

PasSport4life: A trainee sport
psychologist's perspective on
developing a resilience-based life
skills program

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1 Abstract

2 The growing field of sport-based youth development has explored the role of coaches in
3 fostering athletes' lifelong skills to deal with stressors and challenges they encounter, as they
4 transition into adulthood. However, the contribution of sport psychologists in implementing
5 programs has received little attention and could provide a beneficial catalyst in facilitating
6 youth development given their training and expertise. In addition, the use of resilience related
7 life skills could support adolescents in overcoming adversity beyond sport. Therefore, the
8 purpose of this article is to provide a narrative on the experiences of a trainee sport
9 psychologist in designing and delivering a resilience-based life skills program.

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Keywords: youth sport, positive youth development, reflective practice

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2 life skills program

3 Given the significant number of hurdles and potential adversities that adolescents
4 face, such as transitioning from school and university to the workplace, developmental
5 scientists have been interested in the personal assets and coping strategies that can be
6 developed through sport, but benefit adolescents in all walks of life (Coakley, 2011). Positive
7 youth development (PYD) through sport and, more specifically, life skill development has
8 been approached via numerous avenues (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012). Interventions
9 targeting specific cognitive, interpersonal, and behavioral skills have utilised sport as a means
10 of teaching life skills with the aim of extending their use beyond the sporting context (see
11 Hardcastle, Tye, Glassey, & Hagger, 2015). Due to the significance of a coach within the
12 sporting environment, their role is considered a key factor for developing youths' life skills
13 (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). Previous research has explored the
14 involvement of the coach in supporting youth development (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014),
15 specific coaching behaviors within developmental settings (Gould & Carson, 2011), and the
16 philosophies employed by sport coaches (Camiré et al., 2012), in order to understand their
17 importance in the process of adolescent life skill development. Similarly, in developing the
18 psychological skills and competencies of youth athletes, sport psychologists (SPs) have taken
19 a psycho-educational approach (e.g., Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1995), whereby emphasis is
20 placed on developing the individual, as well as the athlete, in preparing adolescents for
21 adulthood.

22 Knowledgeable in developmental research, mental skills training and techniques, as
23 well as emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms, SPs have the potential skillset and
24 experience required to deliver a sport related psycho-educational intervention to non-athletes
25 (Weiss, 2008). Whilst advocating for the role of sport psychologists to include teaching life

1 skills through sport, Danish and Nellen (1997) made reference to the skills and competencies
2 of a SP in engaging with youth to support their personal and social development and
3 ultimately preparing them adult life. Skills aligned to the counseling domain, such as
4 listening, establishing rapport, and understanding the client's needs are important in creating
5 a supportive environment and building meaningful relationships (Danish & Nellen, 1997).
6 However, the potential role of a sport psychologist in supporting adolescents' skills for life
7 beyond sport has received little attention within the literature, with few studies considering
8 the design and delivery of life skills programs. Therefore, SPs as sport-based youth program
9 leaders could support adolescents in developing resilience-based skills and characteristics,
10 enabling them to manage everyday challenges, potential adversities, and their transition into
11 adulthood.

12 Adolescence is a transitional period where strategies and mechanisms associated with
13 managing potential adversities are learnt, developed, and tested to support positive adaptation
14 to new environments and situations (Coleman, 2011). Although there is an emerging
15 literature base surrounding the theoretical overlap between resilience and PYD (Masten,
16 2014), a gap in the applied literature remains in relation to translating theory to practice in
17 sport-based youth development programs. Given the importance of adapting to new
18 environments and dealing with challenges and potential stressors during adolescence, the
19 need to develop youths' skills and strategies to support their transition to adulthood is
20 pertinent (Sanders, Munford, Thimasarn-Anwar, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015). Indeed, Weiss
21 (2008) highlighted the need to explore topics associated with lifespan development and
22 engage in intervention research, particularly with adolescent age groups. Therefore, given the
23 functional benefits of resilience, such as positive adaptation and appraising potential
24 adversities as developmental opportunities, it is important that we, as researchers and

1 profession. Since Danish and Nellen's (1997) advocacy for sport psychology practitioners to
2 include life skill development within their practice, there has been some movement beyond
3 the traditional counseling and performance-enhancement models. That said, Weiss (2008)
4 suggested greater emphasis is needed on identifying and tracking behavior and emotions
5 from a lifespan development perspective. In an attempt to address these issues, the secondary
6 aim of piloting the intervention was to understand the role and utility of a trainee SP as the
7 primary program facilitator; assessing what skills and competencies the role requires. In
8 doing so, the following section will provide an outline of the intervention content and
9 structure before exploring the program facilitator's reflections.

10 **Program Context**

11 Golf is a unique sport that allows the performer a considerable amount of time to
12 analyze and assess options for the best course of action per shot. Potential adverse situations
13 are frequent, with deliberate challenges created by golf course designers, such as bunkers and
14 sloping greens. As a result, a round of golf provides a medley of potential stress appraisals
15 paired with a routine decision-making process in order to manage the environmental and
16 technical challenges (Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & James, 2005). Therefore, golf was chosen for
17 the intervention context due to its requirement for positive adaptation towards challenging
18 situations whilst demonstrating a potential resilience process. The intervention was delivered
19 and piloted to three separate groups in a golf club in South West Wales, U.K., utilizing a
20 workshop room in the clubhouse as well as driving range and beginners' course for
21 performance tasks (see Table 1). For the purposes of incorporating the teaching of life skills
22 within a golf performance setting, the co-authors and a Professional Golfers Association
23 (PGA) qualified coach assisted in the initial design of the pilot program, with the program
24 facilitator delivering the majority of the program.

25 **Program Content**

1 The six key skills taught in the program were identified from previous research to be
2 associated with resilience, positive adaptation, and critical thinking. These included: goal
3 setting (Forneris, Danish, & Scott, 2007), problem solving (Peacock-Villada, DeCelles, &
4 Banda, 2007), communication (Khanlou & Wray, 2014), managing emotions (Alvord &
5 Grados, 2005), utilizing social support (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Galli & Vealey, 2008) and,
6 reflection (Jones, Lavallee, & Tod, 2011; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014a). Problem solving,
7 managing emotions, utilizing social support, and goal setting were taught as four distinct
8 skills, whereas, reflection and communication were integrated throughout.

9 **Program Structure**

10 Six life skills were initially taught indoors involving break-out discussion tasks (such
11 as identifying how and in what contexts the skill is used) before continuing to the
12 performance component incorporating the newly learnt competencies with golf skills (e.g.
13 driving, chipping, putting). Once the competencies had been taught and developed within a
14 golf setting, participants were presented with tasks, typically on the driving range, based on
15 transferring the skills to a non-sport context (e.g. school, home).

16 Although each skill was taught, modeled, and practiced in turn, participants engaged
17 in a continual reflective process within and between each session. In creating a testing
18 environment, participants were presented with individual and group challenges to incorporate
19 skill learning within golf performance. In doing so, the *challenge model* of resilience was
20 adopted (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). The challenge model states that when an individual is
21 presented with a moderate level stressor (risk), the challenge is sufficient enough to provoke
22 active engagement in a decision-making process and allows learning to occur based on the
23 outcome of the decision. Indeed, Sarkar, Fletcher and Brown (2015) made similar
24 conclusions in relation to athletes engaging in pressure training, where the process of
25 evaluation and judgment become integral with creating pressured situations. Where a stressor

1 is either too severe (impossible to overcome) or too low (lack of challenge), a negative
2 outcome will occur and no learning takes place. Presenting participants with low level
3 challenges and stressors allows them to practice and hone skills required to deal with the
4 challenge (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). As a result, adolescents build their competence in
5 overcoming low-level challenges, allowing greater levels of risk to be tackled.

6 The program was piloted using an action research approach, whereby the lead author
7 completed a reflective diary during and after the completion of each pilot program and then
8 discussed the experiences with the rest of the research team (see Holt et al., 2013). Each
9 subsequent session within each program had been shaped based on the on-going experiences
10 of the program facilitator. Although different participants were involved in each of the three
11 programs, the action research approach allowed a continual cyclical process of adapting each
12 pilot intervention based on delivery experience and personal reflections.

13 [Insert table 1]

14 The total time to deliver pilot two and pilot three was based on the availability of students
15 based on the school curriculum, whereas, pilot one was structured around the existing junior
16 coaching program at weekends. Therefore, there was no standardized delivery time, which
17 allowed a degree of flexibility when working with schools. The use of different populations
18 enabled a greater understanding about delivering the intervention to participants with varying
19 golf experience and knowledge, intellectual ability, and age.

20 **Facilitator Reflections**

21 As part of the implementation process, the program facilitator reflected on the
22 procedure in designing and delivering the intervention. A five-stage reflective model (i.e.,
23 description, reflexivity, evaluation, adapting, action plan), adapted from Anderson, Knowles
24 and Gilbourne (2004), was used as a guide. A key aspect of the reflections incorporated the
25 impact that he had on the pilot process. The existing skills and competencies that he

1 possessed as a trainee sport psychologist played a role in shaping the program design and
2 implementation. In addition, his personal background, experiences in a youth development
3 setting, and emerging professional consulting philosophy also had an influence. The
4 following section will provide a brief outline of the professional philosophy of the program
5 facilitator, written in the first person, in order to provide context for the reflections that
6 follow.

7 **Professional philosophy.** I began to consult with university-level athletes during my
8 Masters degree, under supervision, in order to apply some of the theory I had learnt and build
9 my experiences when working with competitive athletes. I continued working with student
10 athletes in athletics, tennis, rugby, and golf throughout my masters and into my doctoral
11 studies. During the first year of my Ph.D., I had the opportunity to start working with
12 younger athletes, within an elite golf developmental environment, aged approximately 15-18
13 years old. Due to my neophyte status, my professional philosophy as a consultant was
14 starting to develop in line with my core beliefs and values.

15 Although still in the training stages of becoming a sport psychologist, my professional
16 philosophy is based on a humanistic and developmental person-centered approach. A
17 performance enhancement objective is always considered when working with a new client;
18 however, the primary concern is developing the individual as a person, rather than an athlete
19 (Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). As such, I have found that this model of
20 practice has continued in to my coaching and teaching philosophy and compliments well the
21 resilience related life skills intervention program.

22 The following section will outline key reflections based on four themes associated
23 with the design and delivery of the intervention: being adaptable as a facilitator, integrating
24 the challenge model of resilience within the program, transferring life skills outside of golf,
25 and the identity of the program facilitator. It is hoped the experiences will provide a resource

1 for practitioners, coaches and youth program leaders incorporating resilience-based life skills
2 into practice.

3 **Being adaptable as a facilitator.** When designing the first pilot program, I
4 considered the experiences of the junior golfers and their golf performance skills. Having met
5 them briefly as part of a one-hour taster session focused on performance profiling, I was able
6 to gauge their level of understanding towards some of the key concepts and also their skill
7 level in golf; most of whom had played for several years.

8 Early within the first session of pilot one, I realized their knowledge of sport, in
9 general, was very good. As a result, I altered the way in which I approached the teaching of
10 the skill (problem solving) to a more familiar topic. I had originally planned to teach the steps
11 of problem solving in relation to a school-based task, for example, an exam or homework
12 task, before progressing to golf-specific examples. However, one individual kept referring to
13 rugby, so I saw that as my way of relating to the participants. Referring to recent rugby
14 matches on television, I used key scenarios to highlight the process involved in problem
15 solving. Adapting a task to suit their understanding and interests allowed a greater level of
16 engagement and, subsequently, rapport with the participants. The importance of being
17 adaptable and ‘knowing your client’ started to influence my approach. Within subsequent
18 sessions and programs, I made a specific point of directing ‘ice-breaker’ tasks towards
19 getting to know one another which provided an ideal opportunity for me to engage with their
20 interests and hobbies.

21 A particular example of having to adapt my delivery methods occurred during pilot
22 three, where one participant showed little engagement in the learning process. As part of a
23 goal setting task, the group were discussing their future career plans and mapping the specific
24 steps to reach their goals. One participant spoke of his interest in cars and desire to become a
25 mechanic, having engaged more during this short task than the previous two days of the

1 program. Witnessing his obvious excitement and love for cars, I no longer used golf as a
2 means of engaging with him. I was able to relate the skills we had covered to associate and
3 transfer them to his interest in cars. We discussed modifying engines, bodywork, and learning
4 about fixing cars, rather than golf technique and decision-making on the golf course. I
5 adapted the context of problem solving towards fixing a broken engine, whereby solutions
6 and consequences are identified before making a decision. With a shared interest in cars, I
7 was able to quickly establish rapport with the participant which led to a far more productive
8 final day of the intervention.

9 Following that program, I reflected on my lack of consideration towards participants'
10 personal interests and hobbies. I was too concerned with ensuring we covered the content of
11 the intervention. I felt I had strayed away from my person-centered philosophy and became
12 fixed on delivering the sessions that had previously worked with other participants. This
13 notion of adaptability also extended to the specific tasks and challenges that I had set in
14 relation to participants' intellectual and golf ability.

15 **Integrating the Challenge model of resilience.** In order to incorporate the challenge
16 model of resilience within the sessions, the participants were divided in to two groups at the
17 start of each program. Throughout the program, the groups were given tasks designed to put
18 them under moderate levels of stress to ensure the skills taught were used within attempts to
19 approach the tasks. Teams were awarded points primarily for their effort and achievement of
20 goals set prior to the task; supporting a developmental growth mindset (Alvord & Grados,
21 2005). Points were also awarded for winning tasks, to support a competitive spirit, however,
22 priority was placed on effort. As more skills were taught throughout the intervention, the
23 difficulty level of the tasks increased.

24 In practice, trying to gauge the appropriate level of task difficulty for participants
25 proved challenging within the initial few sessions. Sarkar et al. (2015) referred to the

1 importance of tailoring tasks towards an individual's psychosocial development. In practice,
2 effective tailoring of content towards participants' level of ability and understanding required
3 a reliance on what Johansson and Krokmark (2004) refer to as *intuition-in-action* and
4 adapting tasks ad-hoc. Although I wanted them to succeed, I knew they would initially find
5 some of the golf tasks difficult. Therefore, when participants failed to overcome challenges,
6 emphasis was placed on adapting and learning from mistakes via reflection. In relation to the
7 challenge model, when one is presented with a stressor (risk) and insufficient strategies or
8 resources are in place, failure is likely to occur (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). However, the
9 rationale for presenting the groups with very difficult tasks early in the intervention was to
10 guide their understanding of resilience. Initially, very few participants had heard of resilience
11 or were able to articulate its meaning. Therefore, demonstrating the concept in practice,
12 within a golf setting, involving a difficult challenge, enabled a more experiential approach to
13 their learning that incorporated positive appraisal and evaluating potential adversities.

14 Once participants had a reasonable grasp of learning from mistakes and being able to
15 adapt to the current situation, I reduced the difficulty to allow the groups to utilize new
16 strategies based on the skills taught. For example, increasing the width of an 'imaginary
17 fairway' target on the driving range providing a more realistic target for novice golfers. As
18 the intervention progressed, participants began to understand the process of overcoming a
19 challenge and adapting to utilize current competencies and resources. As a result, task
20 difficulty was then increased to provide a sufficiently demanding stressor (Sarkar et al.,
21 2015). However, on reflection, a longer in-depth intervention is required to support the
22 development of effective resilience-based skills that participants can utilize and transfer with
23 ease, rather than only testing and experimenting in different environments outside of sport.

24 **Transferring life skills outside of golf.** Transferability of skills was approached via
25 three different strategies. In supporting the knowledge of transfer we discussed other

1 environments the taught skill could be used in, as well as how to use it in those environments.
2 These discussions were conducted during the post-challenge group and individual reflections.
3 A more experiential strategy involved the group completing tasks that simulated a working
4 environment within sport. For example, a task that simulates potential challenges participants
5 could face outside of sport and test their newly developed skills. For example, an
6 ‘Apprentice’ task (a team-based activity within a time pressurized environment), similar to
7 the television program, was designed and implemented to facilitate team work– with the
8 groups tasked to design a golf activity day for the local community and present their finished
9 concept to a boardroom panel, which included me masquerading as the ‘Boss’. Even though
10 this task does not test transferability to an alternative context, it does provide a useful
11 evaluation of their skill development and application from a golf context. The final strategy
12 employed to aid transferability involved matching a newly learnt golf skill to an additional
13 context. For example, during the ‘managing emotions’ session individuals were tasked with
14 developing ‘pre-shot routines’ to assist the understanding and controlling of emotions before
15 a stressful event (e.g. performing a driving task in front of a crowd). Participants were then
16 asked to devise a ‘pre-exam routine’ in a similar fashion to previously developing their pre-
17 shot routines. This involved breaking each section down and ensuring it served a purpose in
18 mentally preparing them for performance. Although several strategies were employed to aid
19 the transfer of skills, participants still struggled with identifying specific situations or
20 scenarios where the skills and strategies could be utilized. However, as the program
21 progressed, participants were more forthcoming in discussing the challenges that they face at
22 home or school, which was partly due to rapport becoming more established.

23 I felt as if I had established a good rapport with the majority of participants
24 throughout all three pilot programs, given the short amount of contact time. Those who I felt
25 I had made a stronger connection with were more comfortable in expressing the challenges

1 they face at home and at school. From the eyes of a SP, establishing rapport is a key
2 determining factor towards the success of a working relationship with a client (Fifer,
3 Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza, 2008). As such, I made a particular effort in getting to know
4 each individual on a personal level. However, when reflecting on my delivery after the
5 second and third pilot intervention, I felt my identity was closer to that of a teacher than a SP.

6 **Identity of the program facilitator.** The process involved in designing and
7 delivering three interventions spanned across approximately 18 months. During this time, I
8 questioned my identity on numerous occasions. The role of a youth program leader
9 incorporates numerous aspects of teaching, coaching, and counseling as well as knowledge in
10 adolescent development and understanding additional needs. Although I felt my skills and
11 competencies as a trainee SP aided my delivery of the intervention, I rarely considered this as
12 my identity.

13 The pilot program was designed in order to understand how to incorporate life skill
14 teaching within sport performance coaching. Throughout the delivery and re-designing of
15 certain aspects of the sessions, I had to adapt my delivery style in order to support the needs
16 of the participants - something I had not considered prior to pilot delivery. Similar to a
17 teacher with a class of 30 pupils, some individuals were able to complete tasks quicker and
18 with less support. Therefore, in order to support all participants, I created additional tasks for
19 those who would finish quicker. Additional tasks incorporated a greater level of
20 understanding towards a given skill, such as, introducing process and performance goals
21 within goal setting. As a result, I had to learn to be able to lead the group when they were at
22 different stages. In this respect, the challenges that I faced forced me to initially be reactive
23 and become a chameleon; having to adapt to the current situation. As my experience
24 developed, I established my identity as an 'educator'. Within this role I was able to utilize my

1 skills within SP consulting, incorporate knowledge of the teaching environment, whilst
2 having the theoretical understanding of resilience and positive youth development.

3 **Conclusion**

4 Following an extensive reflective process after the delivery of three pilot programs, the
5 structure of the program in its current form (at the time of writing) involves 16 hours of
6 contact time. Still a considerably short intervention, an initial taster session has been included
7 as a requirement in order for the program facilitator to understand the needs of participants.
8 In supporting the sustainability of the program as an outreach opportunity, rather than a
9 standalone research project, the program has been branded for further implementation in golf
10 and potential diversification into additional sports (www.passport4life.co.uk). Other changes
11 include the concept of social support becoming a more integral component within the
12 program as opposed to a stand-alone ‘skill’. Its inclusion has led to tasks on identifying and
13 utilizing support when faced with a challenge and considering it as an ‘umbrella’ skill, much
14 like reflection, within the program.

15 Hopefully, the narrative provided here has offered insight into designing and
16 delivering a resilience-based life skills program. The skills required in working with youth in
17 a sport-based development setting extend beyond that of a SP. Knowledge in coaching
18 science, pedagogy, and youth development form the basis for sport-based program
19 facilitators, yet, the skills and competencies of a SP (e.g. counseling, psychological skills,
20 delivering interventions) are indeed crucial in implementing a life skills program. Bridging
21 the gap between traditional mental skills training, physical education, and developmental
22 science, the changing role of a SP in delivering life skills programs should be recognized
23 within the professional development of trainees. In doing so, such accreditation pathways
24 would allow greater appreciation for the inter-disciplinary nature of our profession in what
25 Weiss (2008) considers being the “wave of the future” (p. 81).

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