

Sporting Recommendations for Spiritual Encounters: Delivering Sport Psychology inside the English Premier League

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ABSTRACT

Sport psychologists rarely discuss religious belief or spirituality in their work. Where they do, this is most usually in relation to flow and positive experiential states linked to optimal performance. This article argues that other spiritual dimensions, such as courage, sacrifice and suffering can also be encountered in sport, especially at elite and professional levels. By drawing on broader and more holistic approaches to identity in sport it becomes possible to recognise that for some athletes, religious faith and other sources of spirituality are a major source of meaning in their lives. Applied experiences of the author delivering sport psychology counselling inside several English Premier League teams over 9 seasons is used to highlight how spirituality can be encountered in work with elite professional footballers. Existential phenomenological psychology and philosophical personalism are offered as ways in which sport psychology might be able to find a suitable theoretical framework that can accommodate spiritual ideas and renew focus on the person of the athlete.

KEYWORDS

spirituality, identity, phenomenology, person, professional football

Introduction

The topic of sport, religion and spirituality is often seen as a strange and exotic mix. It seems to be something way beyond the concerns of performance sport and also a subject that is both too personal and indeed controversial, to be the focus of academic debate and scrutiny. Certainly it is not something that we would expect to see mentioned in books about professional sport, although it may be more accepted in writing about the martial arts, climbing and extreme sports. In some ways this reflects the increasing ghettoization of spiritual and religious life from the everyday world that Pieper (1998) has claimed is a major feature of modern societies. Taking this idea to sport we can see that for some activities (usually those considered counter cultural, risky and highly individualistic) it may be possible to talk about them being linked to a spiritual dimension in some vague way. But this is usually less acceptable where the focus is on more traditional and conventional sporting pursuits.

Where ideas around spirituality, religious belief and identity have been considered in the academic sports literature, it has usually been within the domain of philosophy. Sport psychology has been far more reluctant to accept this topic as being a proper area for study and research or as something that can impact on practice. Despite this, a number of popular books such as those of Tim

Gallwey (1974 1986) have sold in great numbers across the world. His work addresses the psychology of learning and coaching in tennis, skiing and golf by drawing on philosophical and psychological factors from Zen, Buddhism and other Eastern approaches to spirituality.

The idea that spirituality can in some way be connected to performance and high levels of achievement in professional sport has rarely been acknowledged in the academic literature of sport psychology. However, if we look at practice in professional sport a different picture emerges. It could be argued that the term, spirit (if not always spirituality), is frequently mentioned by coaches, athletes and spectators as something of vital importance to success in sport, especially at the most elevated levels. How have we come to this strange state of affairs, where a coach will publicly talk about their pride in witnessing the spirit showed by players to overcome adversity, and sport psychologists' claim that the concept is a myth (Crust 2006)? Some have suggested that there has been a problem around interpretation and translation. This position supports the idea that spirit is somewhat of an old fashioned and vague term for more modern sounding scientific constructs like confidence, self-belief and motivation. This would be all very compelling, except that there is an increasing body of multidisciplinary scholarly work and accounts from the real world of performance sport that offers a coherent challenge to this view. For example, Parry, Nesti and Watson (2011) have gathered together chapters in their book from sport philosophers, psychologists, coaches, sport historians and others, which describe how spirituality can be experienced in sport at all levels and differing circumstances.

Sport psychology and phenomenology

Some of the earliest work in the sport psychology literature on spirituality and sport includes the research carried out by Ravizza (1977) and the seminal work of Murphy and White (1995). This particular text contains a review of over 1000 studies in sport where participants reported experiences that were described as, "mystical, occult, or religious" (Murphy and White 1995, p. 4). However, despite this, the dominant view in sport psychology continues to be that spiritual states do not exist since they cannot be measured and verified empirically.

Empiricism has long been the bedrock of applied sport psychology research and practice. There has been a drive to base the discipline on a reductionist science and a materialist philosophy where only what can be seen, quantified and measured is accepted as real. In this, sport psychology has to a large extent been uncritically following its older and more established sibling, the academic discipline of psychology. Without a challenge to this approach there would appear to be little hope that spirituality can enter the mainstream and be taken seriously by sport psychologists in their work. However, we may be about to see a new development that could provide considerable impetus to the study of spirituality in sport. The growing interest in phenomenology across a number of academic disciplines related to sport (Parry and Martinkova in press) means that spirituality and spiritual concepts may be easier to study and research. This should also make it more acceptable to discuss spirituality within the world of applied sport psychology practice.

Phenomenological psychology involves accessing data from the "Lebenswelt," or lived world of the sports performer. This data is therefore not exclusively objective (whatever that may mean in psychology!) and neither is it purely subjective and only about feelings. Emerging in the form of rich descriptions from the research participants and athletes themselves, it represents a synthesis of objective and subjective data, and is therefore an attempt to avoid the dichotomy of feeling versus thinking. Phenomenology is about access to the *real phenomenon* prior to artificial attempts to separate mind from body, cognitions from emotions. This methodology was introduced into philosophy and the social sciences by Husserl (1970). It seeks to capture the person's experience in its totality, as it stands, and as it is presented to them. Accounts of the spiritual in sport psychology can be more easily acquired where we use phenomenological methods. This is because they are based on a holistic view of human being-one that describes us as being a unity of mind, body and spirit.

Consistent with this holistic heritage, phenomenological psychology is solely interested in gathering descriptions provided by the participants. It differs from other methodologies and methods in psychology by its refusal to collect data where this is guided by pre-determined theoretical perspectives. It represents an attempt to gain direct access to events and experiences without using indirect scientific tools like psychometric tests, questionnaires, or neurophysiological instruments. Although there remain many competing views about how to engage in phenomenological research and even if this can be carried out at all, the value of this approach for practice is easier to see. Phenomenology could provide sport psychologists with an authentically holistic underpinning philosophy that supports their applied practice, something which arguably is absent from the discipline.

This paper will now examine the concept of spirituality by discussing the psychology of identity in sport. This has usually been conceived as something that can be measured easily, and which is tied closely to roles and responsibilities. A different conceptualisation of identity will be outlined in this paper. Identity will be considered from various strands of existential phenomenological thought that describe human beings as subjects capable of agency. These approaches stress that we are a paradox of constant change fused onto a permanent self. This perspective is closely connected to the philosophical movement known as *personalism* (Bialy 2011). Using a number of ideas from existential phenomenological psychology, tomistic personalism and existential personalism (Bialy 2011), we will look at examples drawn from sport psychology practice with English Premier League players to discuss how spiritual matters can be experienced in their lives as elite professional footballers. Finally, brief consideration will be given to how phenomenology and openness to ideas around spirituality could change applied engagement and practice in sport psychology. This development could help sport psychologists acknowledge that spiritual issues and religious belief are sometimes of great importance in the lives of their clients and research participants.

Identity in sport psychology

As one of the most influential sport psychologists of the past 40 years, Martens (1979 1987) called on sport psychology to remember at all times who it was meant to be serving. He reminded researchers, as well as those doing applied work, not to forget that athletes are only people who play sport, not people who are only athletes. This has been translated over the years and enshrined in the maxim: the person first – the athlete second! However, a survey of much of what has been published in the sport psychology literature during the last few decades suggests that we may need a new Martens to remind us about what this should involve. Few of our studies, including surprisingly some using qualitative research, appear to be about persons, although they are often about subjects, participants, individuals and teams. There are many possible explanations for this situation; however I would like to focus on one in particular. The concept of person has not been adequately examined within sport psychology. The word, individual, is seen as synonymous with that of person. However, it has been argued that individualism “is centred on the self as something capable of *absolute freedom*” whereas, “the spiritual concept of the person is based on an ethic of self-giving, altruism and a freedom bounded by responsibility to others” (Nesti 2007, p. 137). This notion of the person as an embodied spiritual being is very different to the traditional view adopted by research in sport psychology. This tends to describe the sports performer in terms of emotions and cognitions which are thought to represent the sum total of what it means to be a human being. Such a view would advocate that we do things in sport (and elsewhere) because our thoughts and feelings tell us to. This deterministic paradigm underpins behaviourist, trait and cognitive theories in psychology, and holds an almost unassailable position within sport psychology. Such a foundation makes it impossible from a logical point of view to speak about important concepts like the self, willpower, courage and even love. None of these terms can be addressed satisfactorily without recognition that we are persons capable of the consciously free act. Or as the phenomenologist’s would say, we have at least some

measure of freedom to act beyond our environmental histories, feelings and thoughts. They refer to this as situated freedom.

Identity in sport psychology based on this account of the person brings a very different picture into view. It opens up the possibility of considering identity from a truly holistic vantage point, one that acknowledges that we are an “inextricable intermixture” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 518) of determined being and freedom. This echoes the descriptions that can be found in both Eastern and Western traditions over the millennia; that we are beings made up of mind, body and *spirit*.

Research in sport psychology has tended to discuss identity almost exclusively from the perspective of trait psychology. Identity has been described in terms of athletic identity; the degree to which someone associates themselves with their role as an athlete. This is typically measured by use of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer Van Raalte and Linder 1993). Scores are taken as indication of how strongly an individual sees their identity as being bound up with their sporting lives. The literature makes it quite clear that where an athlete views themselves exclusively in terms of their athletic identity there can be very negative consequences upon retirement. In addition, recent work (Brown Potrac 2009) suggests that this can also contribute to serious psychological issues in the case of elite youth footballers who are released by their clubs having failed to progress to professional first team levels.

However, accounts derived from practice seem to challenge this narrow approach to identity in sport. Drawing on over 9 seasons delivering confidential, individual sport psychology counselling sessions inside English Premier League (EPL) clubs, Nesti and Littlewood (2009) claimed that for elite professional footballers at least, identity is frequently more complex and varied than the account that emerges from trait based research in sport. They suggest that players often see their identity as being made up of many differing roles, and that crucially, they are fully committed to each of these. In my own applied work inside EPL clubs at first team levels I have found that many players claim that they are equally footballers, fathers, sons, husbands and other roles too. And often, they are keen to emphasise that who they *really* are is not dictated to by their place in sport-something they know only too well is transitory and usually subject to violent change.

Identity that is based on more than who you are at any one moment is not merely something that could help the player adjust to retirement when this inevitably arises. Of maybe even greater importance, such an identity may be essential to be able to deal successfully with the threats and challenges that are part of everyday life as a professional athlete. Being a professional footballer *and* a person is not only something that sounds balanced and ethically appealing! In my experience it helps the player to confront the real issues that threaten their professional identity: being injured; experiencing prolonged de-selection; being sent on loan; put up for sale; or castigated in the local and national media.

Such assaults on personal and professional identity often cannot be addressed through use of mental skills techniques such as visualisation or goal setting. As Corlett (1996a) has identified, attempts to provide quick fix technical solutions tend to fail because the issue is not about managing symptoms but about the person themselves. Mental skills training has contributed to a de personalised sport psychology where the accent is on sorting out problems rather than helping the person. Depending on the issues, sometimes support may be more useful where it helps the athlete to understand themselves and their situation more fully. This clarification process can frequently be a slow and challenging experience. Sometimes it can identify some forms of intervention that may be useful, or it could reveal that the task is to face up to difficulties armed with a deeper recognition of what these demand personally and professionally. Beyond this type of support, guidance from family and friends can help, although this is sometimes too general and unconditional to truly hit the mark.

In my experience it is often when players encounter these fraught and highly challenging occasions that they remind themselves that they are more than just a professional footballer. As a sport psychologist drawing on existential phenomenological psychology and personalistic traditions in

philosophy (Bialy 2011) I am encouraged when players ask deeper questions at these critical moments (Nesti 2010); questions about whom they are and what is really important to them. These important matters about the psychology of identity clearly touch on values, self-knowledge and meaning (Frankl 1984).

Religious and spiritual identity

During confidential sport psychology counselling sessions with EPL players there have been many examples where they have claimed that religious and spiritual beliefs are an important and integral part of their identity. This may appear to be quite a surprise given that EPL football is such a commercially strong entity and players are usually extremely well rewarded financially (Brady, Bolchover and Sturgess 2008). Professional football at this level appears to be based on materialism and dominated by materialistic perspectives and values. However, it should be remembered that the EPL is very much a global league where typically over 65% of the first team squad come from countries outside of the UK. For many of these overseas players, an active religious faith is often the most important source of personal meaning in their lives. During sport psychology counselling sessions with players, they have sometimes claimed that they have been able to maintain motivation and correct focus during difficult critical moments by reminding themselves of God's unconditional love for them. They have explained this in terms of being aware that despite the threats to their identity (something frequently experienced in the often brutal, utilitarian and ruthless world of professional football) they are secure in knowing that they are still loved by God irrespective of how others treat them or perceive them. As one player described this: "I am more than merely a footballer, more even than just me, myself; I am a relationship with the ultimate source of my being who is God".

For the coaching, sport science and other support staff in professional football and at the EPL clubs I have worked at, there is sometimes a lack of understanding about different religions and what these mean to the players who hold these faiths. This lack of knowledge arguably can be seen in the broader culture to some extent. In the UK context religious belief is diminishing rapidly (Fforde 2009). Despite this decline though, it remains quite common for the support staff in professional clubs to appreciate how important a religious faith can be to players, especially during difficult times.

There has been a tradition for many years in professional football, including at EPL clubs, to provide a club chaplain. This individual will be available to work with all players and staff irrespective of their beliefs and religious affiliations. Usually from a mainstream Christian denomination, they operate on a voluntary basis and are often a vital part of the pastoral support at the club. There seems to be a genuine awareness by the staff and the club's themselves that chaplains can provide players (and staff) with something very different to the other support mechanisms in place. This work is usually welcomed by the staff despite their uncertainty about how it can be carried out, why it is so different to the roles of others, and their lack of in depth knowledge about different forms of religious belief. It is somewhat ironic that often there is a greater respect for, and toleration of, religious belief inside football clubs than may be the case in the wider world outside. Support staff and coaches see the value some players place in having a living faith. For the most part they are prepared to accept this graciously and can see that in some deeper way, this spiritual set of beliefs often makes the person the player they are.

Of course, spiritual ideas and terminology can be discussed that are not related to religion necessarily. Religion is one way of being spiritual. Teadale (1999) offers a way of distinguishing between religious and human spirituality. He points out that: "Not every religious person is spiritual (although they ought to be) and not every spiritual person is religious" (Teadale 1999, pp. 17-18). Pieper (1995) has made a further the distinction between human spirit and religious spirituality. He claims that human spirit is seen in acts like courage, selflessness and love. Each of these can be described as spiritual because they can only be understood if we include reference to the idea of free will. As Corlett (1996b) has pointed out, courage is not something we are driven to, or forced into

through circumstances. Courage has a personal dimension to it-it involves a choice to do something that may or may not succeed, and where failure will usually be uncomfortable or worse. Other words that contain both a spiritual and psychological component are sacrifice, self-knowledge, suffering and humility. Although these terms may not be mentioned explicitly by players during sport psychology encounters they are often woven into the dialogue that ensues. For example, maintaining a sense of humility is extremely important in a sport where at the highest levels players make huge sums of money and are feted as celebrities. Pieper (1965) explains that humility involves maintaining a correct perception of the truth about a situation and keeping close to reality. In more modern terms we sometimes refer to this as, 'being grounded.' This is an important spiritual and psychological quality that will help players maintain a balanced focus during their greatest moments and inevitable failures. This account suggests that humility is essential for those staff and players who wish to fulfill their talent over the long term in EPL football.

Recent work by Pisk (2011) has referred to the value of temperance in sport. This virtue, which again cannot be understood without referring to human spirit, has been defined as a 'form of balanced self-denial' (Pisk 2011, p. 58). Described in these terms it is very easy to see that temperance is necessary to be able to perform with total commitment and intensity over many years in the public eye. This is even more of an important virtue to acquire given that in the EPL many players are so wealthy that they will never have to work again when they leave the sport. Learning the psychological skills and qualities associated with acquiring the spiritual virtue of temperance is something that ought to be constantly pursued by players who wish to perform at the highest tier of the game over many years.

These words and other spiritual concepts have been the cornerstone of my applied sport psychology work in elite professional football. Alongside a little work on mental skills training and building self-awareness, many of my sessions are shot through with dialogue about values, human spirit and meaning. For some in psychology and sport psychology the view is that these topics are best left to philosophers and have no place in performance enhancement focused work. In order to address this failing, Giorgi (2004) has argued that the discipline needs to reconceive itself as a human science rather than a natural science. This would enable psychology to study and take seriously those ideas and concepts that can only be adequately understood in concert with the notion of human agency or free will.

Sport psychology practice

In attempting to meet Martens' earlier clarion call, I include ideas from existential personalism and other related perspectives in my practice. This allows me to orient my sport psychology counselling approach towards work with the person. This approach describes a person as being someone who is capable of a free act and making authentic choices, despite always being influenced by their emotions, temperament and past experiences. In relation to personalism, a very important recent paper by Bialy (2011) discussed the apparent conflict between professional sport behaviour and morality. Bialy has argued that at the level of empirical reality, fair play does not appear very evident in professional sport and that a more personalist perspective could slowly begin to resolve this problem. As a sport psychologist operating in EPL football, Bialy's reflection on the importance of personalism has real practical value. It provides an intellectually coherent account of why it is legitimate to talk about the importance of sacrifice, choice and responsibility in sport psychology work with players. A sport psychology informed by personalism gives a framework that could guide practice and applied research. It helps us understand why resistance to individualism; that is being a self-centred, selfish player, and objections to collectivism; that is being a player who avoids their responsibilities and 'hides in the crowd', are both deeply unhelpful to the team and destructive to the person.

In relation to counselling practice with EPL players I find that Buber's (1958) account of an encounter is of immense practical assistance. He explains that in order to see your client as a person it is necessary that we approach them as a *Thou*. This is contrasted with a form of dialogue where we treat the other person as an object, or as an *It* in Buber's terms. This means that to have an authentically personal dialogue with someone we must go beyond their role, personality type and history and attend fully to their *person*. An *I-Thou* mode of communication involves: "an unguarded self-giving of one person to another. This is closely related to the personality of the sport psychology consultant, and their capacity to maintain an attitude of 'disponibilite' (Marcel 1948) or spiritual availability" (Watson and Nesti 2005, p. 236). In my experience, many elite professional footballers welcome an approach that whilst grounded in practice aimed at enhancing performance attempts to meet them at a personal level. When sport psychologists fail to treat players as persons and see them as merely rich celebrity footballers, they tend to withdraw from the support offered and reject the advice given.

Conclusion

The spiritual in sport psychology has been most usually associated with peak experiences, flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1996), being in the zone, and other kinds of positive states that accompany optimal performance. Unfortunately, and especially at the top where extrinsic rewards like money and fame can undermine intrinsic motivation, professional sports performers must deliver when they are not in the zone, and where they are experiencing the discomfort of existential anxiety (Nesti 2004), pain, sacrifice and even suffering. The study of sport and spirituality must include these elements since these are an important part of the lived world of the elite athlete. This is not a demand to replace positive thinking with negative, but to find a middle way that more faithfully captures real lives. Adhering to this will make sports psychologists more attractive not less to professional sport, where after all, most athletes already possess excellent mental skills (Gould 2002) and good self-awareness. And eventually, maybe sport psychology and more sport psychologists will be able to attend to Martens' warning-to work with the whole person in order to assist them in some small way on their journey to personal growth and fulfillment through sport!

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