates the creation of a list of these qualities and characteristics, which are in-turn listed on a blank performance profile (Butler & Hardy, 1992, p. 256). In phase three, each athlete rates themselves on each quality on a scale of 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("very much") regarding their present performance. The scores are then presented on a visual profile (see Figure 1).

The benefits of PP have been previously documented, from perspectives of practitioners (Weston et al., 2010), and athletes (Weston et al., 2011). The holistic nature of PP helps to facilitate both individual benefits, including increased motivation and enhanced sporting knowledge, and team related benefits, such as improving team dynamics, creating a basis for goal setting, and facilitating communication (Bird et al., 2021; Weston et al., 2010, 2011). For a neophyte practitioner, PP provides a clear, systematic protocol as both a successful single-session intervention that promotes self-reflection and self-awareness in athletes, and as a method of needs analysis to guide future interventions (Bird et al., 2021).

Initial assessment is critical in working with youth athletes to develop an accurate conceptualization of their needs and an appropriate action plan (Visek et al., 2009). This can be achieved through PP, however, to ensure that athletes experience its benefits, PP activities should suit

the target audience (Holland et al., 2018). This may include simplified versions of the activity. Some practitioners (e.g., Perry, 2020) have utilized PP for young athletes, however, these activities have not yet been supported with empirical evidence or applied experiences of other sport psychologists and are designed to be used in a classroom setting.

Traditionally, PP requires athletes to use pen and paper in a classroom, rather than a "real world" environment, such as a training pitch. Moving away from delivering sport psychology support in classroom settings is essential, as practitioner experiences suggest that service delivery is more effective if performed in the athletes' "sporting" environment than in an office (Henriksen et al., 2014). Despite Henriksen et al.'s (2014) study, to our knowledge, PP is yet to be adapted for the athletes' environment, thus highlighting our method as a novel, and much needed, contribution to the field. Accordingly, this article describes the development and implementation of a novel team PP activity conducted with an U15 soccer team on their soccer pitch.

Context of the workshops

In their recent publication, Schinke and colleagues (2022) recommended that authors provide details of their background to help provide context to the work conducted. Following these recommendations, the second author and I (first author) are enrolled in the Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology (QSEP) with the British Psychological Society to become Chartered Psychologists. At the time of the workshop, I, as the facilitator of the sessions, had limited experience, and had not worked with young athletes as a trainee sport psychologist. This impacted my confidence and contributed to the challenges I faced during the PP activity. The second author had some previous experience delivering workshops to youth athletes and had played soccer. The third and fourth authors are experienced practitioners and supervisors on the QSEP program, who, along with the second author, ensured that my practice was evidence-based and ethical.

I approached the coach of an U15s (aged 14-15) soccer team, offering a series of sport psychology workshops. The coach requested four workshops to be delivered weekly with the first

workshop designed to introduce sport psychology to the players. To prepare for the workshops, and ensure evidence-based practice, I engaged with literature on the psychology of soccer, the rules of the game, and familiarized myself with the language used in the soccer environment. In the first workshop, after an introduction to sport psychology and a general ice-breaker activity, a needs analysis (PP) took place to determine the needs of the team and therefore the content of the following three workshops. Attendance at the workshops was voluntary and, accordingly, out of 14, eight players attended. All attendees were between the ages of 14 and 15 years and had been playing soccer for more than three years. They trained once a week and played a match each weekend. The workshops were conducted outdoors on the athletes' soccer pitch, as this is the environment where they feel most comfortable (Henriksen et al., 2014). Additionally, as athletes need to use the skills they learn in sport psychology sessions in training and competitions, these skills should be taught where they train and compete (Henriksen et al., 2014). Henriksen et al.'s (2014) findings are also supported by our experiences of delivering applied workshops with younger athletes. Feedback from youth athletes on sport psychology support has indicated that they enjoy being taught psychological skills "on the pitch" as it helps them better understand how techniques can be applied to their sport as well as it being more enjoyable than conducting sessions in 'formal' environments.

However, delivering the workshops outdoors on the pitch and not having a shelter to move under meant that every activity had to be appropriate for all weather conditions. Given the need for an assessment tool and the benefits of PP (Bird et al., 2021; Weston et al., 2010, 2011), as well as the demands of this context, we designed a PP activity that, unlike the existing formats, could be used outdoors in the young athletes' environment, even in unfavorable weather conditions.

Outline of the first workshop

Initially, I introduced myself to the players and initiated a discussion about what sport psychologists do. Then, a general ice-breaker activity was introduced, which required the players to move a football around a circle using different body parts whilst also providing

facts about each other. This game revealed some characteristics of the soccer players, such as "the best tackle on the team", and helped to set the scene for the upcoming PP activity. As a follow-up to the PP activity, the athletes were asked to stand in a line next to each other and jump ahead if they had experienced what I read out loud (e.g., "I have experienced anxiety before a match", "I have wished I was a better player").

The performance profiling activity: What and how?

We made the decision to adapt the original version of the PP (Butler & Hardy, 1992) as this version includes a brainstorming phase, which encourages athletes to collaborate and participate (Bird et al., 2021). Additionally, relying on the advanced versions would have required calculating discrepancy scores, which is not necessarily a straightforward process (Bird et al., 2021) and therefore may be unappealing to young athletes. Furthermore, the revised version requires the athletes to write down definitions of important qualities and their opposites, which would have required paper and pen (Bird et al., 2021), and thus contradicts the aims of our PP activity.

Introduction

The PP activity aimed to help the players identify the characteristics of the best soccer player in the world, and in doing so, raise awareness of key areas that they need to improve on individually to become a better team. The activity was introduced with the question "Who is the best soccer player?" to help the athletes think about players who have achieved success in their sport (Perry, 2020). This question prompted several different responses and facilitated a discussion around why certain players are perceived to be the best. The athletes were encouraged to reach a compromise and agree on one player to be used in the PP activity. Following a majority vote, they agreed on Lionel Messi.

Behaviors

To make the athletes think about the behaviors of their chosen player, the questions "How does Messi *behave* on the pitch? What does Messi *do* when he plays that makes him the best?" were

asked. The athletes, sat in a circle on the pitch, brainstormed as a group (Butler & Hardy, 1992), and following a discussion, they identified "hard-working" as a contributing behavior to Messi's success. Then the question "Do you think it would make you a better team if all of you could be as hard-working as Messi?" was asked. The players' response was 'yes'. As middle to late adolescents (14-18 years old) are able to self-evaluate their abilities based on various cues (Kipp, 2018), the players were asked to rate themselves on how hard-working they were as a team, using colored cones, where one cone meant "not hard-working at all" and five cones meant "as hard-working as Messi". As is common practice when working with athletes at earlier developmental stages (Visek et al., 2009), the original 0 to 10 scale used during PP (Butler & Hardy, 1992) was adapted for the current workshop. This helped to avoid potential information overload for the athletes and had practical benefits, such as easier countability of the displayed cones, and saving time. Overall, the team rated themselves as 2 in relation to Messi's 5. To facilitate coherence, the coach was asked to provide his rating (Butler & Hardy, 1992). The coach's involvement highlighted to the athletes that he perceived sport psychology as important (Henriksen et al., 2014). Following his feedback, one person from the team was chosen to pick a colored cone (out of the five cone colors) and take all the cones of that color to the circle (see Figure 2), and display two cones, to reflect their rating, in the middle of the circle. Cones were used as a mean of visual representation to make the conversation regarding various concepts more tangible for the audience. The original PP activity resulted in filled out performance profiles (Butler & Hardy, 1992) and, similarly, we deemed it important for the football players to see the rating of each behavior, feeling and thought. Therefore, given that cones are waterproof, they can be an important tool in a sport psychologist's bag when delivering sessions outdoors. Additionally, cones are often used in soccer trainings therefore it provided the players with familiarity, which further increased their feelings of comfort (Henriksen et al., 2014). I noted the identified behavior on a piece of paper and on the cones using a felt-tip pen. The same procedure was then repeated. The team identified "perseverance" as the next behavior and collectively rated themselves a 3, which was

supported by the coach. They all agreed that if everyone could show perseverance like Messi, they could become a better team. This time a different person was responsible for picking a color and displaying the right number of cones in the middle of the circle.

Feelings

Once the behaviors had been identified, questions such as "What do you think Messi *feels* when he plays soccer?" were asked. The group, following a discussion where different feelings were mentioned such as "happy" and "motivated", decided on "passion" and "confident" as the feelings they perceived to be the most important for Messi's success. They all agreed that if everyone could play with passion and be confident like Messi, they could become a better team. The athletes gave their team a passion rating of 3 and a confidence rating of 2.

Thoughts

Then the questions "What do you think Messi *thinks* when he plays soccer? What kind of *thoughts* make him the best?" were asked. The athletes decided on the "I am the best" thought as the most important for Messi's success. The players said it would make them a better team if they could think more like Messi. After deciding on a team rating of 2, the right number of cones were displayed. By the end of the activity, there were five different colored cones in the middle of the circle, the number of each representing the rating that the team gave themselves. The team was then asked whether they agreed with all the chosen behaviors (hard-working, perseverance), feelings (passion, confidence) and thoughts (I am the best), and their ratings. As they did, I deemed it appropriate to dedicate the following three workshops to introduce self-talk as a confidence enhancement technique, goal-setting to address players' motivation, and mindfulness. The PP activity took around 20-25 minutes to run, however, this may be dependent on the athletes' willingness to engage in discussion and to reach a shared consensus with regards to ratings.

Evaluation of the performance profiling activity

The aim of the PP activity was to enable young soccer players to identify the behaviors, feelings, and thoughts they deemed important to become the world's best soccer player, and establish whether, as a team, they possessed them. They identified five qualities (hard-working, perseverance, passion, confidence and I am the best thinking), out of which hard-working, perseverance, confident, and passion are congruent with those the extant literature has recognized as being important for soccer performance (e.g., Harwood & Anderson, 2015). However, upon reflection, we realize that different soccer positions (e.g., goalkeeper, striker) may require different qualities of a player to be successful (Asamoah & Grobbelaar, 2016). Therefore, focusing solely on Messi in the activity may have been limiting.

To aid the evaluation of the PP, I sought feedback from the athletes at the end of the first workshop as to facilitate my reflections and to adapt the tool if applicable. The athletes' verbal feedback revealed they found it important to discuss what makes a good soccer player and the PP activity helped them understand what they can improve on. The coach also provided feedback which supported the views of the players:

> I thought the Sports Psychology workshops that you ran were excellent. I think the content was pitched at about the right level, enough to get the boys interested but not too technical to turn them off, bearing in mind there would have been quite a varied intellectual ability in the [group]. There was relatable content, such as the characteristics of a successful football player which they could then link back to their own performances which was good.

Despite the apparent success of the workshop, we reflected that the coach's perception of responsibility for his team (see Bloom et al., 2003) may have generated socially desirable answers. Social desirability occurs when an individual is asked to answer questions related to widely accepted attitudes, and behavioral or social norms, especially when related to one's own attitudes and behaviors (Holden & Passey, 2009). As the athletes' responses did not reflect social norms (e.g., high confidence levels), it is unlikely that their responses were impacted by social desirability, however, we are not

aware of the widely accepted attitudes and behaviors of the team.

Challenges faced and lessons learnt

The extant literature is scarce on how to adapt traditional "office" activities for "on-pitch" environments, making it challenging for us to design an evidence-based PP activity. Additionally, given the ongoing physical, emotional, social, and psychological development of young athletes (Visek et al., 2009), the PP activity had to be age appropriate. Piaget's work informed the development and planning of the PP activity. Based on the players' age, we surmised that they were within the formal operational stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1936) which is characterized by abstract thinking and reasoning, allowing for arguments, planning and conceptual reasoning to occur. Therefore, informed by the developmental literature, it was reasonable to presume the players would be able to identify, not only visible behaviors, but mental and psychological concepts. Furthermore, as children in this stage of development, it was expected that they would be able to explain why they thought certain behaviors, feelings and thoughts are more important than others. However, age only provides the practitioners with a guideline regarding development, as some athletes experience developmental changes earlier, and others later than average (Kipp, 2018). Therefore, although relying on the developmental literature aided our planning, it was challenging to design the activity without meeting the target group first.

Another challenge was related to the behavior of the soccer players. I struggled to identify a working behavior management technique and occasionally found it hard to get the players' full attention as the environment outside provided the players with plenty of distractions. According to Foster et al. (2016), in order to establish a good relationship, it is important not to create a school environment, however, disruptive behaviors need to be addressed as they can derail the session (Gould & Szczygiel, 2018). I found addressing disruptive behaviors challenging as many behavior management techniques come from my understanding of the school environment. Nevertheless, reflections relating to the value of the activity were positive; after my work with the U15 team, I

delivered the PP activity to an U12 (aged 11-12) soccer team, who also identified behaviors, feelings and thoughts identified in previous literature (Harwood & Anderson, 2015), and we continue to develop this activity in our current practice.

A commonly cited challenge of the original PP is that athletes only rate their current abilities, without identifying the importance of each identified construct, therefore it can be challenging for practitioners to decide which abilities need improving urgently (Bird et al., 2021). When delivering our adapted PP activity, I made sure to ask the athletes to identify the most important behavior, feeling and thought after each brainstorming phase, therefore I knew that out of all the behaviors, feelings and thoughts, the chosen ones were the most important to the team. However, in line with the challenges identified in the literature (Bird et al., 2021) it would have been difficult to prioritize one construct without asking the athletes to rate the importance of each. Prioritizing a behavior, feeling or thought, however, was not an objective of the activity, as the following workshops aimed to address all the identified behaviors, feelings and thoughts that received a rating lower than 5.

Applied Implications

Neophyte practitioners benefit more from literature that describes the process of 'doing' sport psychology over intervention studies (Tod et al., 2017). Therefore, the current article helps practitioners implement and further develop PP activities. When doing so, practitioners should ensure that the physical, emotional, social, and psychological development of young athletes (Visek et al., 2009) are taken into consideration when adapting any activity designed for adults, such as the PP. When I used the aforementioned PP activity with an U12 soccer team, some adaptations took place to reflect the needs of the players, one of which related to the rating of the players' abilities. After identifying the behaviors, feelings and thoughts, the players engaged in long discussions about their importance with regards to successful performance. As the discussion was important for the players and PP is an autonomy-supportive tool (Butler & Hardy, 1992), I did not interject. Instead of comparing the teams' abilities to those of their chosen player's, I asked the players to rate the

244 importance of the identified behaviors, feelings and thoughts on a scale of 1 to 5 with regards to
245 successful performance. Therefore, the players displayed cones to represent the importance of each
246 behavior, feeling and thought and those ratings determined the content of the following workshops.
247 Sport psychologists conducting our PP activity may consider creating a poster based on the
248 athletes' responses after the session. This could be placed within the athletes' changing room to
249 provide a visual reminder of the areas most important for team success, and could also form the basis
250 for goal-setting throughout the season (Weston et al., 2010). Additionally, the rating part of the PP
251 activity could be delivered at several points throughout the season to provide a method of monitoring
252 progress.
253 The workshops that I have delivered aimed to explore the areas that the team, collectively,
254 believed needed improvement on an individual level so that the team's performance would be
255 improved. With more time with the team, I could have looked to create individual performance
256 profiles for each player. During this, I would have asked each player to rate their own individual
257 abilities on the characteristics identified by the team. This would have helped players to identify their
258 own individual strengths and areas for improvement. Additionally, it would have also accounted for
259 possible individual differences between the team rating and the players' personal ratings.
260 I did not aim to reveal characteristics that are believed to make the best team at this stage.
261 Prior to the first workshop, I did not have any knowledge on how familiar the soccer players were
262 with soccer players and teams. Therefore, identifying only one successful player was the best option,
263 as I wanted everyone to participate in the discussion / needs analysis. However, practitioners working
264 with teams could adopt the activity and ask the team to identify characteristics of a successful team
265 instead of that of a single player. Delivering both needs analyses would also be an option to explore
266 what areas players need to develop both on individual and team levels.
267 Moreover, practitioners could ask the athletes to work in groups based on their positions and
268 identify a successful player that plays the same position if they have information on the players'

background knowledge. Additionally, practitioners working with individual athletes could further adopt the PP activity to focus on specific aspects of contributing to successful performance, such as lifestyle and support, technical and tactical skills, physical preparation, fitness, mental approaches, and behaviors (Perry, 2020).

However, the limitations of each tool should also be recognized. Whilst the activity revealed the teams' perceived competence levels regarding key behaviors, feelings and thoughts, it did not reveal all the areas that potentially hinder the players' performance, such as the anxiety that many of the players experienced before matches. Therefore, it is also important to adopt various approaches to identify athletes' needs (Holland et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The present article provides a practical PP method, informed by the literature, that may be utilized by experienced and neophyte practitioners working with young athletes. Our experiences working with the soccer players suggest that there may be benefits to adapting traditional sport psychology tools to younger athletes and their 'real world' environment, and to moving away from conducting sport psychology services in traditional settings (Henriksen et al., 2014). However, it is important to note the challenges of delivering sport psychology work outside, such as the distractions the players may face (e.g., other people, weather changes). Therefore, practitioners need to be equipped with behavioral management techniques to direct the athletes' attention back to the workshop, especially if they are younger. It is also important to note that the athletes volunteered to attend these workshops and they were interested, therefore it may be assumed that when workshop attendance is compulsory, and those less interested also attend, managing behaviors effectively is even more important. The adapted PP activity was successful with the U15 and U12 soccer players, however, to further support the use of this method, empirical investigation of the methods' effectiveness also needs to be conducted in the future with different sports, and age groups.

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Data Availability Statement

Data available within the article or its supplementary materials.

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