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Article in *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action* · September 2010

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Applying Sport Psychology in Business: A Narrative Commentary and Bibliography

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This article provides a commentary on the application of sport psychology in business. The narrative is signposted to and interspersed by a series of tables that direct the interested reader to a bibliography of the topics discussed. After noting the early popular books and professional articles on the sport-business link, the focus turns to the main conclusions that can be drawn from the academic literature, in particular from the reflective papers and research studies in this area. An important message to emerge is that collaborations between professional service suppliers and scientific research groups appear to present the most robust opportunities to further understanding of the sport-business link.

KEYWORDS *elite, excellence, performance enhancement, performance psychology, sport-business*

The worlds of sport and business have been closely linked for as long as anyone alive today can remember. Major sports are big business, involving big cities, big egos, and big bucks. On the other hand, big business—indeed, all business—can be viewed as sport. Scan any popular business periodical and you will find at least one article or advertisement about coaching and team-work in business. Or listen to the sportslike [sic] language used by people in business. (Keidel, 1985, p. 1)

The study and practice of the psychology of human performance has been an area of fascination for many years. Over the past few decades this

Received 30 August 2010; accepted 4 December 2010.

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TABLE 1 Performance Psychology—Academic Books and Papers

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- Gould, D. (2002). Moving beyond the psychology of athletic excellence. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 14*, 247–248.
- Hays, K. F., & Brown, C. H., Jr. (2004). *You're on! Consulting for peak performance*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Hays, K. F. (2006). Being fit: The ethics of practice diversification in performance psychology. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 37*, 223–232.
- Terry, T. (2008, February). Performance psychology: Being the best, the best you can be, or just a little better? *InPsych, 8*–11.
- Hays, K. F. (Ed.). (2009). *Performance psychology in action*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Vernon, D. (2009). *Human potential: Exploring techniques used to enhance human performance*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Aoyagi, M. W., & Portenga, S. T. (2010). The role of positive ethics and virtues in the context of sport and performance psychology service delivery. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 41*, 253–258.
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interest has intensified and, as attention has focused on the factors associated with performance excellence, the field of sport psychology has played an influential role in the generation and application of knowledge (see Table 1). The quotation above from Keidel's book, *Game Plans: Sports Strategies for Business*, illustrates the close link between sport and another prominent performance domain, business. Sport-business analogies and phrases, such as “the corporate athlete,” “from the locker room to the boardroom,” and “trading-in the tracksuit for the pinstripe,” appeared in a variety of popular books and professional articles published in the latter part of the last century (see Table 2) and have been the *raison d'être* for the discipline of performance psychology. In this article, I provide a commentary on the literature on the link between sport and business, reflect on where we are now in our understanding, and speculate about what the future holds for this exciting area of performance psychology. The narrative is signposted to and interspersed by a series of tables that direct the interested reader to a bibliography of the topics discussed.

In the mid-1990s, reflective papers on the sport-business analogy began to emerge in the academic literature (see Table 3) as scholars sought to identify the specific areas in which links could be drawn between the two domains. In 1995, McNutt and Wright discussed the parallels between sport and business, and examined methods of sport success and their application in the business world. They identified the following three areas as common links between both domains:

1. *Open communication*: Communication must be clear and honest.
2. *Team unity*: Refers to the cohesiveness of a unit and stresses that in order to be effective as a team, everyone must work together.

TABLE 2 The Sport-Business Link—Early Popular Books and Professional Articles

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- Keidel, R. (1985). *Game plans: Sports strategies for business*. New York, NY: E. P. Dutton.
- Loehr, J., & McLaughlin, P. J. (1986). *Mentally tough: The principles of winning at sports applied to winning in business*. New York, NY: M. Evans & Co.
- Lansing, R. L. (1989). Football coaches lessons learned can lead your team to victory. *Management Review*, 78, 14–15.
- Dick, F. (1992). *Winning: Motivation for business, sport and life*. Richmond, UK: Abingdon.
- Hopkins, R., & Kleiner, B. (1993). How to be an effective coach in business. *Agency Sales Magazine*, 23, 57–61.
- Martin, D., & Martin, R. (Eds.). (1993). *TeamThink: Using the sports connection to develop, motivate, and manage a winning business team*. New York, NY: Dutton.
- Miller, J. B., & Brown, P. B. (1993). *The corporate coach: How to build a team of loyal customers and happy employees*. New York, NY: St Martin's.
- Riley, P. (1994). *The winner within: A life plan for team players*. New York, NY: Berkley.
- Carling, W., & Heller, R. (1995). *The way to win: Strategies for success in business and sport*. London, UK: Little, Brown & Co.
- Didinger, R. (Ed.). (1995). *Game plans for success: Winning strategies for business and life from ten top NFL head coaches*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co.
- Sommer, R. B. (Ed.). (1996). *The winning spirit: Achieving Olympic level performance in business and personal advancements*. Santa Ana, CA: Griffin.
- Murphy, S. (1996). *The achievement zone: Eight skills for winning all the time from the playing field to the boardroom*. New York, NY: Putnam.
- Perry, J. M., & Perry, J. (1997). *In the zone: Achieving optimal performance in business as in sports*. Lincolnwood, IL: Contemporary Books.
- Wooden, J. R., & Jamison, S. (1997). *Wooden: A lifetime of observations and reflections on and off the court*. Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books.
- Gerson, R. F. (1998). *Winning the inner game of selling: How sports psychology turns ordinary salespeople into extraordinary salespeople*. Cambridge, MA: Course Technology Inc.
- Gibson, C., Pratt, M., Roberts, K., & Weymus, E. (2000). *Peak performance: Business lessons from the World's top sports organizations*. London, UK: HarperCollins.
- Groppel, J. L. (2000). *The corporate athlete: How to achieve maximal performance in business and life*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Loehr, J., & Schwartz, T. (2001, January). The making of a corporate athlete. *Harvard Business Review*, 120–128.
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3. *Employee/player recognition*: Managers and coaches must not be afraid of congratulating employees and players and recognizing their efforts in some way.

Following a series of case studies with sports coaches and consultants, McNutt and Wright outlined the implications for the practice of business managements in the following areas: recruiting, training and initiation, job rotations, performance appraisals, reward/pay structures, and career planning. In an article summarizing his keynote lecture at the Annual Conference of the North American Society for Sport Management, Trevor Slack (1996) observed that, “sport, as many commentators have noted, is big business . . . and big business is heavily involved in sport” (p. 97). He argued that sport management and the broader field of management have much to learn

TABLE 3 The Sport-Business Link—Academic Reflective Papers

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- McNutt, R., & Wright, P. C. (1995). Coaching your employees: Applying sports analogies to business. *Executive Development*, 8, 27–32.
- Slack, T. (1996). From the locker room to the board room: Changing the domain of sport management. *Journal of Sport Management*, 10, 97–105.
- Foster, S. (2002). Enhancing peak potential in managers and leaders: Integrating knowledge and findings from sport psychology. In R. L. Lowman (Ed.), *The California School of Organizational Studies handbook of organizational consulting psychology: A comprehensive guide to theory, skills and techniques* (pp. 212–231). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
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- Lindvall, P. (2004). The coach as an asset in the business setting: No brain no gain. *Journal of Excellence*, 10, 80–85.
- Lloyd, P. J., & Foster, S. L. (2006). Creating healthy, high-performance workplaces: Strategies from health and sports psychology. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 58, 23–39.
- Adler, R. (2006). Putting sport into organizations: The role of the accountant. *Business Horizons*, 49, 31–39.
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- Ievleva, L., & Terry, P. C. (2008). Applying sport psychology to business. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 3, 8–18.
- Adcroft, A., & Teckman, J. (2008a). A new look at the sports paradigm for business: Performing isn't enough. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 29, 38–43.
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- Fletcher, D., & Wagstaff, C. (2009). Organizational psychology in elite sport: Its emergence, application and future. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10, 427–434.
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from one another. In her book chapter, Foster (2002) discussed the potential contribution of sport psychology principles and techniques to consulting best practices with individual managers and leaders, and work teams. She reviewed the literature on the skill transfer from sport to business settings, together with the relevant empirical findings from the area of positive psychology. In particular, she focused on five major skills of mental training:

1. *Mental imagery*: The ability to form images of things or events in one's mind .
2. *Performance routines*: Personal routines to optimize one's preparation for performance.
3. *Positive self-talk*: Internal dialogue that is positive, self-affirming, and that internally guides successful behavior.
4. *Activation control strategies*: The ability to be self-composed under pressure.
5. *Focus and sustaining attention*: Clarity of long-range goals and focus on tactical plans.

Foster concluded that “organizational consultants have much to gain from becoming familiar with the five major mental training skills [of sport psychology]” (p. 225). Jones (2002) discussed similar issues in his personal perspectives on the link between sport and business. However, rather than focusing on mental training skills, he identified five other areas in which direct links can be drawn between the two domains:

1. *Organizational issues*: These often act as a constraint on performance and are commonly a major, unwanted distraction.
2. *Stress*: Stress is a major issue in sport and business and its management is very important.
3. *Leadership*: Leaders are dependent on their people to deliver and have a significant impact people’s attitudes.
4. *High-performing teams*: Important to consider how newly formed teams can be developed into high-performing teams.
5. *One-to-one coaching/consulting*: The ability to work in a coaching or consultancy capacity is vital in the realization of elite performance.

Jones concluded that “the principles of elite performance in sport are easily transferable to the business context, and also that sport has a considerable amount to learn from the excellence in business” (2002, p. 279).

These papers spurred a flurry of academic publications examining different aspects of the sport-business link. Lindvall (2004) investigated the effectiveness of leaders using a coaching approach based on communicative strategies to enhance performance. In their discussion of creating healthy, high-performance workplaces, Lloyd and Foster (2006) integrated strategies from health and sport psychology to enhance employee well-being and performance. They focused on the same five mental skills as Foster (2002): performance routines, the capacity to focus and concentrate, mental imagery, self-talk, and activation control. Adler (2006) examined how organizations can promote in their employees similarly high levels of interest, motivation, and fun that participants in sport commonly experience. They focused on the role accountants can play in enhancing employees’ experiences. The following year, Gordon (2007) summarized Jones’s (2002) views on the sport-business link and identified five possible collaborative research areas between the domains:

1. *Mental toughness*: The ability to thrive on pressure is critical in sport and business.
2. *Job stress*: Stress associated with professional sport and business has the potential to affect both health and performance.
3. *Burnout*: Long-term exhaustion and diminished interest is a potentially devastating outcome for elite performers.

4. *Life development and personal excellence interventions*: For elite performers, maintaining balance in their lives can be difficult and requires support from others.
5. *Leadership and motivation*: Modern approaches to leadership are required to excel and sustain motivation over long periods of time.

Following a brief discussion summarizing advice that some elite sport leaders have for business leaders, Gordon presented a case study applying principles of transformational leadership in professional cricket. Ievleva and Terry (2008) highlighted and elaborated upon points of intersection and divergence between the psychology of peak performance in the worlds of sport and business. They presented Orlick's (2008) Wheel of Excellence as a vehicle for illustrating how a performance psychology model might be transferred from the sport world and applied to the business world. In a series of papers on the sport-business link, Adcroft and Teckman presented a model illustrating the difference between performing and competing (2008a), examined its explanatory potential in the Rugby World Cup (2008b), and argued that sport should be taken seriously in the business and management world (2009). Although the trend in the academic literature has generally been to attempt to transfer knowledge from sport to business, a recent review paper by Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) chartered the emergence and application of organizational psychology in elite sport, lending support to Jones's (2002) assertion that sport also has much to learn from business principles.

Whilst the above academic reflective papers provide an element of credence to the sport-business analogy, there are surprisingly few original research studies in this area. This is probably due to the difficulty in accessing elite performers to participate in such work—a dilemma which is compounded if one wishes to sample individuals from multiple performance domains, such as sport and business. Nevertheless, it is important that researchers persevere because if the field of performance psychology is to progress then the hypothesized links between domains need to be tested and evidence gathered using rigorously designed research. Only three studies have explicitly sought to explore this area (see Table 4). In 1999,

TABLE 4 The Sport-Business Link—Research Studies

Kellett, P. (1999). Organizational leadership: Lessons from professional coaches. <i>Sport Management Journal</i> , 2, 150–171.
Weinberg, R., & McDermott, M. (2002). A comparative analysis of sport and business organizations: Factors perceived as critical for organizational success. <i>Journal of Applied Sport Psychology</i> , 14, 282–298.
Jones, G., & Spooner, K. (2006). Coaching high achievers. <i>Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research</i> , 58, 40–50.

Kellett recognized that “professional sport seems to provide a close analog to corporate environments” (1999, p. 150) and interviewed 12 professional football coaches about the role of leadership in their work. Although the coaches discussed the close relationships they had with the assistant staff and their players, they were reticent to describe their activities as leadership or themselves as leaders. The coaches did, however, talk about facilitating and empowering players to develop and become leaders themselves.

In developing this line of inquiry, Weinberg and McDermott (2002) interviewed ten sports coaches and ten business executives regarding what makes a successful organization with a focus on group dynamics, including leadership, group cohesion, and communication. Results revealed that most sport and business leaders were in agreement on the factors relating to organizational success. The main leadership factors were:

- *Leader characteristics*: Honesty, consistency, decisiveness, and organized.
- *Interpersonal skills*: Emphasize with others, interact with others, good listener, and trustworthy.
- *Leadership style*: Democratic, autocratic, and situational.

An important theme to emerge was the ability to flexibly employ various leadership styles, an approach which appears to require interpersonal competencies such as listening, empathy and trust. The main group cohesion factors were:

- *Benefits of cohesion*: Working together as team, common goals, and a positive working environment.
- *Types of cohesion*: Task and social cohesion.
- *People enhancing cohesion*: Role acceptance and mutual respect.
- *Techniques fostering cohesion*: Shared vision and belief in final objective.
- *Barriers to cohesion*: Personality differences and communication failures.

These factors highlight the influential role of antecedents (e.g., role acceptance, mutual respect, and a shared vision) and barriers (e.g., personality differences, social pressures, and communication failures) to developing cohesive groups in sport and business. The main communication factors were:

- *Message characteristics*: Concise and clear, frequent and honest, and positive information.
- *Communication benefits*: Open discussion.
- *Communication techniques*: Reflective learning.
- *Communication barriers*: Ambiguity, poor listening skills, lack of time, and personal barriers.

The importance of communication to organizational success was illustrated by the participants citing numerous examples of how these factors could “make or break” an organization’s effectiveness. In the only other study to examine the sport-business link, Jones and Spooner (2006) interviewed high achievers in sport and business to identify common characteristics that are important to take into account when coaching them, their coaching needs, and the key implications for the practice of coaching them. The findings suggested that a “one-size-fits-all” approach to coaching may be inappropriate and a number of factors need to be taken into account when coaching high achievers. Of fundamental importance is the need to establish a coaching relationship built on trust and mutual respect. The impact of the coaching is determined by a number of factors, including the coach being challenging, flexible, and adding value quickly.

What is clear from the findings of these three studies is that links do exist between sport and business domains but, particularly at the highest levels of performance, the transfer of knowledge needs to be conducted with caution and on an individual, case-by-case basis. Furthermore, Ievleva and Terry (2008) highlighted a number of points of divergence between sport and business. Firstly, they noted that the largely visible and objective nature of the sporting arena ensures rapid feedback on performance. Whereas in the business world there tends to be a greater time lag before results are reported and disseminated. Secondly, Ievleva and Terry argued that goal-setting in sports is more straightforward than business due to the complex structure of commercial organizations. Thirdly, they suggested that the rules in sport are clearer than those in business, that the career span of athletes is shorter than most business careers, and that training time versus performance time in sport is in direct contrast to the ratio in business. Hence, despite the clear link between sport and business, important differences exist that should be considered when researching and consulting across performance domains.

Looking to the future, the opportunities for those working in performance psychology are both challenging and exciting. Popular interest in and demand for the principles of performance excellence has grown dramatically in recent years (see Table 5) and the appetite in the business world for transferring such principles from elite sport shows no sign of abating (see Table 6). Indeed, businesses are realizing the power of ‘learning

TABLE 5 Performance Psychology—Popular Books

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- Dweck, C. (2007). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine.
 Colvin, G. (2008). *Talent is overrated: What really separates world-class performers from everybody else*. New York, NY: Portfolio.
 Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: The story of success*. London, UK: Allen Lane.
 Coyle, D. (2009). *The talent code: Greatness isn't born. It's grown*. New York, NY: Bantam.
 Syed, M. (2010). *Bounce: How champions are made*. London, UK: Fourth Estate.
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TABLE 6 The Sport-Business Link—Professional and Autobiographical Books

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- Woodward, C. (2004). *Winning!* Sevenoaks, UK: Hodder and Staughton.
- Bull, S. (2006). *The game plan: Your guide to mental toughness at work*. Chichester, UK: Capstone.
- Jones, G., & Moorhouse, A. (2007). *Developing mental toughness: Gold medal strategies for transforming your business performance*. Begbroke, UK: Spring Hill.
- Gerson, R. F. (2008). *The executive athlete: How sports psychology helps business people become world-class performers*. Amherst, MA: HRD.
- McCormick, J., & Karinch, M. (2009). *Business lessons from the edge: Learn how extreme athletes use intelligent risk taking to succeed in business*. New York NY: McGraw-Hill Professional.
- Miller, S. L. (2009). *Why teams win: Nine keys to success in business, sport and beyond*. Mississauga, Canada: Wiley.
- Coe, S. (2009). *The winning mind: My inside track on great leadership*. London, UK: Headline.
- Murphy, J. (2010). *Inner excellence: Achieve extraordinary business success through mental toughness*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Professional.
- Dick, F. (2010). *Winning matters*. Richmond, UK: Abingdon.
- Redgrave, S. (2010). *Enduring success: How to stay at the top in business*. London, UK: Headline.
-

through metaphor' and that many of principles of performance excellence are universal, regardless of specific domain or culture. Moreover, individuals and organizations offering services in this area are becoming increasingly visible, and a growing number of psychology and management scholars are focusing their research attention on the sport-business link. Partly as a consequence of this popularity, consultants are expected more than ever to provide cutting-edge services, together with supporting evidence for their effects on individual and organizational performance. Similarly, scholars are under more pressure to demonstrate how their research has a positive and direct impact on those operating in multiple performance domains. Hence, for those that wish to remain at the forefront of this field, collaborations between professional service suppliers and scientific research groups appear to present the most robust opportunities to deliver the very highest standards of excellence in all aspects of performance psychology. Groundbreaking research conducted by leading scholars will ensure that products are truly innovative in the marketplace and are based on scientific rigor and evidence.

Such partnerships would likely necessitate different ways of working for both academics and practitioners. At the heart of the collaboration would be effective lines of communication underpinning the research and consultancy processes. In terms of research question generation, it is likely that knowledge development will need to be driven by a "problem-solution" approach that is characterized by the inclusion of a wider range of stakeholders and the joint construction of questions. Some topic areas that appear to merit more comparative research across performance domains include: optimism, hardiness, resilience, proactive personality traits, passion, work engagement,

flow, work-life balance, talent identification and development, career transitions, organizational change, and crisis management. However, rather than the traditional linear scientific process that moves from theory to application, this approach will likely involve a continuous feedback loop until a problem is resolved. Regarding the dissemination of research findings, knowledge transfer will need to go beyond the typical practical recommendations made in academic journals, and consider the production of white papers, popular articles, newsletters, educational workshops and videos, breakfast seminars, and various multimedia (including blogs, podcasts, video seminars, and information depositories). In conclusion, academic-consultancy partnerships offer a compelling proposition for those who wish to lead the generation, application and implementation of knowledge about the psychology of performance excellence.

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