Winning Mentality: A Reflective Account of Delivery to a Professional Football Academy

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Abstract

This paper presents a reflective account of the sport psychology support work delivered across one season at a professional football academy by a neophyte practitioner. The development of the sport psychology programme, referred to as Winning Mentality, was guided by Harwood and Anderson’s (2015) 5C guidelines to psychological skills training. The Winning Mentality programme outlined within this paper was delivered to the U9-U12 age groups and focused on the three key topics: (1) growth mind-set; (2) emotional control; and (3) confidence. The intervention comprised predominantly of classroom based workshops delivered at the team level that focused on one topic per training cycle. Working with these young age groups uncovered a number of challenges that form the basis of this reflective account. Drawing upon child developmental literature was a necessity to ensure the effective matching of session content to the relevant age group. Additionally, the heavily classroom based nature of the programme limited the youth footballers application of sport psychology techniques on the football pitch. Finally, opportunities to empower coaches with the knowledge and skills to apply psychological concepts within their training sessions should be welcomed.

*Keywords:* sport psychology, reflection, youth, applied practice

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**Context**

This case study presents an account of the sport psychology support work (referred to as Winning Mentality) delivered to a UK professional academy football club over the course of one season. I am a neophyte practitioner and at the time of initial engagement with the football club, I was four months into my supervised experience following the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) route to accreditation. Prior to this role, I had approximately one year’s previous experience, working within a sport psychology support role for a national sports team, but held no previous experience within the sport of football.

**Consulting Philosophy**

My consulting philosophy was initially developed during my academic experience. Completing an applied focused Master’s degree, emphasis was placed on the importance of understanding and developing our philosophical approach as a prerequisite to effective practice (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004), particularly for early career practitioners (Keegan, 2010). Therefore, prior to any applied experience outside of academia, my philosophical approach aligned to that of cognitive behavioral (Beck, 1995). This early alignment to the cognitive behavioral approach was partially influenced by its prominence within the sport psychology literature and my tendency as a neophyte practitioner, to develop an over-reliance on the dominant approach of my postgraduate programme (Collins, Evans-Jones, & O’Connor, 2013). The vast majority of the reading I engaged in was focused around athlete cognitions and interventions that targeted these. The cognitive behavioral approach places emphasis on breaking down negative links between cognition, behavior, and emotion (Beck, 1995). Furthermore, it places importance on interventions that attempt to modify maladaptive and irrational thinking patterns, therefore facilitating behavioral and psychological change (McArdle & Moore, 2012).

As part of my BASES supervised experience, I regularly engage in group supervisory meetings, the first of which encouraged me to reflect on my philosophy and how this may have developed following my early experiences of working in the applied field. During my applied experience, I recognized that my cognitive behavioral approach to consulting was not always effective and instead of consistently exploring cognitions and drawing on interventions that targeted these, I found greater appreciation for the athlete as a whole. Being an early career practitioner, I found that in some instances I attempted to deliver interventions that did not necessarily fit the requirements of the situation or individual (Collins et al., 2013; Tod, Andersen, & Marchant, 2009). Therefore, upon reflection my philosophy evolved to incorporate elements of the humanistic approach (Rogers, 2003). I recognized every athlete is unique and the goal of interaction is not always to treat the problem behavior, but to recognize and appreciate the individual outside of their role as an athlete (Poczwardowski et al., 2004). Additionally, the humanistic approach recognizes the athlete as an active member in identifying the best solution to the presenting problem (Rogers, 2003). Therefore at the time of this case study, my philosophy was influenced by a combination of cognitive behavioral and humanistic approaches.

It is important to note, however, that the nature and structure of the Winning Mentality programme influenced the level at which I could align to my own philosophy. As detailed in the following section, the Winning Mentality programme was heavily focused at the team level. Each age group engaged in similar group sessions around a specific topic or pre-determined technique that aligned to the cognitive behavioral approach. While this partially aligned to my approach, the one size fits all nature of the group sessions did not align to the humanistic element of my philosophy; in that it is difficult to appreciate the uniqueness of individual players when delivering a set programme. However, the football academy did recognize the need to incorporate individual player support, and it was during these one-to-one consultancies that I was able to align more closely to my philosophy.

**The Case**

Winning Mentality was already an established programme developed and delivered across the foundation phase (U9-U11), the youth development phase (U12-U16), and the professional development phase (U17-U21) at the football academy, by the previous sport psychology practitioners. Therefore, players will have already been exposed to sport psychology through their involvement at the club or received sport psychology support from their previous clubs. The Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) is a long-term scheme initiated by the premier league across all three academy phases with the aim of developing more and better quality homegrown players (Premier League, 2016). Players are invited to the club through a process of scouting and trials. Those who are accepted full-time to the academy, attend a partner school. There is an agreement in place, where these players are granted an early release from the school to attend academy training. As part of the EPPP, a four corner model for player development has been established which considers the interface between technical/tactical, psychological, physical, and social elements of player development (Premier League, 2016). Football clubs following the EPPP scheme are therefore required to have psychology delivery embedded within their academy programmes.

The purpose of my employment was to continue developing and delivering the Winning Mentality programme to assist the young footballers in their psychological development throughout these academy phases. Therefore, when commencing work at the club, I adopted the established Winning Mentality structure and developed sessions that aligned to this programme. Although some individual one-to-one support was conducted with players, this case study details the first year of engagement delivering the primary focus of the Winning Mentality programme, at the team level.

The psychology support work I provided during the season spanned across four age groups: U9s, U10s, U11s, and U12s. These players are constantly reviewed by the club and can be released each season. Therefore, each team varied in the number of players, ranging from 15 to 24 per squad, although not all players attended every Winning Mentality session. Each squad trained on average three times a week with a match game held every Sunday. All training sessions were scheduled in seven week cycles; six weeks training with the seventh week a rest and review week. The four squads rotated on a three week basis between Winning Mentality and gym sessions (the U9s and U11s attended Winning Mentality for three weeks, followed by the U10s and U12s for three weeks, and so on). Each session was scheduled for one hour prior to training and sessions were delivered separately to each squad.

**Needs Analysis**

Developing an extensive needs analysis is an important process when commencing applied practice, allowing a true understanding of the athlete and their needs to be achieved (Gardner & Moore, 2005). Typically in my previous applied experience, the triangulation of interviews, performance profiling, and observations assisted me in developing a thorough needs analysis and subsequent diagnosis and intervention (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002; Patton, 1999). However, due to the existing set-up of the academy football programme, I adopted a different type of needs analysis in that I used observation and discussions with the head of sport psychology, peers, and coaches during the season, to influence the structure of delivery and my understanding of age group ability levels.

Within the club, I was encouraged to follow the Football Associations 5C guidelines to psychological skills training (Harwood, 2008; Harwood & Anderson, 2015). The 5Cs guidelines consist of five key components of positive psycho-social development in players; commitment, communication, concentration, control, and confidence (Harwood & Anderson, 2015). The previous sport psychology practitioners working at the football academy utilized these topics when developing the psychology programme. Using these five topics as an umbrella, they expanded these into a final ten themes (growth mind-set, emotional control, confidence, communication, inner drive, resilience, focus, self-awareness, team-orientation, and performance lifestyle) that could be introduced at different phases across the academy age groups. Under the guidance of the head of sport psychology at the academy, I adopted this existing programme that had been implemented by the previous practitioners.

Prior to the start of delivery, I spent approximately one month collaboratively working with the head of sport psychology and the other two members of the Winning Mentality team. Discussions were held regarding the introduction of each topic to the different age groups and collaboratively we produced a document that could be distributed to coaches and support staff defining each topic, its importance, what it looks like, and examples in sport. Techniques and strategies were also discussed prior to the start of delivery in order to ensure a level of consistency across the different age groups during the Winning Mentality sessions. These meetings and discussions with practitioners of differing experience levels were extremely beneficial to me as a neophyte practitioner; they gave me confidence in both my decision making and delivery of the topics (Collins et al., 2013; Woodcock, Richards, & Mugford, 2008).

Additionally, I assisted in developing a profiling tool that aimed to monitor the progress of the players’ psychological skills across different stages of the season. The tool consisted of three questions per topic that required players to rate themselves using a Likert type scale. The idea being, a score would be produced for each Winning Mentality topic relevant to the player’s age group. This tool would indicate areas of strength and development for each player and age group, based on the principles of Butler and Hardy’s (1992) performance profiling. I had scheduled for the profiling tool to be administered and completed at the end of each training cycle. However, due to staff changes, it was only conducted once at the start of the season. As a planned basis for the initiation of one-to-one work and a method of the evaluation of the Winning Mentality programme, it was unfortunate that further data could not be collected and was somewhat frustrating that this was out of my control.

Following discussions with the head of sport psychology and football coaches of the age groups, it was agreed that the topics of growth mind-set, emotional control, and confidence were to continue being the main focus for the U9s-U12s for the season. This was due to previous education, experience from the coaches, and the sport psychology literature surrounding the needs for these age group players (Harwood & Anderson, 2015). Furthermore, this would allow sufficient time for players to focus on one topic over several weeks, so that they could develop a strong knowledge base and potentially build upon this over the season, and as they develop through the academy phases (Foster, Maynard, Butt, & Hays, 2016).

Additionally, my communications with coaches and previous practitioners concluded that the more effective sessions involved practical, fun tasks, and the use of videos to communicate key points. Orlick and McCaffrey (1991) suggested it is important to incorporate an element of fun within your approach when working with children. Additionally, the use of videos of high performance athletes may help younger athletes form clearer images of what is required. Therefore every session that I planned, incorporated at least one video relating to the skill and an interactive task to help demonstrate and apply the subsequent technique.

**The Intervention**

The Winning Mentality work conducted with the four age groups consisted of workshops delivered in either the academy classroom or players’ lounge. These locations were beneficial, in that they allowed laptop to TV connection so that visual aids such as videos and PowerPoint slides could facilitate the workshops. Coaches were expected to attend the sessions based on the head sport psychologist’s recommendation, and while coach attendance was high at the start of the season, this gradually declined particularly with the U11 and U12 groups. The participation of coaches within the sessions was important for both integrating psychological principles into physical training (Sherman & Poczwardowski, 2005) and for player adherence (Maddux, 1993). Otherwise, it could be argued, that if coaches are seen to overlook the importance of sport psychology, athletes may adopt a similar attitude. Moreover, this may have provided a potential explanation for the behavioral issues that arose with these age groups (see reflection 4). The workshop theme was the same each week for all age groups, however changes were made to the content to reflect the different learning stages of the age groups (Grey, 2010; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; see reflection 1 for further detail).

The first workshop was designed to allow me to introduce myself and sport psychology to the team, and with the older age groups gauge their current experience and understanding of what sport psychology is. I spent half of the session getting to know the players through ice breaker games, to assist with the important rapport building process (Hemmings, 2009; Lane, 2009). An example of these ice breaker games was for players to state three facts about themselves, two of which were true and one they had created. The rest of the team had to try to determine which one of the three was false. The second half of the session focused on introducing the topic of growth mind-set (e.g., Dweck, 2006; 2007; Ommundsen, 2003). The two following weeks with each age group were designed to introduce the topics of emotional control (e.g., Beswick, 2001; Jones, 2003; Martinent, Ledos, Ferrand, Campo, & Nicolas, 2015; Prapavessis, Grove, McNair, & Cable, 1992) and confidence (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Beaumont, Maynard, & Butt, 2015; Vealey, 2001) respectively, allowing the players to understand the importance of each topic to their performance, before focusing more specifically on how these can be developed. The following six-week cycles consisted of focusing on one topic per cycle (3 weeks with each age group). The first step depicted by a number of psychological skills training models, views education as a fundamental underpinning to successful implementation (e.g., Harwood & Anderson, 2015; Visek, Harris, & Blom, 2009). Therefore, I focused on one topic per cycle, to allow players time to fully understand each topic before attempting to apply it to their football performance (see Table 1 for an overview of the Winning Mentality programme).

**Evaluation**

Initially, the intervention was to be evaluated via the profiling tool that would provide a score for every player across each Winning Mentality topic. However, as previously mentioned, due to staff changes and accessibility issues the use of the profiling tool, as an evaluation method was not possible. Therefore, the evaluation of the Winning Mentality Programme was derived from evaluative discussions held with the coaches, the head of sport psychology at the club, a peer neophyte practitioner delivering to the older age groups, my BASES SE supervisor, and my own personal reflections. I regularly reflected throughout the season on various aspects of my practice, following Gibbs (1988) model of reflection. This model is based upon six stages in which the reflection is broken down; description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. This reflective process was beneficial in helping me to revise the workshop content and my own delivery style over the season, to ensure that the sessions were as effective as possible. Additionally, continued reflection has enabled me to understand the decisions that I have made and the feelings I have experienced during this early stage of my career, assisting me in my professional growth and development as a neophyte practitioner (Poczwardowski et al., 2004; Tod et al., 2009; Woodcock et al., 2008). A number of reflections arose throughout this ongoing programme of delivery. Below, details some of my key reflections that resulted from the first season.

**Reflection 1 – Ensuring Workshop Content Matched Each Age Group**

Prior to starting work at the football academy, I had never delivered sport psychology sessions to players that were so young. At the start of the season I was slightly concerned that I would not be able to match the content of the session to the developmental stage of the players, particularly the U9s. In my previous experience, I had always planned sessions that involved activities such as written tasks, group discussion around experiences and scenarios, role plays, and the implementation of psychological techniques. However, given the age of the squads I was aware that I needed to adapt my approach both in the activities that I chose and the depth and language in which I delivered on topics.

According to Piaget and Inhelder (1969), children aged between 7 and 11 are in the concrete operational stage of development, which is characterized by the ability to perform concrete operations. Children in this stage are suggested to be able to think logically about physical objects, events, and experiences. Once a child has reached the formal operations stage, around 11 or 12 years old and beyond, they can begin to deal with complex abstractions and reason about hypothetical situations (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Considering this, the sessions that I planned were kept basic and any tasks I incorporated for the U9s and U10s were centred around events or experiences they had encountered. Early in the season, I continuously read through and revised the PowerPoint slides and tasks to make it as simple and engaging as I could. I was fortunate in that I could pilot the content of the first two sessions on my 8 year old niece, also in the concrete operational stage, and therefore following her approval gave me more confidence that the content of the session would match the age group (Côte & Hay, 2002; Sherman & Poczwardowski, 2005).

Upon reflection and following feedback from the head of sport psychology, I feel I matched the content for the U9s and U10s well; the terminology I used was very basic and I was quite creative in thinking of tasks and activities that reflected both the topic and developmental stage of the players (Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991). With the more cognitively mature players, the U11s and U12s, I altered the content of the sessions by slightly advancing the terminology used and incorporating more written tasks (Sherman & Poczwardowski, 2005). However, upon reflection, I found matching the content for the U11s and U12s to be more difficult; I needed to keep the content relatively simple, yet I was also aware that I did not want to patronize the players by not challenging them enough. Over the first few weeks, as I developed a better understanding of their ability level, I matched the session content for the U11s and was able to incorporate more complex tasks. With the U12s however, I underestimated their ability level and overlooked the premise that while now at high school, their understanding and learning environment was more mature. Moreover, I was able to quickly recognize this and revise the U12 sessions further by advancing the content and tasks to their development stage (Weiss, 1991).

Matching interventions to ability level is, therefore, a crucial consideration for sport psychologists. Foster et al. (2016) suggested this matching was more likely to be influenced by the characteristics of the young athlete with whom you are working with, rather than shaped by the sport psychologist’s knowledge of child development theories in psychology. In this case, I did use my experience of working directly with the age groups to assist me in matching content to ability level, in addition to referring to the child development literature (e.g., Côte & Hay, 2002; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Weiss, 1991). Therefore going into the second season, I will continue to use this evidence-base, alongside my discussions and experience of working with the players to judge their ability level.

**Reflection 2 – Constraints of Classroom Based Winning Mentality Sessions**

All group work delivered to the players consisted predominantly of classroom based educational workshops. This environment was beneficial in that I could prepare PowerPoint slides as visual aids and play videos to demonstrate certain psychological skills and techniques. Furthermore, I incorporated interactive tasks within all of my Winning Mentality sessions, which were well received and facilitated players’ enjoyment. However, due to the space restrictions, these were never football related. I consequently found this environment limited the work I could do with the players; sessions had to be discussion based, and although this enabled the teams to develop a sound understanding of the topic, it was difficult for players to later take what they had learnt and apply it on the pitch, particularly being so young. This again can relate to the developmental stage of the players. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) highlight that during the concrete operational stage, children may not be able to reason with hypothetical situations. As a result, the players may have found it more difficult to identify when and how to apply techniques from the classroom to practice, without having learnt in that environment. Additionally, Sinclair and Sinclair (1994) suggested the more situated in context an event is the more readily it is understood and learned. Therefore, it would appear more beneficial to embed psychological skills training into physical practice (Foster et al., 2016).

Subsequently, this second season at the club, I have designed and delivered more practical football based Winning Mentality sessions. For example, when covering the topic of confidence, I have prepared progressively difficult drills and challenged the players to continuously demonstrate positive body language throughout their training session. Beaumont et al. (2015) suggested creating a challenging practice environment is a potential strategy to build robust sport confidence. Theoretically, performance accomplishments have been identified within the sport psychology literature as a salient source of confidence (Bandura, 1977; Vealey, 2001), and therefore the successful completion of these challenges will build young players’ beliefs in their ability to perform. Additionally, the practice of positive body language can assist players in the regulation of their thoughts and feelings to confidently manage a variety of situations (Harwood & Anderson, 2015). Performers who feel in control of their emotions are more likely to feel confident (Bandura, 1977) and therefore at intervals during the practical session, players are asked to reflect on their teammate’s body language and determine if they were successful in the challenge.

Furthermore, it was harder for both players and coaches to invest and buy into the importance of Winning Mentality due to the sessions being heavily classroom based. Although I held discussions during the workshops with players (and the coaches who were present) about the importance of Winning Mentality, I think the nature in which these sessions were delivered, influenced their enthusiasm and commitment to developing sport psychology. I had several discussions with two of the coaches who communicated that they thought the sessions were difficult for the players to both endure and apply, being that they were classroom based. Foster et al. (2016) suggested an important factor in maintaining youth engagement in psychological skills training was not allowing the environment to seem anything like a school environment. This is due to the negative connotations of education some youngsters have, based on their school experiences (Foster et al., 2016). Additionally, clarity regarding the services sport psychologists provide, as well as the perceived value of sport psychology, have been found to be potential barriers within sport psychology (Pain & Harwood, 2004; Winter & Collins, 2016).

Accordingly, applied sport psychologists need to demonstrate the value of their work, particularly within football (Pain & Harwood, 2004). Upon reflection, I should have delivered more practical Winning Mentality sessions to demonstrate to the players and coaches how psychology is applied to performance. This would not only develop their ability to apply sport psychology, but potentially also increase player and coach commitment to the Winning Mentality programme. However, during season one arranging practical sessions was not entirely feasible due to my lack of control over time and space / pitch availability. Therefore, prior to season two, I have requested with the head of academy that the Winning Mentality sessions develop from the classroom to take place on the football pitch, where I envisage incorporating football drills and games into the sessions, to facilitate the application of sport psychology and collaboration with the coaching staff.

**Reflection 3 – Striving for the Integration of Winning Mentality into Coaching Practice**

Prior to delivery at the football club, I felt quite apprehensive with regards to the integration of both myself and psychology into the academy. Being in the early stage of my career and female, I felt apprehensive about being accepted within this male dominated environment. A similar sentiment was expressed by Barrett (2015) in her work as a female neophyte practitioner within a male cricket team. However, I forced myself to approach this role with confidence and made a conscious effort to communicate with coaches and players to start building rapport as early as possible (Barrett, 2015; Woodcock et al., 2008). The work that I had been delivering with the academy players appeared to be generally well received by most of my age group coaches. This was evident through verbal feedback that I received from a few of the coaches themselves, as well as their reinforcement of Winning Mentality out on the pitch. I feel fortunate that the coaches were generally very encouraging of sport psychology and during my sessions coaches would often get involved by offering examples of professional footballers that demonstrate a particular skill or technique that we were discussing. Additionally, when observing the training sessions of the U9s and U10s that followed my Winning Mentality session, I would often hear the coach reinforce messages from within my session (for example the traffic light system and adopting a growth mind-set). This was really pleasing to hear, as it felt like the coaches valued the work that I did and demonstrated a willingness to reinforce this out on the pitch. However, despite enthusiasm from most coaches being relatively high, the integration of Winning Mentality into actual coaching sessions could have been developed further.

While psychology was mentioned during coaching sessions, these messages did not always align or directly relate to the content we had discussed within my sessions, predominantly with the U11 and U12 coaches. This limited reinforcement from the coaches was likely because they did not attend all of the Winning Mentality sessions and therefore were not fully aware of what I was working on with the players. Additionally, there was very limited opportunity to meet with coaches outside of training time to fully discuss the work I was doing, what each topic meant, and how it could be reinforced. Staff meetings were typically held during the morning, when I was not at the club. I feel this limited the coaches’ knowledge and subsequently their willingness to reinforce psychology during training sessions. The benefits of sport psychology consultants being integrated as part of the coaching staff include greater appreciation and acceptance of sport psychology which subsequently can assist the consultant to gain entry, particularly with more hesitant members of the group (Haberl & Peterson, 2006). Additionally, it has been identified that a barrier to the coaches’ implementation of sport psychology in academy football is the coaches’ lack of knowledge, time, and awareness of sport psychology (Harwood, 2008). Coaches may therefore have limited confidence in incorporating this into their training sessions, even if they are unknowingly already integrating elements.

Upon reflection of the season, there was a missed opportunity for sport psychology to be integrated further within the whole football programme and this was a reflection that was mirrored by the other Winning Mentality coach. This reflection was discussed with the Academy Performance Manager at the end of the season, and we discussed how being invited to academy staff meetings would help with the integration of sport psychology. Additionally, working more closely with coaches or delivering coach sport psychology sessions, where I can outline the topic we will be working on and offer suggestions to coaches as to how they can reinforce and integrate the topic into their training session will be beneficial in helping to integrate Winning Mentality further in the upcoming season (Harwood, 2008). Combined with more practical based Winning Mentality sessions, I feel this will aid and encourage players to apply sport psychology on the football pitch.

**Reflection 4 – The Realities of Managing Player Behavior during Winning Mentality**

Working with large groups of young players within a classroom environment brought its challenges, one of those being behavior management. During the start of the season behavior did not seem to be a problem and I felt I could manage the sessions relatively well in terms of engaging the whole group in discussions and gaining their attention. However, as coach attendance to the Winning Mentality sessions dropped off, behavior management of the U11 and U12 groups became more difficult. While players wanted to get involved in discussion or tasks, they wanted to all talk at once and lacked some respect for the materials or tasks that I had prepared (e.g., breaking equipment, using equipment at the wrong time). This was extremely frustrating as I was spending a lot of the session controlling the few players who were disrupting the group. I also found it difficult to determine how to deal with this behavior having very little previous experience within this situation. I did not want to keep ‘telling them off’ or seem like a teacher figure, because I wanted the players to enjoy the sessions so that engagement would remain high (Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991).

I discussed this issue with the U12s coach who suggested I send the disruptive players out during the session, or informed him of anyone who misbehaved and he would deal with the players directly. I found this advice a little difficult to follow; firstly I wanted to avoid sending players out because I wanted the team to see Winning Mentality as part of the programme, not an add on that can be missed. Secondly, I was concerned informing the coach about certain player behavior would break any trust that I had developed with players, which is essential to effective consulting (e.g., Salacuse, 2000). Instead, I used examples of athletes who openly talked about sport psychology and how it improved their performance (videos and quotes). Additionally, when players were being disruptive I referred back to the football clubs values, particularly highlighting respect. These methods were effective in the short term to manage behavior, as they provided an immediate reminder, which usually resulted in players calming down and trying to uphold the value of respect. However, this was never long term due to no reinforcement outside of Winning Mentality, and either by the end of the session or definitely in the next session behavior would again become an issue.

After discussing this issue with my BASES supervisory group, it was suggested that I could develop a code of conduct with the players, regarding expected behavior during sessions. I wanted to initiate this at the football academy and after talking to the Academy Performance Manager, he mentioned it was something they were going to initiate with both the Winning Mentality and gym sessions. Unfortunately however, this was never actioned by the club. Therefore, at the start of next season I will incorporate player input into creating a code of conduct, emphasizing the behaviors expected. It is hoped this will make it easier to manage behavior, because players will have already agreed to adhere to the code of conduct. Furthermore, following this reflection, I felt that the Winning Mentality sessions would have been more proactive with smaller numbers of players to manage. This is something that I have recently discussed with the Academy Performance Manager and should hopefully result in smaller groups and therefore more effective sessions going forwards.

**Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Practice**

Taking over an existing sport psychology programme was challenging in that I had to immediately align to pre-existing topics and terminology without having built my own needs analysis. Additionally, I had to ensure a level of consistency was maintained between the previous season and the work that I was to conduct. However, the existing Winning Mentality programme was a well-structured, evidence based programme (Harwood, 2008), with a clear aim, therefore making this an easier process for me to adopt. I appreciated being able to draw upon a sport specific developmental consultancy model (Harwood & Anderson, 2015) to guide the work that I conducted. Being evidence based and shaped by direct experiences within professional football academies (Harwood, 2008), this model gave me confidence in the programme I was delivering.

Furthermore, it is extremely valuable engaging in wider reading of child developmental literature when working with youth athletes (e.g., Weiss, 1991). This allowed me to tailor the content of my Winning Mentality sessions more effectively to each group, ensuring that the language, tasks, and techniques I chose to adopt were suited to the varying ages. Following this wider reading, I appreciated the need to ensure that sessions with young athletes incorporated fun activities and the use of videos (Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991). While understanding the developmental needs of young athletes is of vital importance, I have also learnt to value my own judgement, regarding player ability levels, formed through my direct experiences of working with them (Foster et al., 2016).

Although I was able to use a variety of sources to determine the effectiveness of the intervention, collecting objective data would have been a valuable addition. The use of the profiling tool throughout the season would have enabled me to track the progress of each age group in their development of each topic. Additionally, consultant evaluation forms (e.g., Partington & Orlick, 1987) designed specifically for each age group, could also have been used as a means of assessing the intervention, my delivery, and appropriate revisions where necessary.

Finally, through my own reflections and discussions with coaches, it became evident that the classroom based nature of the Winning Mentality sessions did not offer the opportunity for the young players to apply psychological skills and techniques onto the football pitch. Going forwards, practical football based Winning Mentality sessions may be more effective in helping young athletes apply psychological skills within their performance (Foster et al., 2016). Furthermore, Winning Mentality sessions alone are not enough to support youth psychological development. Coaches are an essential part in this process; with the purposeful integration of psychological principles into training, coaches and sport psychologists can help youth athletes achieve affective, social, and cognitive gains (Sherman & Poczwardowski, 2005). Opportunities to increase coach knowledge and subsequently, the implementation of psychology within their coaching sessions would therefore be welcomed.

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