

It's all in your head

In pursuit of defining **athletic competitive excellence**, Dr Garrath Rosslee shares his **research findings around the topic of "sports intelligence"**

I'm a serial goal-setter; I can't help it. Always have been and probably always will be. On the last day of December you'll find me reviewing what I've achieved, what's outstanding and what I've learnt during the year. I use this as the basis for the next year's objectives and plans. I commit them to paper and assess my progress every two weeks.

Eureka, I've found it!

In December 2011 I decided it was time to do a doctoral degree. However, I wasn't sure what it would be on. I was sitting in my study, staring at a section on my bookcase where I had clustered many texts on intelligence, consciously or unconsciously. *Spiritual Intelligence* was beside *The Cambridge Handbook of Intelligence*, which was next to *Emotional Intelligence* and *Appreciative Intelligence*, with a few issues of *Health Intelligence* and *Intelligent Life* close by. I was working with sports teams at the time and I wondered if anything on "sports intelligence" existed.

I searched, but could find only two reliable articles – one focused solely on golf, while the other was a high-level assessment that identified “sports intelligence” as a personality trait in Olympian athletes. Both were written in the US. Sports intelligence – as a concept and philosophy – had not been adequately researched and published in South Africa.

The topic for my doctorate had been found. I have since spent the last four years of my life reading, interviewing, reviewing protocols, observing, teaching, talking, writing and reflecting on this exciting domain.

What is sports intelligence?

I started my journey by reviewing the little available literature on sports intelligence and then reading scientifically sound approaches to intelligence and sports psychology. I learnt that there are probably as many definitions of intelligence as theories on it, which raised more questions than I had before.

I found this quote from Tom Eaton in *Business Day Sports*: “...one sees a bowler at the height of his powers, using speed, skill and intelligence to prise batsmen of batting friendly wickets.” He was speaking about Dale Steyn, perhaps the top fast bowler

of his generation. We know about speed and skill, but what constitutes *intelligence* within a sporting context?

I came across more quotes from sporting greats, like ice hockey legend Wayne Gretsky: “A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be.” How is it that greats almost *know* where the puck will be?

A six-dimensional approach

I discovered sports intelligence comprises six dimensions and can’t be reduced to a single factor, as some have suggested. There is actually no “sports gene”, despite being coined so eloquently by David Epstein in his book of the same name.

1 *Your brain: a neurophysiological subsystem*

As the name suggests, the first subsystem refers to an integration of the brain, its cortical activity in concert with physical preparation and overall body management. Mental speed, reaction time, memory, recall and retention are key components and need to be actively used by the sports intelligent athlete. Overall body management is part of this and emphasises the

significance of physical preparation, practice, training, conditioning, competition and post-competition periodisation.

2 *Your mind: a cognitive/rational subsystem*

The intelligent athlete intimately knows and understands the rules and principles of their sport. They devote time and energy to understand the game deeply so they are able to make better decisions and judgments when training and competing. They are constantly learning and have the ability to know what the correct course of action is in many different situations. They are “process aware”, which is the ability to remain focused on tasks while observing oneself and a competitor’s behavior.

They are able to quickly learn from mistakes, often not repeating previous errors. They understand that top performance and success come from making few errors.

3 *Your emotions: the emotional/affective subsystem*

The role of emotions in sports is obvious, yet is still a relatively new area of research. A colleague has called it the missing link. Our practice and experience has confirmed

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psychological stability, arousal control, response management, regulation and self-awareness to be helpful processes in managing emotions while competing and practising.

4 *Your relationships: a team/group subsystem*

An international coach, someone I interviewed during my four years of research, said, "I will choose a team player above talent any day", while another, a former professional athlete, made the point that "players who cannot be effective teammates usually don't last". The point is that the sports intelligent athlete has excellent interpersonal skills. They understand the importance of team cohesion and effective communication while also knowing that on- and off-field dynamics between players, coaches, management and other stakeholders will exert considerable influence over performance. The stronger the psychological contract athletes have with each other in a team, the more likelihood of superior performance.

5 *Your environment: a societal subsystem*

Sports intelligent athletes are not machines: they experience a range of influences that need to be kept in perspective. Personal relationships are functional; they generally don't get caught up in "hype" and are able to inspire themselves and others in the midst of countless hours of sacrifice and perspiration. They "live the life" 24/7/365, which suggests that sports intelligence is a lifestyle choice.

6 *Your soul: a metaphysical subsystem*

The final system I identified was a little surprising, as it didn't feature prominently in the literature, but was evident in the research and in practice. The role of beliefs, values and "higher order" factors including spirituality and religious beliefs is significant. I read an article by English rugby flyhalf Johnny Wilkinson, who, reflecting on his career, said, "my journey became more spiritual". In essence he may have been arguing that other – perhaps parallel – realities exist when competing. It may be that sports intelligent athletes gain a deeper understanding of themselves – perhaps life through sport.

Sports intelligence – now what?

These six concepts are intuitively obvious to most who have played sport. The challenge is to hold them all together and process them at the same time. The positive is that they can be taught and with ongoing and deliberate work will improve performance and likelihood of success.

Practically speaking, sports intelligence improves your performance through optimising your psychological skills. **HI**

»» → **Dr Garrath Rosslee** is a registered psychologist with a PhD in sports intelligence. Read more about his courses at **Sports-intelligence.com**



References available on request