

Review article

A four-year chronology with National Team Boxing in Canada

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Abstract

Applied sport psychologists tend to begin their consulting relationships with national teams having formalized skills, and often, limited contextual and sport-specific understanding. The present report overviews the first four years of a long-term consulting relationship one practitioner developed with the Canadian National Boxing Team. From the vantage of an applied sport psychology consultant, I overview how a limited consulting role expanded into increased responsibilities and opportunities. Suggestions are provided for the aspiring sport psychology consultant interested in working with athletes and coaches within the combative sport of elite amateur boxing.

Key words: Boxing, national team, consulting.

Introduction

Combative sports are perhaps, among the most suited disciplines for applied sport psychology. The aspiring boxer for instance, is rewarded twice for optimal performance stemming from confidence, courage, and pre-bout planning. On one level, the boxer is rewarded by control of the ring, the bout, and following, the outcome. On a second level, there is the satisfaction of a well-executed bout, leading to improved skills and cumulative efficacy. In contrast, the dominated boxer also experiences her / his outcome on at least two levels. There is the psychological and emotional consequence of a poorly executed performance and also, there are the physiological consequences, both varying in severity and duration. In short it could take the athlete as little as one day and as long as an entire career to recover psychologically from one bout and proceed to the next. Herein it is suggested that sport psychology has a role to play in terms of the progress and recovery of aspiring boxers, though only when mental training consultants immerse themselves and learn their role within the larger context of boxing.

There is a clear and recently documented need for applied sport psychology services within the combative sports in general (e.g., Galloway, 2006), and pertaining to the present report, boxing in specific (see also Lane, 2006; Schinke, 2005). The present report is one of several in a second annual special edition within the Journal of Sport Science and Medicine. Pertaining to the topic, the process of becoming an effective consultant within the world of boxing requires more than formalized mental training skills. The process requires time, time to understand the sport as a discipline, and time to understand the athletes, coaches, and contextual players who can and do affect performance. Within the present report, it is my

goal to overview how one applied sport psychology consultant gained entry and developed the necessary skills to assist amateur athletes at the international level during the initial 4 years of a 9-year tenure. Rather than approaching this report as a prescriptive document, my experiences will be relayed as a descriptive story, one with successes and setbacks founded on my interpretation of events.

The Team's history previous history

I first became aware of Canada's National Boxing Team while viewing them on television during the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. What stood out in my mind was the conviction with which Canada's boxers fought each bout. There were standout performances that resonate in my memories even today, including the success stories of Willie Dewitt (Olympic Gold medal) and Shaun O'Sullivan (Olympic Silver medal). At the time, I was a national team member in equestrian, and had no idea that my life would intersect with the boxing world, a world very different from my own. From 1984 – 1996, Canada's Olympic Boxing Team claimed medals at each consecutive major game (Olympics included). That said, during the same time period, there was a steady decline in Olympic performance among the team's athletes (5 in 1988, 3 in 1992, and 1 in 1996).

During the trip home from employment at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, from an airport television, I witnessed what was the final Olympic medal awarded to a Canadian boxer to present day. What I recall is a fearful performance and a convincing loss suffered at the hands of a Cuban athlete. As I observed the performance with interest, it was clear that I was witnessing an emotionally and physiologically overwhelmed athlete. It was clear in his posture, which was slumped over, and also in the athlete's lack of belief and conviction in any chance of winning. Throughout the bout, though I did not know anything of boxing other than its entertainment value, it was apparent that one boxer controlled the ring from the center (the Cuban). The second athlete (the Canadian) relinquished the ring, moved backwards passively, and was clearly exemplifying defensiveness, fear and concern. These observations, though instinctive at the time, became a very large part of what the athletes and I discussed prior to bouts as I was invited to increase my involvement during a 9- year time span (1996-2004 though the present report pertains only to 1996-1999). Boxing is a sport founded on control, control of oneself, control of the other, control over the judges, and consequently control over the outcome.

First meeting in Atlanta - 1996

During the first year of my doctorate, and only four years after my retirement from elite sport, I attended the 1996 Olympics as an onsite administrator with the Canadian Olympic Committee, and also as the sport psychology consultant for Canada's National Shooting Teams. As part of my administrative responsibilities, I was asked to attend to coaching and administrative staff's needs. This opportunity allowed me the possibility to speak with and observe social support resources at the end of each day once performances were completed, and prior to the next day's events. One of the administrators I fetched coffee for was Dr. Matt Mizerski, the former Technical Director of Boxing Canada. Though it was not my objective to solicit sport teams while in attendance, it seemed that the group I was most drawn to was boxing. They were straight-forward, transparent, and in short, likeable. As we became acquainted, there was some interest in my expertise and background. At the time, the national boxing team did employ the services of a sport psychology consultant though his services had not been resourced by any of the athletes in the recent pre-games training camp. The general consensus was that the athletes and coaching staff would be more receptive to a former elite athlete with fresh ideas and a progressive approach. From these early discussions onsite, 4 weeks of telephone conversations ensued, leading to my first (initial trial) experience with the national junior team. In keeping with what has already been noted by Ravizza (1988) among others (e.g., Schinke, 2004) the rapport aspect of applied consulting happens in progressive stages. Consequently, this trial experience was one of several employed by Boxing Canada before I was eventually allowed to work onsite at tournaments as part of their team.

First trial with intermediates (juniors) and rapport

The first trial experience was a strategic move on the part of the team's administrators. I was introduced to the athletes in a group meeting and asked to share a few strategies pertaining to effective breathing techniques and planning. From the group meetings, perhaps because the athletes were aspiring to progress to the senior level, most (all but one) were receptive to working with me. National team athletes are often guarded in their first encounter with a sport psychology consultant. The belief is that what has worked prior to national team appointment will continue to work from that point onward. I was of the same belief when I first encountered a sport psychologist in training camp before the 1987 Pan-American Games while I was a national team athlete (I opted not to meet one on one in my first training camp experience). Reflecting upon this belief as a starting point before each introductory meeting perhaps also allowed me to approach the athletes and their coaches with a sensitivity stemming from lived experience and some understanding. Consequently, the athletes and coaches appreciated my patience, and so most of what I did was discuss concerns, anticipated challenges, and strategies on a general level. When several of the athletes exceeded expectations at the Junior World Championships, regardless of whether I was effec-

tive, my affiliation was associated with the outcome. Upon reflection the reason why I was able to proceed with (and eventually as part of) the national team can be explained to my ability to establish rapport with those in attendance. On one level, rapport was achieved by being engaged within all aspects of each day from early morning runs to team discussions. Less visible, though I think at least as important, I clearly liked the people I was working with, which included their varied backgrounds and a few eye opening stories regarding personal challenges prior to boxing. Finally, there was also some success paired with the first experience, and elite athletes and coaches like to retain what works within their plan. My first experience seemed to work, and so I was retained.

Making in-roads with the Senior Team: Training camp experiences

Shortly thereafter, I was invited to meet with the senior national team within the fold of a more general group discussion, the 1996 post-Olympic debriefing. Though I cannot recall what was said within the group meeting other than the following year's seasonal plan, I did meet with athletes individually during that first day. Learning from my predecessor, correct or otherwise, I introduced myself to every athlete personally (I knew each member's name and face from the previous Olympic Games). Several of the less accomplished athletes were receptive to meeting within me from the beginning, undoubtedly due as much to curiosity and hope as anything else. Even in these early times, my strategy was to ask the athletes to share their stories as athletes and as people. When a pattern of under-achievement was described, I followed up with a thorough debriefing of successive setbacks in an attempt to help identify planning oversights and tactical errors. When the first two athletes were able to identify several oversights pertaining to packing, pre-sleeping strategies, and coach – athlete communication, their satisfaction resulted almost immediately in wider spread curiosity, and following, additional meetings with other athletes.

From my first two experiences with the national boxing team I learned that the team's composition was going to be extensively multicultural. Almost immediately, it became apparent that some of the athletes came from single-family homes, some hailed from the inner city, some were first generation immigrants, and some came from white-collar families. The culturally diverse setting of boxing was very different from my own previous background, and it enriched (and also challenged) the team with an array of perspectives. Among the senior team at the beginning, beyond cross-sectional differences already identified above, there was representation from England, Iran, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Canada's Aboriginal population, and mainstream Canadians. Though I was formally trained with a mono cultural approach to consulting (see Schinke et al., 2005), it became evident that there were cultural nuances in terms of how to communicate and work effectively. For instance, athletes from Latin America and the tropical islands were often expressive and collectively minded (see also Kontos and Arguello, 2005). As such, I became acquainted with these

athletes during small group outings to shopping malls and movies. Among the Canadian Aboriginals, I quickly learned that eye contact was regarded as a sign of aggression, and that daily existence sometimes included the use of traditional medicines and praying, strategies I knew nothing about (see also Schinke et al., 2006, Schinke et al., 2007 in press). Among mainstream Canadians, who contrasted clearly with the aforementioned, the desire was to garner self-confidence and self-control, attributes paired with individualism. Consequently, it became clear during the very first set of meetings that effective consulting necessitated an improved understanding of each athlete in relation to his culture outside of sport. Further, as noted recently by Ryba and Wright (2005) and Butryn (2002), there was also a quick recognition that cross-cultural communication is a two-way process, and that I had to adapt my approach to the other's background (athletes and coaches). Further, it followed that cross-cultural communication among athletes and coaches necessitated the development of cultural competence (or at least cultural appreciation) on the part of coaching staff.

Finding my niche

For the first two years of affiliation, I was invited to training camps across Canada. During the second year, and immediately before the 1998 Commonwealth Games as one of my tasks, I met with each athlete to discuss personal needs before, during, and after each bout. Each athlete was asked to consider an optimal performance, preferably within an international sporting tournament. When recounting the experience, the athletes were asked to consider (a) their day's progression leading up to the bout, (b) arrival onsite, (c) pre-tournament warm-up from general warm-up to final tune-up, (d) use of coaching resources within the corner before the bout (e) coaching and personal strategies in between rounds, and finally (f) the strategy within each round, which was segmented into the first 15 seconds, the following 30 seconds, the next minute, and the final 15 seconds. In relation to each aspect, the athletes and I developed a list of strategies that they, their coaching staff, or both could monitor as each day's performance unfolded. Some athletes liked extensive and consistent pad work before each bout in specified intervals. Others preferred a looser structure with intermittent coaching involvement. Where some athletes liked an extensive warm-up with two hours of activities, others preferred a shorter more intense structure. A few of the athletes liked to watch bouts onsite before they started their warm-up, and others preferred to stay in the dressing room for the entire duration once they arrived at the tournament venue. In addition, there were nuances in terms of the quantity of feedback and how it was relayed to each athlete in between rounds, which was compounded further by how the athlete was performing throughout the bout. These few aspects were among the facets that each athlete shared with me, with the understanding that their preferences would be relayed to the coaching staff working their corner. As athlete meetings became a formal part of the Pre-Commonwealth Games Training Camp, the coaching staff became increasingly excited about what was discussed. The result was an extensive briefing to

coaching staff within the final 3 days of the training camp, and information (on index cards) with tips for optimal athlete management. These index cards became part of the pre-bout mental preparation for coaching staff during the following week's international tournament.

An understanding of what works (and does not work as well) is an important part of each athlete's self-awareness. Beyond the logical result of increased internal locus of control, there are also several peripheral and equally important benefits. In the immediate short-term the athletes knew that their individual needs were being considered and integrated by coaching staff. Briefings in relation to each athlete, who should work his corner, and what he prefers, were at times surprising and sometimes confirming to the coaches. On both counts, at least from what I told, the coaches became more confident in how to work with each athlete. In addition, the athletes also became more confident that their coaches would provide at least most of what the athletes associated (from external resources) with optimal performance. There was also a long-term consequence to this logical and simplistic part of what we did. The technical director and traveling coaching staff to each international tournament were provided with a portable athlete biography, which included how to provide optimal coaching support. In essence, though ideally it would have been best to have a consolidated coaching staff traveling to every tournament throughout each four-year quadrennial, the Canadian national boxing team provided opportunities on rotation for a larger pool of elite certified coaches to travel and gain expertise. The long-term consequence of a two-week fact finding mission in 1998 was athlete protocols that compensated somewhat for the coaching changes with each tournament. When the national boxing team exceeded their own expectations with 8 of 11 athletes medaling and 6 finalists at the Commonwealth Games, my credibility increased once more (see Schinke, 1999). I began to work with coaches and athletes throughout each year, and it was not long before my involvement and demand allowed for traveling opportunities and subsequently, professional boxing opportunities spoken of elsewhere (Schinke, 2004).

International travel, its benefits, and its challenges

The opportunity to travel with a national team provides additional opportunities to work with athletes, and also an opportunity to appreciate why some applied strategies work better than others. My first onsite opportunity at a major-games competition (Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, Pan-American Games, Asian Games are examples of major games competitions) happened in 1999 leading up to and during the Pan-American Games. The experience began with a two-week training camp. At the time, I believed that I had a reasonable consulting structure from which to work effectively with the athletes and coaching staff. I had earned the trust of all of the participants, and found each day occupied by approximately 6 1-hour individual sessions, and several group sessions interspersed throughout each week (e.g., team-building, affirmations, venue discussions, onsite logistical planning, performance plans). The overall experience during the

camp remains among my most memorable; the team was exceptionally cohesive and hopeful despite previous under-achievements at the very same Games (3 medals and 7 wins was the best ever performance before 1999). The team sensed that their performance was going to exceed all expectations, but no one knew to what extent this would happen.

Despite what was almost entirely a smooth training camp experience, as always, interpersonal challenges surfaced as the important tournament drew near. Partway into the training camp, while working with one athlete – coach dyad, I sensed uncertainty and an unspoken of two-way tension. The coach seemed desperate to retain the athlete's loyalty as a client during and after the competition. The athlete, a first time team member, was a passive participant within each discussion, which I believed was part of his cultural approach (he was from a culture different from my own and that of the coach). The athlete – coach relationship seemed to remain intact during the training camp, and I did not foresee any serious concerns as the training camp ended and the team traveled to the venue. As I followed the athlete's progress throughout the tournament, he invited me to take part in his culture's traditional pre-bout strategies. The coach accepted the athlete's unfamiliar pre-competition practices, though interestingly, he stayed apart from the athlete during these crucial moments. As the tournament progressed, the athlete continued to win bouts, and he eventually succeeded to the medal rounds. At that point, the athlete asked the team's manager for a change in coaches, a demand that in Canada is often respected when it is believed that a coaching change will result in further success. I continued to work with the athlete throughout the coaching transition, as it was my mandate to provide services wherever they were desired. From the experience, though only in hindsight, I learned that strained relations before tournaments result in escalated conflicts as tournament pressures build (see also Schinke et al., 2005).

Despite the small challenges that do ensue during all major-games, when athletes and staff live in close quarters, the national team exceeded their own hopeful expectations and won 17 bouts and 7 medals. With the team's increased success at their second straight major-games, my involvement deepened. In 1999, while traveling with the national team for the first time to an international venue, my lodging was outside of the international village. Consequently, I traveled to and from the village each day, before departing with the athletes to their tournament venue. When performances and my relations with the athletes and their staff continued to build, it was suggested by all involved that I become part of the onsite national team staff during its daily activities, and that required my attendance as an onsite resident. What followed was the final progressive stage of any applied sport psychologist's experience with a national team, full immersion.

Recommendations for the aspiring consultant

I have been told over my continued experiences as an applied practitioner that sport psychology is intangible. Though many athletes and coaches believe that applied

sport psychology has an additive effect on athlete and team performance, it is hard to understand when the consultant is an effective part of the endeavor. In elite amateur boxing, there are several ways to discern whether sport psychology works. On one level, as has been discussed within this report, effective consulting is reflected by increased meetings with athletes, an emerging role within the national team's fold, and lasting relationships with the athletes, coaches, and national team's staff. On a second level, ongoing increases in team performance do support the argument that one is playing an effective part as motivator and communicational facilitator. National teams can over and under-achieve at one isolated event, but continued performances and strong team moral within challenging tournaments are useful indicators. Finally, though not in isolation, I believe that one's sense of being a part of the team's structure as opposed to a separate service apart from the team indicates success as a consultant.

There are also more specific consulting suggestions that pertain to the combative sport addressed herein - boxing. First, elite amateur boxing tends to be a multicultural sporting context. Having traveled internationally as part of a national team it has become apparent that many national boxing teams are comprised of multinational athletes and coaches. Consequently, it is recommended that applied sport psychologists with an interest in elite boxing develop culturally competent practice (see Butryn, 2002; Kontos and Arguello, 2005; Ryba and Wright, 2005). Second, when seeking cultural competence, I suggest that one be prepared to learn about (and from) athletes from every socio-economic strata. Modes of expression, what is valued, and why it is valued, are sometimes intertwined with family and community of origin. For instance, the value of achieving national team status might be very different for the athlete from a white-collar background (accomplishment, prestige) in contrast with an athlete from the inner city (socio-economic opportunities, wealth). An understanding of what motivates the athlete will provide important information regarding how to develop relationships with and support aspiring boxers. Third, it is imperative that boxers and their social support develop effective plans and protocols leading to optimal performance. It was stated earlier within this report that the benefits and consequences of performance include a wider array of short- and long-term consequences due to the combative aspect of the sport (injury, fear, apathy). Hence, the applied practitioner can build an effective relationship within the context by assisting with planning (packing lists, coaching protocols, pre-bout planning, within both strategies, adaptive post-bout debriefing), and as a result, increasing the likelihood of perceived control. Finally, it is proposed within this report that effective consulting, at least within the context of elite boxing, requires patience, and eventually, full immersion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that the experiences provided within this report were selected from among many others during 4 years of applied consultation. It

should be noted that the progression from the point of entry onward to full immersion within the aforementioned national team context was one pathway to success and not a definitive roadmap. There are many ways to develop a positive relationship with athletes and coaches, and following, work alongside an elite boxing team. Upon final reflection, one suggestion that I would propose is for consultants engage in such (and similar) opportunities with patience. Regardless of the possibilities the consultant sees from the outset, it takes time and patience for meaningful relationships and trust to develop. These latter aspects, I have found, are the basis of effective consulting when one works with elite boxers.

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Key points

- A case study with elite amateur boxers.
- A strategy to develop rapport.
- Four years of major games experiences on site.

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