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Reflections on a long-term consultancy relationship; challenging the beliefs of an elite
golfer

For Peer Review

Abstract

This case study is a reflective account of a consultation with a (then) 37-year-old male professional golfer and former Ryder Cup player who had lost his status on the European Golf Tour and was working out of the sport in order to make a living. Needs analysis suggested that the client had poor performances, low self-confidence and dysfunctional beliefs (e.g., “My swing is not good enough”). An eclectic philosophical approach was adopted to address these issues (e.g., strength-based training, overlearning, hypnosis, promoting an external focus of attention, cognitive restructuring, and a clutch-based visualization). The effectiveness of the interventions was determined by the player’s performance and his underlying emotions and beliefs. The client provided social validation for the consultation approach. The interventions in this case-study elevated positive emotions (e.g., confidence and optimism), changed dysfunction beliefs (e.g., “I am always a bridesmaid”), and enhanced performance (win major championships). The case-study illustrates a protracted engagement with a client and the evolution of a professional relationship. The case is discussed in light of a self-fulfilling prophecy effect, and a consultancy that targets the conscious and unconscious mind of an elite golfer. Recommendations are offered for consultants working with elite golfers.

Keywords: eclectic approach, self-fulfilling prophecies, dysfunctional beliefs, low self-confidence, golf, performance.

I (first author) am a chartered sport and exercise psychologist with the British Psychological Society. I am also registered with the Health Care Professions Council in the United Kingdom. At the time of this case study I had worked for approximately 12 months on the PGA European golf tour. I was sitting at home browsing through the local paper and an article caught my eye; the report described the demise of a former Ryder Cup golfer who had lost his card on the PGA European Golf Tour. The story intrigued me, so I decided to write a letter enquiring if he was interested in working with a sports psychologist with the intention to improve his performance and win back his playing status. To my surprise he wrote back and asked me to call him. I gave him a telephone call immediately after I received his letter, and the client invited me to his home to explore how I could help him improve his game. Little did I know this neoteric client-consultant relationship was going to last over 17 years and would significantly impact on my career as a sport psychologist. This case study reflects on our journey, the relationship and the lessons learned. It also emphasizes the protracted time that one may spend working with a client in order to realize positive results. It should be noted here as long as respect, competence, responsibility and integrity is maintained at all times, consultants who may write to a potential client does not risk violating the British Psychological Societies 2018 code of conduct.

Philosophical Approach

In my consultancy I use an eclectic philosophical approach that engages the epistemologies, methodologies and ontological perspectives captured in the fields of transpersonal psychology, existential phenomenological psychology, humanistic psychology and positive psychology.

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My interest in transpersonal psychology started in 1986 when reading a book chapter written by a Swedish Psychologist called Lars Unestahl. At the time of his publication, he was working for the Swedish national sports teams using hypnosis as a transformational tool. The epistemology that lay behind his approach was controversial and unsupported empirically in sport. Despite these shortcomings the results he was reporting appeared remarkable and the theories behind his approach were magical and inspirational. The golf program, for instance, had helped create some of the world's greatest golfers, and the athletic program had produced Olympic champions.

I completed my hypnotherapy training at St Anne's Hospital in Haringey, London and I made it my mission to provide evidence for Unestahl's methodology (The qualification I obtained was a Diploma in Clinical Ericksonian Hypnotherapy which was offered by The British Hypnosis Research and Training Institute). I had hoped to achieve this goal by directing several studies that examined the effects of Hypnosis on the performance of golfers and basketball players. I also examined the effects of Hypnosis on the optimal performance state known as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Through adopting Hypnosis and flow as fields of psychological interest I began my journey into the world of Transpersonal psychology.

Unlike other philosophies in psychology, transpersonal psychologists have a special interest in the unconscious mind and transcending experiences that are associated with spirituality, altered states of consciousness, and extrasensory awareness such as intuition (see Shapiro, Lee, & Gross, 2002). It also includes the study of extraordinary human experiences such as peak performance (Privette & Bundrick, 1991), peak experience (Laski, 1961; Maslow, 1943; 1970) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; 2002). Peak performance, peak experiences and flow are strongly associated with optimal performance in sport (see, Norsworthy; Gorczynski;

Jackson; 2017). These altered states of consciousness occur in the transpersonal realm and therefore, in my view, should be studied using transpersonal methodologies and mediated by transpersonal intervention strategies. Meditation, guided-imagery, hypnosis and music are intervention strategies used by consultants who advocate this approach (see Davis, 2003; Friedman & Hartelius, 2013). Research that supports the utility of these intervention strategies in sport is sparse, but increasingly (see Colzato & Kibele, 2017; Pain, Harwood & Anderson, 2011; and Pates & Kingston, 2020) recognized as legitimate components of consultancy services.

In contrast, the interest in existential phenomenological psychology began when working on the PGA European (golf) Tour. Specifically, feedback from my clients suggested that they preferred to be interviewed, as opposed to completing a psychometric test. Based on this feedback I employed open-ended existential phenomenological interview techniques (see Dale, 1996). The existential phenomenological interview technique allows exploration of the client's subjective experiences, and one role of the psychologist is to facilitate client understanding of the impact of these experiences. A client's understanding and the bearing of his or her subjective experiences is perhaps the most powerful sport psychology intervention. Additionally, as a consultant of the existential phenomenological approach, I adopt the view that client is an expert and I am a co-investigator in a psychological inquiry (see Dale, 1996; Giorgi, 1970; Nesti, 2004; Newburg, 1992; Ravizza, 2002). As a methodology it supplies me with a rich source of experiential knowledge that provides me with information needed to recommend an appropriate psychological intervention.

The central tenets of humanistic psychology also provide a meaningful framework for consultancy services. The chief objective of this approach is to develop a self-actualized individual (see Maslow, 1943), who can regulate positive emotions such as confidence,

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happiness, hope, and optimism. The positive emotions highlighted here are of particular interest because they are known to trigger peak performance experiences (see Gould and Maynard, 2009). Additionally, they're important in maintaining a client's well-being and mental health (see Gorman, 2010). The teachings of Carl Rogers (1951) contribute to this methodology by offering the client congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy (see Corey, 1995). Congruence implies that the consultant is genuine, open, integrated and authentic during their interactions with the client. Unconditional positive regard refers to the consultant to genuinely care for the client, and empathy refers to the consultant's ability to understand sensitively and accurately the client's feelings and experiences. I embrace these three qualities because I feel they are fundamental in the development of an effective client-consultant relationship.

The desire for augmenting positive self-esteem, peak experiences, and self-actualization among athletes, is in line with Maslow's (1970) vision of positive psychology. The seeds for positive psychology can also be found in the work of Seligman (1991) who borrowed the term positive psychology from Maslow and spearheaded a new movement in psychology that focused on his studies of learned optimism. More specifically, Seligman (1991) found an optimistic thinking style helps the individual maintain hope, increase resilience, and improve the chances of a successful outcome. This style of thinking has been shown to be prevalent in elite athletes (see Gould & Maynard, 2009), and is one of the reasons I choose to adopt this approach in my consultancy services. Historically, positive psychology focused on individual's strengths rather than their weaknesses. Strength-based interventions have evolved from this philosophy, and strength-based intervention form a significant part of many consultancy services (see Jones-Smith, 2011).

Taken together, we believe the philosophical approaches described above, provide a framework to foster the development of optimal performance and human potential. They embrace the entire human experience and provide invaluable methodologies for a consultant to bring about a positive change in athletic performance. In addition, they allow the consultant to explore and unlock the performance optimizing potential of both the conscious and unconscious mind.

The Case

The client was a 37, year-old male professional golfer who had played on the Professional Golfers' Association European Golf Tour for 14 years. Our relationship started in 2002. To protect his anonymity, the pseudonym 'John' is used. John had won five times on golf's European Tour and was a former Ryder Cup player. John sustained a wrist injury that prevented him playing the game for 18 months. When he returned to the tour, he could not find his previous form and had played so badly he had lost his European Tour playing status. When the consultancy began, John had not played on the European Tour for 2 years and had reverted to a sales position in order to make a living. He had recently downsized his property in order to support his family.

It is perhaps worth noting here the authors are the only persons who know the identity of John, and John is aware of this. He is also aware that some of the information he provided (such as his performance history) might have the potential to be recognized by a member of his professional group. It should be noted John has consented to the publication of the information contained in this manuscript.

Needs Analysis

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At the beginning of the first session demographic information and detailed knowledge of his playing background were gathered. Questions such as ‘How old are you?’; ‘Tell me about your family?’; ‘How many years have you played on tour?’; ‘Tell me about your history on tour?’; ‘What is your favorite golf course and competition?’ were posed to John to develop a rapport with the client and build a short descriptive profile. Following this line of questioning an existential phenomenological interview using open ended questions and focusing on his internal thoughts and feelings about his game was conducted (see Dale, 1996). He was also questioned regarding his beliefs about his game and what he expected to achieve in the future. More specifically, the following questions were asked: ‘Can you tell me about your recent experience playing competitions?’; ‘How are you feeling during competitions?’; ‘What are you thinking during your competitions?’; ‘What else do you remember about that experience?’; ‘How do you feel about your performances?’; ‘What are your beliefs about your game?’; and ‘What do you think you can achieve in the future?’ It is worth mentioning here I also used elaboration and clarification probing questions to provide the detail required to help classify his responses into themes, for example: ‘Can you tell me more about that experience?’; ‘Do you have any more experiences regarding that?’; and ‘Could you expand on that?’

The interview was transcribed, and the information organized into coherent themes based on the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke, (2006). In the second session when the themes were presented to John, he confirmed that the themes accurately captured his experience.

On reviewing John’s interview responses, the themes that emerged were poor performances, a loss of self-confidence, and a negative belief that his game was not good enough to compete at the highest level. The themes named here were used to help plan the strategy for the psychological intervention.

Interventions

Positive psychologists such as Peterson and Seligman (2004) have successfully managed feelings of low self-confidence by focusing the minds of their clients on their strengths rather than their weaknesses and encouraging them to complete tasks they are good at every-day. The broader benefits of this strategy are that it targets confidence while enabling the consultant to challenge and restructure the client's dysfunctional beliefs (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Consultants utilising this approach describe clients as happier, having higher self-esteem, experiencing less stress, more resilient, perform better, and are more engaged (see Linley & Harrington, 2006; Linley, et al., 2010; Seligman, 1999). The positive outcomes achieved from developing a strength-building environment validates the use of a strength-based approach to consultancy. The efficacy of this approach has been supported widely over the past 20-years (see Kaiser & Overfield, 2011; Linley, & Joseph, 2004; Linley, Woolston, & Biswas-Diener, 2009; Ludlam, et al., 2015; MacIntyre, Moran, Collet, & Guillot, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Scheel, Davis & Henderson, 2012; Seligman, 2002; Seligman, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Zhang, et al., 2017).

In this case study John was asked to determine his perceptions and beliefs about his strengths relative to his technical, tactical, physical and mental skills ability. This involved using an existential phenomenological interview using open ended questions such as: "Can you tell me about what part of game is your strength?"; "How do you know this is your biggest strength?". I then asked probing questions such as, "Can you tell me more about that strength and the other strengths you have as a golfer?" Based on the interview a number of themes emerged. John revealed his greatest strength was his short game and that he considered himself an above average wedge player and putter. He also highlighted within the interview that Jack Nicklaus had

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played with him during the British Open and commented that he was one of the best short game (putting and chipping) players he had ever seen. This endorsement had been reinforced by other players on the tour. In spite of this commendation, John had, in more recent years, become an inconsistent putter and had lost confidence in this aspect of his game. At the end of the interview, John was given a brief summary of the findings and asked to verify the accuracy of the information provided. After confirming the accuracy of the information, it was agreed to focus on his strength (his short game) and John asked me to help him develop a new pre-shot routine for his putting. It should be noted we also agreed not to interfere with his chipping routine because this remained the best part of his game. Further, in the belief that the client is an expert (see Dale, 1996), it is important to observe and ask questions of the client with respect to the things they do well. Also, to maintain positive emotions, John agreed to practice chipping every day to allow the confidence he had in his chipping to impact the rest of his game.

The first intervention session involved the development of a pre-shot routine for his putting. The session took place on a quiet and private practice area, and the session started with a simple warm-up, and when he was ready, he was to invite me to observe his existing pre-shot routine for both chipping and putting. I was particularly interested in where he focused his attention and what he thinks before he makes a chip or a putt. The routines John used for chipping and putting were markedly different. The chipping routine involved a focus of attention on a landing area and an image of the ball rolling towards the hole, in contrast his putting routine involved focusing on the putter head and how the path of the putter head moved back in line of the ball. In the chipping routine his thoughts were on getting the ball close to the hole, whereas in the putting routine his thoughts focused on the movement of the putter in his hands.

There is a large body of research suggesting that athletes who focus their attention on external rather than internal cues are less likely to experience breakdown in performance under stress, and produce more fluid, coordinated movement patterns (Hardy, Jones & Gould, 1996; Masters, 1992; Wulf, 2013; Wulf & Su, 2007). It was evident in the contrast between John's two routines that the focus of attention during his execution of his chips and pitches was directed to an external source (a landing area for the ball), whereas for putting his attention was focused internally on his hands, and other more proximal attention cues such as the head of the putter and its swing path. Consequently, we agreed to change his focus to an external cue during his putting routine. After some experimentation it was agreed that he would apply the following routine. First, he would look at the hole, he would then take a snap-shot picture of the hole and then keep a picture of the hole in his mind while focusing on hitting the front of the golf ball.

The change in attention and focus appeared to have an immediate performance enhancing effect because he appeared to make more mid-range putts, and on observing, his stroke appeared less jerky. Phenomenological questioning of his experience (e.g., "Can you tell me what you are experiencing?") indicated he felt he was happy with the routine because he was making more putts, and he felt he had "better distance control". He also said felt his putting stroke was "more-free".

To enhance his feelings of confidence, John was asked to think about some of his best putting performances from his past, and then to use an image from one of these memories as part of his routine. The recall of images that involve recalling best performances, has been shown to have a powerful performance enhancing effect (see Pates, Cowan & Karageorghis, 2012; Pates & Kingston, 2020). In this first session, John decided to use an image of the great putt he had made playing in the Ryder Cup. The image formed part of John's putting routine. Individualized

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pre-performance putting routines (see, Boutcher and Crews, 1987; Cohn, 1990; 1991; Cohn, Rotella, & Lloyd, 1990) are also known to enhance self-confidence (see, Hanton & Jones, 1999; Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007; Pates, et al., 2012; and Pates & Kingston, 2020). This first session took about an hour and we continued to meet and repeat the session with some minor refinements several times over the next few weeks. John also practiced his routine every day without support; this helps avoid dependency and develop self-reliance.

In addition, to his new putting routine John was asked to practice a self-hypnosis technique pioneered by Pates (2013). This technique was chosen because it is known to have an enhancing effect on self-confidence (see Pates, 2013). The procedure involved using hypnosis to help John focus his mind on his best ever round in a Major Championship (when partnering Jack Nicklaus). He was also asked to remind himself of what Jack Nicklaus had told him about his short game. John was asked to commit himself to practice the techniques by playing a 40-minute audiotape of a live session, every day. More specifically, the recording instructed John to follow three stages of instructions:

In the first stage of the hypnosis intervention, John was encouraged to sit in a comfortable position and focus on his breathing. Specifically, he was instructed to breathe deeply and to release air slowly while counting backwards from the Number 10. He was then given a 15-minute session involving progressive muscular relaxation (PMR). The technique, originally pioneered by Jacobson (1938), involved the golfer tensing and relaxing parts of his body while deeply inhaling. Suggestions asking John to contrast the differences between the tense and the relaxed muscles were given along with instructions to direct his attention to images of situations that were associated with relaxation. For example, the external image of a warm comfortable beach, or the internal sensation of floating in water.

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In the second stage, an Ericksonian hypnosis technique known as a staircase induction (Hammond, 1990) was applied. The staircase induction consisted of a journey, one step at a time, down a flight of 20 stairs. As the participant took the journey, he was told to see each stair in front of him and feel the stair under his feet. At the bottom of the stairs, he was told he would see a door and beyond the door he would see a room with a comfortable chair. John was then asked to sit down in the chair and to focus on a small cinema screen on which appeared a relaxing scene. Throughout this stage, suggestions were given to reinforce both the experience of the PMR, the deep breathing, and imagery techniques.

In the third stage, suggestions were given to help John regress and remember a multisensory experience of his best competitive performance (his round of golf with Jack Nicklaus). Specifically, he was asked to include visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory memories of this experience from an internal perspective.

It should be noted here hypnotic interventions should be conducted by a trained Hypnotherapist; the efficacy of this approach in sport has been demonstrated widely (see, for example, Pates & Maynard, 2000; Pates, Oliver, & Maynard, 2001; Pates, Cummings, & Maynard, 2002; Pates, Maynard, & Westbury, 2001; Pates & Palmi, 2002; Pates, 2013). Used creatively, hypnosis can provide consultants with a powerful transformational tool. Indeed, Transpersonal approaches have the potential for a powerful performance enhancing effect; researchers using this approach have found that images used during moments of hypnosis may serve as a mental switch, telling the brain to “enter into” or “perform” a change in conscious states (Hope & Sugarman, 2015). In other words, images used during hypnosis create an altered state of consciousness that gives rise to a quantum shift in feelings, thoughts and beliefs. The trance states achieved through hypnosis are “shells” that help us change our minds. According to

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Hope and Sugarman, (2015), through the aid of hypnosis, the plasticity of the human mind enables us to create new patterns of thinking.

Following 5 days of training John played a low-key professional tournament and won the event. He continued his training with daily rehearsals of his mental training programme over the next four weeks and won 3 out his next 5 events. Follow-up phenomenological interviews of his experiences indicated John was satisfied and trusted the intervention and its effect. Specifically, he described being: “happy and optimistic”, and “feeling more confident” about going to the tour school.

The next phase of the intervention involved preparing John for the qualifying event (Tour school). The European Tour school provides professional players with the opportunity to gain playing rights on the main European Tour; the final qualifying event requires playing 6 rounds of tournament golf at a single venue in Spain. John knew the golf course well, so to prepare for this event John was asked to use imagery every day and imagine playing the golf course using his imagination. I also asked John to imagine birdying every hole on the course. Additionally, and simultaneously where possible, John was asked to physically practice playing the golf on his home driving range. This involved selecting the clubs he would play on each of the 18 holes. For example, on the first hole which is a short par4 he would hit a driver then a 7 iron, on the second hole he selected a 6 iron into a par-3 green. This is essentially an overlearning of skills intervention strategy where athletes repeatedly execute the physical and mental skills that they are going to reproduce in competitions. The overlearning intervention strategy was first developed by Hardy, Jones and Gould, (1996) and later used by other researchers such as Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, (2008). The overlearning intervention strategy has consistently helped elite athletes develop self-confidence and restructure their interpretations of

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emotional responses during competitive events (Hardy, Jones and Gould, 1996). It can also help golfers develop a robust game plan; game plans are also known as an essential performance enhancing self-confidence building strategy (see Cohn, 2002; Gould & Maynard, 2009).

Another important aspect of this intervention phase involved challenging the client's negative beliefs. This was achieved by encouraging John to focus on his history of success (a positive life event visualization). This is essentially a cognitive-bias modification technique where clients are asked to repeatedly practice a positive image to create a bias in thinking that produces a positive effect and positive change in interpretive thoughts (see Williams, O'Moore, Blackwell, Smith, Holmes, Andrews, 2015). The first step of this intervention strategy requires the client to select a significant event that evokes positive emotions. Once the client has an image in mind, the consultant moves to assessing what the image means to the client utilizing two cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques, namely prompted descriptions and prompted transformations (see, Edwards, 1989).

Prompted description is a technique that involves asking questions about what the client is seeing and feeling (e.g., asking John to provide information about his feelings during his British Open experience). Prompted transformation is a technique that involves asking a client to change the image so they can discover and modify their thoughts about their game (e.g., asking John to see himself playing at his full potential). During this visualization John was asked to reframe his thoughts about having "A swing that was not good enough" to a thought that challenged this belief: "How can you think you are not good enough when you won the French Open and shot the lowest score in British Open history?" In addition, John's negative beliefs were challenged using an approach called Socratic Questioning (see Edwards, 1989). This form of questioning has proved to be a very effective cognitive restructuring technique that can help

clients challenge irrational, illogical, or harmful thinking errors. The basic outline for this technique is to ask the following questions: “Is this thought realistic?”; “Are you basing your thoughts on facts or on feelings?”; “What is the evidence for this thought?”; “Could you be misinterpreting the evidence?”; “Are you viewing the situation as black and white when it’s really more complicated?”; “Are you having this thought out of habit, or do facts support it?” This approach can be used by the consultant to identify the content of beliefs and to challenge them with logical analysis.

Although rarely reported in the sport psychology literature I find a fusion of humanistic, transpersonal and CBT methodologies extremely useful in the cognitive restructuring process of negative beliefs. I believe they work well because they utilize the resources of both the conscious and unconscious mind to form change. Phenomenological interviews with John supported the social validity of this approach. Indeed, when asked the question “Tell me about your experience of this procedure?” John reported he felt more confident about the tour school and more optimistic about his future as a golfer. It is important to note here, researchers such as Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffett, (2002) have shown when confronted with a challenge, optimists approach the challenge with confidence and persistence and are less doubtful and hesitant.

Effectiveness of the intervention

The challenge of being successful at the European Tour School is formidable. The tour school requires you to play 6 rounds of golf and finish in the top 15 out of 165 competitors. Nevertheless, John went to tour school that year and regained his status to play on the PGA European Golf Tour. Phenomenological Interviews conducted after the event, revealed John had advocated that the intervention helped improve his performance and regain his status to play on

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the PGA European Golf Tour. The positive result meant John employed me as his sport psychologist in the following season.

On tour the strength-based approach, over-learning, hypnosis, and the cognitive restructuring methodologies became a significant feature of John's mental training program. In the first year, John would often play well then lapse into a slump. During his slumps the same negative beliefs and negative automatic thoughts about his game would emerge. The mental training program was a significant factor in helping restore his confidence and performances. In spite of what felt like a continuous fight with his demons, John performed well for three seasons, finishing in the top 50 on the order of merit.

It was the last tournament of his third season (Madrid Open) where another significant moment procured and gave me another opportunity to challenge his negative beliefs. John played the last game in the Madrid open with Miguel Jimenez. Miguel had won five times that year and John out played him beating him in the final round by 5 shots finishing 3rd in the tournament. In a follow-up session after the game he was asked about his goals for the next season. His reply was "I think I can win again" Three tournaments after this prediction, he won the Portuguese Masters. It should be noted here John had not won on tour for 7 years. The win provided me with another significant moment (life event visualization) to use in the cognitive restructuring mental training program. Interestingly, in the following year John won the same tournament again. He also finished in the top 15 on the European Order of Merit that season narrowly missing an automatic Ryder cup position. In spite of a great season, the disappointment of narrowly missing out on playing the Ryder cup was devastating. In fact, it created another negative belief "I am always the bridesmaid" in other words he believed he always missed out on winning or participating in big events. The belief "I am always the bridesmaid" became part of John's

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narrative about himself. This belief had a profound effect on John's performances. Indeed, John did not win another event on the PGA European Tour for the next 10 years.

Over the next 10 years John and I continued to work. John had moved from the European PGA tour to the Senior European PGA tour when he turned 50. He had narrowly missed out on joining the Senior American PGA tour by failing to get his playing status at the Senior American PGA tour school. This was a major disappointment because he had made the Senior American PGA tour a personal goal. The only opportunity he had left to join the tour was to win the British Senior Open (a major championship).

After the first day of the British Senior Open I had a call from John asking for some advice. He had shot 3 over par in the first round and was lying 135th. He felt he was playing well but could not score. I asked him the following questions: "Tell me what you would do if you had a putt or shot to win the British Open?"; "Tell me what you would feel?"; and "Tell me what your mindset would be?"; His reply was "I would be more aggressive". Based on his feedback I asked John to adopt the mindset of trying to hold every shot and every putt and make it part of his pre-shot routine.

I chose this approach because over the years of working on the tour he had discovered one of the problems many of the golfers agonize over is commitment to the shots. One of my remedies for this problem is to adopt an 'all, or nothing' mindset. In other words, the golfer is asked what they do when they are in a clutch situation, i.e., when they have to make something happen (See Swann, Crust, Jackman, Vella, Allen, & Keegan, 2017). To achieve this mindset the client has to visualize an important event where they had to make an important putt or shot to win. In this case study John chose to focus on the memories he had of putting in the match-play situation of the Ryder Cup. The feelings, cognitions and emotions attached to clutch situations

emerge from the visualization. Clutch-based visualizations create an altered state that allows optimal performances to transpire (see Pates, in Press). More specifically, the routine employed by John involved creating a multisensory image of a clutch situation where he had to make a putt or shot to win an important event. He would then imagine having to hole his next shot or putt to win the British Open. He was instructed to use this routine for approach shots from the fairways, chip shots from around the greens, and for all of his putts.

After adopting the clutch based visualization into his routine John scored 5 under-par and made the cut. During our phone call that evening I asked John about his experience using the routine. He reported the routine had made him more aggressive and take more risks; he also reported feeling more courageous and determined. Other factors associated with clutch states described by Swann et al., (2017) were reported, namely, an increase in effort, commitment, confidence, excitement, and fun. It was agreed that John would continue using the visualization in his pre-shot routine throughout the tournament. At the end of the 4th and last day of the British Open John had found himself the winner of his first major. In a national TV interview John said this about his game.

“I am usually the ‘bridesmaid’ in these events, I have come close to winning several times in the past, but I always make mistakes when I need to make a shot. Putting usually lets me down like in the first round, but sticking to the routine helped me win, going for every shot made a huge difference. I held some crucial putts out there just to save par, it’s astonishing to realize I did not miss a putt in 3 rounds. To do this in front of my family makes this better; my younger kids have never seen me win anything before”

It is essential to note here, the belief “I am always a bridesmaid” had faded away and was replaced with “I can win majors”. Ironically, later that year John joined the senior PGA in America and won his second major. Although making generalizations from a case study should be treated with caution, the outcomes of this case suggest that the methodologies used with John, namely hypnosis, strength-based training, overlearning, cognitive restructuring and clutch-based visualizations, may be an effective intervention strategy for training elite athletes with poor performances, low self-confidence and dysfunctional performance beliefs. Investigations using different athletic populations would be needed to clarify this position. Future studies are needed to fully investigate the utility of this approach, however, the positive results reported here are compelling, and should inspire other consultants to utilize this approach.

Reflections

This case-study highlights the importance of beliefs, and the power they have on a player’s success as a professional athlete. Over many years of reflecting on my consultancy experiences I have come to the conclusion beliefs may either be barriers (self-defeating) or enablers (self-fulfilling) to optimal performance. Beliefs are fundamental to achieving success in sport. John, for example, won his first tournament in 7 years only when he changed his belief from “I am not good enough” to “I think I can win again”. Additionally, John won two major championships because he no longer believed he was a bridesmaid. This case-study highlights, in a profound way, the importance of beliefs and self-fulfilling prophecies in professional sport. What we believe or expect will happen, invariably does happen.

Merton first introduced the term self-fulfilling prophecy in 1948 to refer to circumstances in which people’s belief or expectation about something could lead them to behave in ways that cause the belief to come true. In the last thirty years, this topic has generated a large number of

studies in the social science literature. Based on these studies we now know beliefs are causal in determining future behavior, imagining oneself completing a future event can lead to a significantly greater likelihood of the event being completed in real-life. To emphasize this point I would like to bring your attention to an episode that occurred in a private conversation with another client. In an interview, the client said this: “I constantly think about winning the British Open”. “I know I am good enough to win this event”. “I am a much better player than anyone out there”, and “I know I someday will do it”. Eight years later his prophecy.

It took 17 years to help John change his beliefs from a golfer who could not get on the tour to a golfer who believed he could win a major. This may be due to a number of factors, including the skills and training of the consultant, and/or the result of the individual differences we see in our clients. Increasing our abilities to change the belief systems of clients can help athletes achieve exceptional sporting success.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The beliefs athletes hold about themselves and the mindsets they adopt about winning and achieving are fundamental to understanding success and optimal performance in sport. By pushing the boundaries of what athletes believe they are capable of, we as consultants can inspire athletes to achieve new levels of performance. I call these boundary-breaking beliefs ‘quantum thoughts’ because they involve creating a new reality for the athlete. Quantum thinking can lead to transformations and enlightenment if the thoughts are positive. Positive quantum thinking evoke hope and a life with a better future. When these thoughts are consistent and fuelled by passion, confidence, and intensity, they work through the belief system of the athlete and transform into reality. In other words, what athletes think will happen does happen. This is the self-fulfilling prophecy effect described by Merton in 1948.

This case-study suggests self-fulfilling prophecies occur through a sequence of events that involve social interaction. First, the athlete must hold a belief about his/her potential, and second, the consultant must treat the athlete in a manner that is consistent with the belief. A consultant should, therefore, look for opportunities to create and reinforce positive beliefs and always challenge negative dysfunctional beliefs. This case-study provides a consultant with a number of evidence-based methodologies that may be used to challenge negative beliefs and replace them with performance enhancing positive beliefs. This study also provides the consultant with a number of intervention strategies that help athletes who have suffered from poor performances and low self-confidence. The methods and procedures described in this study require further investigation.

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