



Sport psychology is a major resource for talented and professional footballers

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How well is sport psychology integrated in academies and professional teams? Do the teams miss out on an important area of development?

Until recently, the sport psychology profession in Denmark was characterized by a diversity of approaches with little overarching consensus on the professional philosophy and intervention strategies among consultants in the field. In 2008, Team Denmark (The Danish Institute for Elite Sport) established a sport psychology team with the aim to enhance the quality and consistency of applied sport psychology services (Henriksen, Hansen & Diment, 2011). However, only few football clubs provide systematic long-term sport psychology services for youth as well as professional players.

Is it about the organizational culture at the clubs?

In order to keep up and stay competitive on national and international levels, there is a need for clubs to recognize that the players' resources and psychological skills are a key factor for

coping in future transitions (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). To do so, clubs need to integrate sport psychology as a part of talent development and the organizational culture of the team and club. However, several external and internal barriers (e.g., financial and team integration issues) seem to restrict the possibilities for a practitioner (i.e., sport psychology consultant) to have a positive impact on teams (Johnson, Andersson, & Fallby, 2011). Internal barriers and the lack of psychology in football could be related to the culture of football. The greatest barriers to using practitioners were found to be lack of knowledge and skepticism about the field, unclear descriptions of services, and problems integrating with the team. British research similarly showed that practitioners are often (and mistakenly) viewed as problem fixers as opposed to architects of hurricane-proof, long-term psychological foundations in athletes (Harwood & Steptoe, 2012). The culture of football at team level is, in many ways, dominated by the coach and his perceptions regarding the integration of psychology as a natural element in the development of footballers. However, Johnson et al. (2011) describe that: "Some coaches also articulated a fear and a negative perception about sport psychology consultants because of a distorted prior knowledge about the potential of sport psychology services, such as perceiving it as "mumbo jumbo" or just about relaxation training in the locker room" (p. 315). This perception of psychology in football can be devastating, as the coach in many ways is the bearer and creator of sport psychology as a part of the organizational culture in the club and team.

Is sport psychology services in football more abstract?

In the international research, the apparent reason for a lack of sport psychology in football could, as suggested, be associated with the culture of football as well as the approach of the practitioner. The field of sport psychology has been slow to involve cultural aspects and broad societal factors or to learn from these relevant sources. However, lately, organizational research in the quest to optimize performance has received considerable attention (Stensaker & Langley, 2010). One of the demands placed on sports organizations is to continually "renew an organization's direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers" (Moran & Brightman, 2001, p. 111). Previous research in talent development has focused on individuals as well as the path to elite level (Stambulova, 2009), and recently more research has focused on a holistic ecological approach of talent development. This results in shifting the focus towards interactions and culture as essential

aspects of successful talent development environments as well as sport psychology delivery in elite sport. Despite the vast amount of research in the area, it seems that psychology, as an element of development in football, is not well developed, which seems to be related to the culture of football. In comparing psychology to other developmental areas of football, we can see that physical trainers work on tangible and valued aspects of training (physical dimensions = hard science), while psychologists are involved with a less objective and more abstract area of development (psychological dimensions = soft science) (Dosit, 2006). Because it is difficult to establish major structural changes to systems, it is difficult to embed sport psychology as this would entail major changes in football, however both coaches and players have been ignorant of its existence (Johnson et al., 2011; Dosit, 2006). Sport psychology is perceived as one of the factors that is essential to peak performance in sport, despite the fact that few people systematically train this aspect of development (Johnson et al., 2011; Dosit, 2006).

Building a foundation for sport psychology in Danish football?

Last week Team Denmark, the Danish FA and University of Southern Denmark – LET's organized the third seminar on football psychology. We hosted 72 participants across 18 clubs across the Danish Premier League, 1. Division mens and womens elite. National coaches, coordinators, and staff, Danish FA, sport psychologists, researchers, students, teachers and municipalities. The purpose for of the seminars is to build sport psychology literacy and inspire the participants to integrate sport psychology as a part of everyday practice. The program consisted of five practitioners and researchers in football psychology. Daniel Ransom, sport psychologist at Manchester United described the pathway from academy to the Premier League. Daniel Ekvall, sport psychologist at the Swedish FA, illustrated sport psychology at the Swedish National Team and his experiences from the World Championships in Russia. Additionally, Vana Hutter, assistant professor Vrije University and Mark Nesti, Liverpool John Moores University and 20 years as an applied sport psychologist in Everton, Arsenal, Chelsea showcased research and applied experiences of how to develop mental health in football academies in Holland and England and Denmark. In Denmark there are established research units with a focus on psychology in elitesport but listening to the presenters at the seminar, we are still lacking behind and about 10 years behind England in applying sport psychology in football. Even though that sport psychology is starting to get

accepted alongside physical training in clubs, there are sport psychologist related to clubs, but usually short term and not a regular part of the staff of the teams and club. Even though that the initiatives are positive, there are problems regarding integration of sport psychology as part of the club culture and the clubs in Denmark miss out on development and a major resource for talented and professional footballers. Nevertheless, we will continue to inspire coaches, clubs and sport psychologist and next year we will focus on sport psychology delivery from youth to senior at Rasenballsport Leipzig.

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