

■ HOW YOUR MIND CAN IMPROVE YOUR PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE

Often we're so busy training our bodies that we forget about the mind-body connection. Dr Garrath Rosslee introduces us to a new concept in sports psychology – the idea of sports intelligence.

Our minds and bodies are inextricably linked – we know this through phenomena like the placebo effect. In a nutshell, the placebo effect explains how you can take a sugar pill with no medicinal value whatsoever, yet find that it cures your man flu if you truly, honestly believe it's going to have a beneficial impact on your condition.

Yet, when we hit the gym we often focus disproportionately on the physical aspect of training – on how many reps we do, or how much we're lifting – with a disregard for the potential that our mind has to improve our performance.

USE YOUR HEAD TO GET AHEAD

■ SPORTS INTELLIGENCE

And I'm not just talking sports psychology here. I'm talking about sports intelligence. Let me explain... I spent much of my childhood swimming. I started when I was about six, and I don't remember why I did, but it turned out that I loved the training and competition side of the sport, and I was also pretty good at it.

The club I swam for was headed up by a short man with bandy legs, grey hair and a raspy, deep voice, who drummed into us that you don't "just swim, you think and swim". Fast forward 40 years or so when, following a great deal of sports participation, training and competitions across a variety of sports, I found myself contemplating a doctoral study in psychology.

I'd been working with a number of high school teams and individuals on introducing basic psychological principals

and techniques to their sporting disciplines, and I became interested in what playing sport intelligently might look like. I had my doctoral topic.

It took me down some amazing rabbit holes, but in essence, I found, after doing a comprehensive review of orthodox and unorthodox theories of intelligence, applied psychology and sport psychology, that sports intelligence exists. More specifically, it exists in an elaborate system with six components, all of which run in parallel in our minds, as well as affecting each other.

THESE SIX COMPONENTS ARE:

1. A neurophysiological component;
2. A cognitive/rational component;
3. An emotional/affective component;
4. A team/group component;
5. A societal/ecological component; and
6. A metaphysical sub-component.

■ AN ACQUIRED TRAIT

Furthermore, I discovered that you can actually improve your sports intelligence – this is not a situation where you're born with a particular Sports IQ, and that's that. Working on any of the six areas will not only boost your intelligence in that area, but it will also improve your sports intelligence as a whole.

THE DATA INDICATED THAT IMPROVING YOUR SPORTS IQ WILL RESULT IN:

- Enhanced, insightful decision-making;
- Better body management;
- Coping better under pressure;
- Being more performance-oriented;
- Improved focus and concentration;
- Ability to learn more effectively;
- Being able to better manage and control situations; and
- Improved relationship skills.

“LEARNING TO APPROACH YOUR TRAINING WITH BRAIN AS WELL AS BRAWN, CAN REALLY TAKE YOU TO THE NEXT LEVEL.”

■ THEORY TO PRACTICE

But this is not just some airy-fairy theory dreamed up by a psychologist. I've seen it work across various sporting disciplines and codes. One such example is the case of a young woman – we'll call her Janet – who decided she wanted to compete as a fitness athlete, despite being fairly sedentary.

She only previously participated occasionally in social sport, but within five months she went from the couch to the podium, placing second in her first competition. In crafting her plan we began by identifying 15 focus areas. The plan included:

- 1. Physical preparation,** which included pre-competition, competition, and post-competition phases.
- 2. Knowing and using the technical aspects** and having the skills to compete and train.
- 3. Establishing realistic** and achievable goals.
- 4. Making lifestyle changes** including diet, social life and personal relationships.
- 5. Appreciating the subtle nuances** of competitive behaviour including posing, competitor activity, and judging criteria.
- 6. Exploring differentiation**

- opportunities** and accentuating strengths.
- 7. Positive messaging,** affirmations, and reinforcement, including weekly progress reviews.
- 8. Keeping a fitness diary** for knowledge capture and competitive intelligence.
- 9. Maintaining perspective** throughout the preparation phase.
- 10. Improving resilience** and perseverance, as this was a concern early on.
- 11. Improving emotional awareness** and self-understanding for future competitions and training phases.
- 12. Selecting a team**

- including coaches, specialists, myself and Janet's husband, with each team member having clear and concise roles and responsibilities, and being aligned with these.
- 13. Building a competitive ethos** through regular reviews, work-life balance, sport values consistency, habits, and thereby developing performance culture.
- 14. Constructively using peers,** friends, and social networks though social and electronic media.
- 15. Tapping into the athlete's** spiritual, ethical, and religious beliefs to serve higher order needs and motivation.

These were actively worked on for 16 weeks prior to competition, a final preparation week leading up to the competition, the competition weekend itself, and post-competition.

After placing second in her first competition, she continued to compete and place in national competitions and has since set her sights on a Pro card. She has received endorsements, sponsorships and has continued to inspire herself and others in their athletic endeavours.

“My first step was to look for a team,” says Janet. “Those who are not in a ‘single athlete sport’ don't realise that even for us, a team is necessary. An athlete is only

as successful as those who are pushing alongside them. I learnt that I am very much externally motivated and require the support and encouragement of others to keep myself going. I also came to terms with the fact that needing to be held accountable by someone is not a weakness, and so I gave up trying to do everything myself and leaned on the support of my coach and the rest of my support system. I heard the word ‘no’ more times than I thought I could handle, but the most valuable lesson I learnt from sports intelligence was that resilience is key. So with that single lesson in mind, I kept knocking until doors were opened.”



■ KEY LEARNINGS

A few things stood out as significant when I reflected on Janet's case. The first is that she had already established a ‘platform for change’ – she was motivated to see this through.

Second, the diagnostic assessment suggested that she needed to make significant changes in her lifestyle and day-to-day management of herself, relationships, and her network.

Third, the fact that she had a team of skilled practitioners, coupled with a ‘can-do’ and motivational attitude towards the change meant that her stakeholders and people resources were all aligned with her goals, and supportive of her. She had an ‘on field’ (training, diet, posing, and competition) and an ‘off-field’ plan (psychological and social support, sports intelligence team).

Fourth, the action-oriented approach to learning continued to help her to yield improved results. She has a thirst for knowledge and experience and uses this to guide all facets of her sport.

Finally, she grew spiritually as a person. Both her sport and its continued progress helped her appreciate her talent and gifts to an even greater extent.

The take-home message is that going to the gym and training will get you so far. But there's a much more complex picture – an entire system – at play here, including your beliefs, your support system and your motivation, to name just a few aspects. Learning to approach your training with brain as well as brawn, can really take you to the next level. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr Garrath Rosslee is a consulting industrial psychologist with a doctorate in sports intelligence, and an avid sports fan and participant in his free time. He can be contacted via his website www.sports-intelligence.com.