

Ten Years in Team Denmark & Ten Valuable Lessons Learned

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I recently realized I had a 10-year anniversary working as a sport psychology practitioner in Team Denmark, the Danish elite sport institution. In this period I have had the privilege of working with a range of dedicated athletes and coaches from different sports and through their peak moments as well as their heaviest defeats. I have supported athletes and coaches through major championships. I have attended more training camps than I care to remember.

A friend asked me: “So what have you learned over those ten years?” My first response was a smile and the thoughts that this was way too complex to explain, and that my reflections would be too simple for my skilled international colleagues. I have such thoughts often, so I smiled compassionately at them and remembered my values. I have always wanted to be a person who reflects, who engages in professional discussions, and who shares.

So here they are. Ten lessons about sport psychology that I have learned over my first ten years working with true top performers.

1. A solid professional philosophy is key

When the sport psychology team in Team Denmark was established ten years ago, the first thing we did was to formulate a professional philosophy for the team. Through lengthy discussions we decided who we wanted to be as a team and how we wanted to work. We formulated key values, selected interventions theories and designed a model that provided an overview of key focus areas. The philosophy provided a clear direction and team identity while allowing individual variation. We formulated the philosophy in an accessible language and presented it to sport managers, coaches and other collaborators.

Working from a coherent framework has helped establish us as a serious and trustworthy profession, enabled us to deliver a consistent service across sports, and assured that as young athletes progress towards the elite level they are met with the same approach, thereby creating continuity.

2. Mental strength is not a super power

Athletes often describe a mentally strong athlete as an athlete who “is always confident and motivated”, and “doesn’t get nervous or doubt their plan.” Unfortunately, the story elite level athletes most often tell is a story of supernatural mental powers, of steely dedication and unshakeable confidence. Sport psychology practitioners nourish this misconception when they talk about the minds of the great.

This is not only wrong; it is also an unnecessary and heavy burden on young athletes who may think they are alone in experiencing doubt and worries. I have had the privilege of standing right next to top-level performers minutes before competing successfully in a championship. Their dominant feeling was often one of doubt, worry and even wanting to escape.

Mental strength is not a super power. Rather it is *the ability to act in a way that is consistent with your values and game plan, even when you are under pressure and face difficult thoughts and emotions*.

Athletes express relief when they understand the implications of this idea.

3. Presence is the currency of performance

Sport psychology practitioners rightfully teach a host of skills to their athletes. I find there is “one skill to rule them all”: presence.

Presence means being in the present moment. Here and now. All too often, athletes’ thoughts stray to the past (“if only I had not made that mistake”) or to the future (“if I win this I will be...”), and performance suffers. Presence includes the task-focused attention and the moment-to-moment

awareness of the mind's wandering. You must know when your mind wanders in order to bring it back. Mindfulness training targets both, and is a key component of almost all that I do. Thanks to Peter Haberl, a good friend and colleague, who inspires the heading.

4. It is impossible to control the mind

Early in my career, I used to try and help athletes always think and feel positive thoughts and emotions. I failed. The mind is designed to look for threats and to foresee potential problems. We cannot bypass evolution.

Today I aim to teach athletes to embrace and accept the full range of emotions involved in being a human being and an ambitious athlete: the thrill of success *and* the fear of defeat. I rarely talk to athletes about *self-confidence* (understood as the feeling of being great and the belief that nothing can go wrong) but rather about *courage* (the willingness to do your very best even though you have fears or doubts and realize you may not succeed).

5. Elite sport is about much more than results

The athletes I have met who were most pleased with their athletic careers were not simply the athletes with the largest pile of medals. They were athletes who during their career enjoyed good mental health, remained true to their values, had a purpose beyond results, *and* won medals. Much of my work revolves around helping athletes answer difficult questions of identity, meaning and values, such as: "who do I want to be as an athlete and as a person?" and "what do I want my career to be about beyond results?" Being strongly rooted in values is particularly helpful in the strong and frequent winds of adversity.

6. Sport psychology should target the performance environment, not only the performer

With good research colleagues, I have demonstrated that talent development is a social affair and that good talent development environments are a key to success. Elite sport is no different. Successful environments are characterized by an integration of efforts among all involved and a strong culture in which espoused and enacted values are aligned.

Knowing this, I do not only focus on the individual athlete in my work. When necessary, I aim to improve environment functioning by improving structure (e.g., dialogue between key people) and culture (aligning values and actions). In my experience, just as athletes can be values-based *and* successful, performance environments can be built around compassion *and* produce international results.

7. Sport psychology training belongs on the pitch

While not the core of my work, I do teach mental *skills*. To work on the pitch, such skills should be acquired on the pitch. By "the pitch" I refer to the training and competition settings. In sailing, the training of sport psychology skills belongs on the water and in mountain biking it belongs in the forest. When athletes acquire skills in an office, it is difficult for them to make these work in a sport setting where coaches and other athletes neither support nor take an interest.

I always aim to take the psychology training onto the pitch. I meet the athletes in training and follow them to camps (not only competitions). I work closely with coaches and physical trainers to develop relevant exercises that help athletes develop skills such as focus and communication. I supervise coaches on the way they integrate psychological training into their practice sessions. I sometimes even plan and execute specific parts of a training session.

8. The relationship comes first

Building and maintaining a good relationship with the athletes (therapeutic alliance) is key to a successful service. Fostering alliance is demanding and includes caring for the athletes as persons, being available when they need you, and accepting the challenges they give you (e.g., to try their sport).

Traveling with teams is very helpful. Standing next to the athletes when they are under pressure shows that you care, and talking to athletes over breakfast or during transportation allows you to pick up the small but crucial concerns, athletes rarely tell you in a “session”. Traveling further allows us to target our work through seeing the athletes in training and competition, and to see how our interventions work or do not work and adjust.

9. Sport organizations can eat you alive

Sport psychology education often focuses on theory, models and methods. What they sometimes fail to teach is how to interact with sport organizations such as clubs, academies, national governing bodies and others. Sport organizations – like all organizations – are characterized by political agendas, power struggles, gatekeepers, rapid exchange of personnel, and frequently uncertainty towards the sport psychologist.

Managing yourself inside the performance environment includes the difficult balance between respecting the environment by patiently examining the culture on the one hand, and demonstrating your worth and efficiency on the other. In my experience it is better to go slow.

10. The sport psychology practitioner is a performer

The final lesson targets the sport psychologist as a performer. We too are under immense pressure, feel stressed when athletes don't succeed, and want to show our ability to fix. As a performer you need to work on your own psychology. I have worked to clarify my values and who I want to be as a practitioner; to be in the present moment even under pressure; and to accept my own doubts and worries in the pursuit of being of true service for the athletes. Just like the athletes, I practice my ability to *act in a way that is consistent with my values even when I am under pressure and face difficult thoughts and emotions.*

My personal quest towards authenticity has involved mindfulness practice, case discussions with colleagues, supervision and personal reflections.

Disclaimer

For the record. The above ten lessons are important to me. I realize that I come from a western European democracy and that I work in an organization that is bound by law to promote elite sport in a socially responsible manner. Other practitioners may have learned other valuable lessons. The analytical reader may have spotted, that my lessons revolve around two main psychological traditions. Acceptance commitment training (ACT) directs me in focusing on values, presence and acceptance. The holistic ecological approach (HEA) inspires me to take the performance environment seriously. Well spotted.