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

Cox, Hamish
Neil, Rich
Oliver, Jon
Hanton, Sheldon
Abstract

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

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

Knowledgeable in developmental research, mental skills training and techniques, as well as emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms, SPs have the potential skillset and experience required to deliver a sport related psycho-educational intervention to non-athletes (Weiss, 2008). Whilst advocating for the role of sport psychologists to include teaching life
skills through sport, Danish and Nellen (1997) made reference to the skills and competencies of a SP in engaging with youth to support their personal and social development and ultimately preparing them adult life. Skills aligned to the counseling domain, such as listening, establishing rapport, and understanding the client’s needs are important in creating a supportive environment and building meaningful relationships (Danish & Nellen, 1997).

However, the potential role of a sport psychologist in supporting adolescents’ skills for life beyond sport has received little attention within the literature, with few studies considering the design and delivery of life skills programs. Therefore, SPs as sport-based youth program leaders could support adolescents in developing resilience-based skills and characteristics, enabling them to manage everyday challenges, potential adversities, and their transition into adulthood.

Adolescence is a transitional period where strategies and mechanisms associated with managing potential adversities are learnt, developed, and tested to support positive adaptation to new environments and situations (Coleman, 2011). Although there is an emerging literature base surrounding the theoretical overlap between resilience and PYD (Masten, 2014), a gap in the applied literature remains in relation to translating theory to practice in sport-based youth development programs. Given the importance of adapting to new environments and dealing with challenges and potential stressors during adolescence, the need to develop youths’ skills and strategies to support their transition to adulthood is pertinent (Sanders, Munford, Thimasarn-Anwar, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015). Indeed, Weiss (2008) highlighted the need to explore topics associated with lifespan development and engage in intervention research, particularly with adolescent age groups. Therefore, given the functional benefits of resilience, such as positive adaptation and appraising potential adversities as developmental opportunities, it is important that we, as researchers and
practitioners within the field of sport psychology, support adolescents in developing protective and promotive factors (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013).

The skills and competencies associated to the process of resilience can be witnessed in sport; having to deal with challenges when experiencing adversity alongside potential organizational, competitive and personal stressors (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014b). Although Masten (2014) made reference to the conceptual differences between PYD and resilience whereby “PYD has focused more on indicators of optimal function and thriving, whereas resilience work has focused more attention on adequate or ‘‘okay’’ function” (p.1019), there is considerable overlap due to the inclusion of developmental assets versus protective and promotive factors. However, an individual who thrives on stressors, and views them as positive developmental challenges, would be demonstrating resilience, as opposed to solely adopting coping mechanisms to deal with the adversity (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Lee, Cheung, & Kwong, 2012).

Sport-based youth programs could potentially provide an avenue for developing the strengths and assets of individuals to enable them to successfully navigate through life, whilst providing the skills to identify and utilize resources in order to overcome challenges and develop resilience. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to illuminate the role of a trainee sport psychologist as an applied sport psychology researcher in designing and piloting a sport-based program to develop adolescents’ resilience-based life skills. The following section will provide a brief outline of the pilot program structure and content before reporting the key reflections from the lead author – who will be referred to as the program facilitator.

**Pilot Program**

The aim of the pilot process was to understand how to integrate life skill resilience teaching into sport coaching. Alongside the design of the program, the involvement of a trainee SP in the delivery allowed for a more in-depth appreciation for the changing roles in this
profession. Since Danish and Nellen’s (1997) advocacy for sport psychology practitioners to
include life skill development within their practice, there has been some movement beyond
the traditional counseling and performance-enhancement models. That said, Weiss (2008)
suggested greater emphasis is needed on identifying and tracking behavior and emotions
from a lifespan development perspective. In an attempt to address these issues, the secondary
aim of piloting the intervention was to understand the role and utility of a trainee SP as the
primary program facilitator; assessing what skills and competencies the role requires. In
doing so, the following section will provide an outline of the intervention content and
structure before exploring the program facilitator’s reflections.

**Program Context**

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

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

Program Structure

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

Although each skill was taught, modeled, and practiced in turn, participants engaged in a continual reflective process within and between each session. In creating a testing environment, participants were presented with individual and group challenges to incorporate skill learning within golf performance. In doing so, the challenge model of resilience was adopted (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). The challenge model states that when an individual is presented with a moderate level stressor (risk), the challenge is sufficient enough to provoke active engagement in a decision-making process and allows learning to occur based on the outcome of the decision. Indeed, Sarkar, Fletcher and Brown (2015) made similar conclusions in relation to athletes engaging in pressure training, where the process of evaluation and judgment become integral with creating pressured situations. Where a stressor
is either too severe (impossible to overcome) or too low (lack of challenge), a negative outcome will occur and no learning takes place. Presenting participants with low level challenges and stressors allows them to practice and hone skills required to deal with the challenge (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). As a result, adolescents build their competence in overcoming low-level challenges, allowing greater levels of risk to be tackled.

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

[Insert table 1]

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

Facilitator Reflections

As part of the implementation process, the program facilitator reflected on the procedure in designing and delivering the intervention. A five-stage reflective model (i.e., description, reflexivity, evaluation, adapting, action plan), adapted from Anderson, Knowles and Gilbourne (2004), was used as a guide. A key aspect of the reflections incorporated the impact that he had on the pilot process. The existing skills and competencies that he
possessed as a trainee sport psychologist played a role in shaping the program design and implementation. In addition, his personal background, experiences in a youth development setting, and emerging professional consulting philosophy also had an influence. The following section will provide a brief outline of the professional philosophy of the program facilitator, written in the first person, in order to provide context for the reflections that follow.

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

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

The following section will outline key reflections based on four themes associated with the design and delivery of the intervention: being adaptable as a facilitator, integrating the challenge model of resilience within the program, transferring life skills outside of golf, and the identity of the program facilitator. It is hoped the experiences will provide a resource
for practitioners, coaches and youth program leaders incorporating resilience-based life skills into practice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In practice, trying to gauge the appropriate level of task difficulty for participants proved challenging within the initial few sessions. Sarkar et al. (2015) referred to the
importance of tailoring tasks towards an individual’s psychosocial development. In practice, effective tailoring of content towards participants’ level of ability and understanding required a reliance on what Johansson and Kroksmark (2004) refer to as intuition-in-action and adapting tasks ad-hoc. Although I wanted them to succeed, I knew they would initially find some of the golf tasks difficult. Therefore, when participants failed to overcome challenges, emphasis was placed on adapting and learning from mistakes via reflection. In relation to the challenge model, when one is presented with a stressor (risk) and insufficient strategies or resources are in place, failure is likely to occur (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). However, the rationale for presenting the groups with very difficult tasks early in the intervention was to guide their understanding of resilience. Initially, very few participants had heard of resilience or were able to articulate its meaning. Therefore, demonstrating the concept in practice, within a golf setting, involving a difficult challenge, enabled a more experiential approach to their learning that incorporated positive appraisal and evaluating potential adversities.

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

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

I felt as if I had established a good rapport with the majority of participants throughout all three pilot programs, given the short amount of contact time. Those who I felt I had made a stronger connection with were more comfortable in expressing the challenges...
they face at home and at school. From the eyes of a SP, establishing rapport is a key determining factor towards the success of a working relationship with a client (Fifer, Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza, 2008). As such, I made a particular effort in getting to know each individual on a personal level. However, when reflecting on my delivery after the second and third pilot intervention, I felt my identity was closer to that of a teacher than a SP. **Identity of the program facilitator.** The process involved in designing and delivering three interventions spanned across approximately 18 months. During this time, I questioned my identity on numerous occasions. The role of a youth program leader incorporates numerous aspects of teaching, coaching, and counseling as well as knowledge in adolescent development and understanding additional needs. Although I felt my skills and competencies as a trainee SP aided my delivery of the intervention, I rarely considered this as my identity.

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

**Conclusion**

Following an extensive reflective process after the delivery of three pilot programs, the structure of the program in its current form (at the time of writing) involves 16 hours of contact time. Still a considerably short intervention, an initial taster session has been included as a requirement in order for the program facilitator to understand the needs of participants.

In supporting the sustainability of the program as an outreach opportunity, rather than a standalone research project, the program has been branded for further implementation in golf and potential diversification into additional sports (www.passport4life.co.uk). Other changes include the concept of social support becoming a more integral component within the program as opposed to a stand-alone ‘skill’. Its inclusion has led to tasks on identifying and utilizing support when faced with a challenge and considering it as an ‘umbrella’ skill, much like reflection, within the program.

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


