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APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IN ELITE CLIMBING: WORKING WITH ATHLETES, COACHES, AND A FEDERATION.

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Abstract

Sport climbing is being promoted as an Olympic sport for Tokyo 2020. Embracing the Olympic project constitutes an opportunity for both climbing structure and elite-level actors to grow together, nevertheless it also creates tensions and difficulties due to the rapid changes and professionalization of structure. Working as an applied sport psychologist in this unique context, I share and discuss the advantages of being involved not only at individual level with athletes, but also in a holistic ecological approach with coaches and a federation. Departing from this context and my professional philosophy, I discuss the specificities, needs, and orientations that are particular for each level. I share an example of a sport psychology project that strengthens the interactive involvement of the athletes, coaches, and the federation and creates an added value for all three parties. Finally, I share and discuss the challenges and perspectives from such an engaging experience.

Key words: Olympic project; Holistic ecological approach; Combined format

Résumé

L'escalade sportive a été promue comme un sport Olympique pour les jeux de Tokyo 2020. Cela constitue une opportunité pour les structures et les acteurs de haut niveau afin de progresser et de grandir ensemble, mais cela crée aussi des tensions et des difficultés liées aux changements rapides et à la professionnalisation. Travaillant comme psychologue du sport dans ce contexte unique, je partage et discute les avantages d'être impliqué non-seulement au niveau individuel avec les athlètes, mais aussi avec les entraîneurs et la fédération dans une approche holistique et environnementale. En débutant par ma philosophie professionnelle, je discute des spécificités, besoins, et orientations que je rencontre spécifiquement à chaque niveau. Je partage ensuite un exemple de projet initié par la démarche en psychologie du sport qui implique de faire travailler en interaction les athlètes, entraîneurs, et la fédération. Finalement, je discute des difficultés rencontrées ainsi que des perspectives futures pour ce projet si engageant.

Mots clés : Projet Olympique ; Approche holistique environnementale ; Format combiné

Context

The Club Alpin Belge (CAB) – French speaking Belgian climbing, hiking, and mountaineering federation represents around 4.000 members with a history of elite climbers performing at international level since early nineties. The most well-known is Muriel Sarkany; five times World Cup champion (1997, 1999, 2001, 2002, and 2003), and two times World Champion (1992 – Junior, and 2003 – Senior). If at early stages the structures were frail and athletes' training mostly individually, the federation has gradually evolved to a position in which independent teams were able to improve their structures and knowledge to consistently bring athletes to the international level. Today, the Olympic project provides an opportunity for the CAB to increase team integration and professionalization of sport climbing. This situation creates opportunities, nevertheless it entails also changes and challenges for long lasting actors such as teams and coaches who were used to work independently and used the federation support mostly for logistical reasons.

In this context, the federation decided to hire me as a sport psychologist consultant for the Olympic project. This gives me the opportunity to work with integrative perspective at three levels: athletes, coaches, and the federation. The position represents a new step for my professional involvement in sport climbing. I have been active since childhood as a climber, then as a climbing teacher and coach from initiation-level to international-level, and eventually as competition and high-level coordinator for the federation. These last 10 years I gradually evolved from a climbing expert position to sport psychology specialisation with a master's degree in sport psychology and today being involved in a PhD studying the features of parent-athlete relationships.

Professional philosophy

In my professional philosophy, striving for performance with elite athletes is necessarily linked to their development and well-being in a holistic ecological perspective (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010a, 2010b). Also, according to the Developmental Model of Sport Participation, I support the early sampling/diversification pathway that considers that with involvement in various sports and deliberate play, children will learn emotional, cognitive and motor skills that most favourably affect positive youth development and will be important to their later involvement and specialisation in sport (Côté, 1999; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009; Côté & Hay, 2002; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). Athletes further involvement and specialisation to reach the elite level is considered by taking care of their athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/volitional, and financial development and transitions (Stambulova et al., 2014; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016).

Likewise, as athletes are not alone in their sports journey, I apply a sensitive approach to the environmental and organisational culture in which they develop (Henriksen & Roessler, 2011; Henriksen et al., 2010b), as such as parent-athlete (Holt & Knight, 2014; Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017) and coach-athlete relationships (Jowett, 2005). In this perspective, it is particularly relevant to work not only with athletes but also with their proximal environment such as coaches and the federation.

Specifically, my consulting philosophy is based on acceptance-based models that suggest that (a) optimal performances requires a nonjudging moment-to-moment awareness and acceptance of internal states rather than efforts to control or reduce these internal processes; (b) an attentional focus on task-relevant

information and stimuli; and (c) commitment toward values-driven behaviours that support one's athletic journey (Gardner & Moore, 2007, 2012).

Working with athletes, coaches, and the federation

In my applied practice, I am involved with climbers at individual level for instance to develop their self-awareness of own emotional states, acceptance, and commitment (Gardner & Moore, 2007). My usual practice also includes development of psychological characteristics of developing excellence (e.g., Macnamara, Button, & Collins, 2010). Psychological skills could be limited to competitive routines and warm-up, mental imagery and route observation procedures, self-talking strategies, though for the elite level it also requires high level of self-regulation or life skills (Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017). Characteristics that athletes need to gradually develop could be related to their training or academic commitment, planning and self-organisation, actively seeking social support, studying techniques, life balance, social life, or fatigue management (Macnamara et al., 2010a; Macnamara, Button, & Collins, 2010b).

As athletes do not train alone and are in daily contact with their coach, coach-athlete relationships and communication are a primary area of inter-personal work (Davis & Jowett, 2014; Jowett, 2005; Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavalley, 2010). It starts from the general motivational climate and extends to competitive debriefing and action points to focus on in training situations, interpersonal conflicts, or miscommunication as well as lack of understanding of respective parties.

Another field of action is the work with coaches as they are for instance vulnerable to performance and organizational stressors (Norris, Didymus, & Kaiseler, 2017). Performance stressors could be related to athletes failing to perform to their potential or underperforming in training or in competition (Olusoga, Butt, Hays, & Maynard, 2009). However performance stressors can also be related to their own coaching performance for instance by setting unrealistically high standards for themselves, or related to the quality of their decisions at trainings and/or competitions (Norris et al., 2017; Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008). Organisational stressors can be related to job characteristics and working hours, managing budget, salary and incomes or compliance to contract (Knight, Reade, Selzler, & Rodgers, 2013). These organisational stressors are particularly relevant in the context of the federation Olympic project as it created new opportunities but also heavily disturbed coaches' habits that were used to work without the constraint of the federation's regulations.

Finally, regarding the federation, I am involved as a sport psychology consultant to improve the structures and the elite level environment (Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2013); to improve the implementation of well validated techniques (Rees et al., 2016); and to monitor athletes' progress and difficulties with a sport psychology perspective according to my professional philosophy. I am involved in the core team, a consultative commission in which the technical director, administrative support, competition coaches, athletes' trainer, and sport psychologist meet monthly to discuss, share and improve athletes' development and performance. It goes from talent identification, and athletes safeguarding, to being part of the selection committee to hire the new competition coach or being active in coaches' education and federation awareness of sport-psychology.

Working at three different levels represent a great advantage as it allows to individually and structurally progress towards the Olympic dream. To exemplify this advantage, I will share one example from my applied practice that proved valuable: the goal setting and monitoring project.

One example of integrated project: goal setting and monitoring

The national team and the Olympic Project are governmental funded projects that the federation has to monitor and to report on. One indicator of success includes the athlete's progress and engagement. A tool was needed that complies with this monitoring task but that also integrates well into the athlete's live and at best that even supports the athlete's development.

An often-applied tool to monitor athlete's progress is called goal setting. It is common practice in sport psychology and has demonstrated interest for example to improve athletes' well-being (Steca et al., 2016), positive affects (McCarthy, Jones, Harwood, & Davenport, 2010), perceived effectiveness (Ortega, Olmedilla, Palao, Sanz, & Bazaco, 2013) or athletes performances (Van Yperen, Blaga, & Postmes, 2014). But even when goals are being self-determined by athletes, their implementation and planification remains challenging (P. M. Gollwitzer, 1999; P. Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2010). Athletes' goal implementation is linked with training, physical preparation, physiotherapist treatment and adherence, academic considerations as well as with the federation's support or athlete assessment.

This practice has been brought to the core team. The federation needs in terms of athlete monitoring led to the construction of a standardized procedure for athletes to set and monitor their goals. Following discussions, it was established that (1) athletes should determine multiples goals monthly in accordance with their personal trainer and structure. (2) These goals should be implemented in a holistic developmental perspective with considering for example athlete's academic achievement, social and life-style considerations. (3) Performances and results, that are important for governing bodies should be part of the goal setting procedure but are considered as outcomes and subsequent to the processes and continuous involvement of athletes in their project. (4) The federation will monitor athletes' goals monthly within the core team. (5) Based on the monitoring, and only if the core team considers that an athlete needs to improve specific points, the federation can propose actions to be taken by the athlete.

Central to the goal setting, and monitoring project is athletes' involvement. They considered as responsible to both create and put in place goals. Coaches and physical preparators are responsible both for the implementation of athletes' goals, but also to suggest training inputs and orientations for the athletes in a bi-directional fashion. As a sport psychologist, I have been involved in the construction and promotion of the project, but also to help athletes and coaches to specify and operationalize their goals effectively. The federation is involved to monitor goals and progresses but also to further establish the rigor and professionalize the structure of athletes' involvement to the governing bodies. By focusing predominantly on processes rather than outcomes, this goal setting project also aims to reduce performance pressure both on athletes and their proximal environment.

This initiative required to overcome few challenges, the first being to create a standardized document that is specific, simple to use, and flexible for athletes and coaches. The following obstacle was to ensure that

this procedure is effectively used by athletes and their environment not only as a means to report progress to the federation, but also as a new tool to improve training and help to monitor actions, progresses or difficulties encountered, and finally to remind steps that have been achieved. This project is ongoing and proved interesting as it helps creating multiple interactions between athletes, coaches, and the federation but also with sport psychologist. On the long run, it is hoped that the goal setting, and monitoring will help athlete to progress toward their goals step by step, without forgetting their academic or social responsibilities in a coherent life project.

Challenges and perspectives

My personal and long-lasting history in sport climbing constitutes on the one hand a strong asset, as I am embodied and nourish by this sport culture since childhood, I can understand the specific needs of athletes, coaches, and the federation, and I “speak” the same sport language as my fellows. Nevertheless, what constitutes an advantage is also a huge challenge as it is very complicated to not take a stand for or against parties. Being in a sport psychologist position implies not being judgmental but rather trying to understand, explain, and being as neutral as possible. This is a great challenge when it comes to reality.

The sport climbing milieu is also a very small world and we all know each other for years. Personal and professional relationships are sometimes quite intricate and can restrain from collaborating with one or the other. These divisions can undermine projects and opportunities to work together on a common ground. Here again, it is a challenge to be aware of.

Finally, managing different expectations from athletes, coaches and the federations remains a daily challenge as each individual or organisation has its own agenda, constraints, and objectives. These different expectations are sometimes strongly divergent. It takes time, effort and patience to make them explicit, to consider and register these divergences, and to understand and accept point of views from each other.

Despite the multiples challenges and the relative infancy of this project, working with a holistic ecological approach at three different levels with athlete, coaches, and the federation is a valuable opportunity for us to growth and progress toward the Olympic dream. This integrated perspective considers athletes, not only as individuals, but also in interaction with their environment. It is hoped that a better integration of athletes and coaches with the federation will help to build a stronger team, and an environment in which athletes develop positively and perform at their best.

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