

A Psychological Profiling System for Elite Cricketers



The enormous demands of a professional athlete's life are more than purely physical: the mental pressures can also be huge. The climb up the performance pyramid, the burdens of fame and celebrity, the months away from home – all can take their toll. It is no surprise that more and more leading figures are now admitting personal issues have damaged their sporting careers.

The University of Exeter's Centre for Sport, Leisure and Tourism is working with the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) to create a psychological profiling system to tackle this increasingly recognised problem. The aim is to identify and address potential concerns as early as possible, so giving the stars of the future the support they need as individuals and helping them to realise their full potential.



Overview

England's cricketers have enjoyed many triumphs in recent years, including regaining the Ashes, winning the World Twenty20 Cup and topping the Test rankings. But a tragic side of the professional game has emerged alongside the triumphs: Marcus Trescothick, Andrew Flintoff, Steve Harmison, Matthew Hoggard and Michael Yardy are among the high-profile players who have confessed to severe bouts of depression.

This is by no means an issue confined to the English game or, indeed, cricket. New Zealand players Iain O'Brien and Lou Vincent have spoken of similar problems. In 2009 Robert Enke, who had been touted as Germany's first-choice goalkeeper at the following year's football World Cup, took his own life after concealing his struggles from his team-mates for years. Self-destructive snooker legend Alex Higgins was habitually labelled "flamboyant" in his heyday; many of his friends now believe he was actually schizophrenic.

Many youngsters show signs of sporting potential, but only a tiny minority will attain true excellence. Identifying these precocious talents and nurturing their ability to deliver exceptional performances requires more than years of training and the refinement of their skills: it demands an intimate understanding of each individual and a sympathetic grasp of how to create an environment in which athleticism and, just as importantly, mental toughness can flourish.

This is the thinking behind ongoing research by the University of Exeter, supported by the ECB, into the viability of psychologically profiling players post-selection and pre-entry on to ECB national programmes from under-16 level upwards. The aim is to construct a comprehensive system that will assess players' life histories – including demographics, early childhood, identity, support structures and personality factors – and how these might shape their adjustment and wellbeing in a training and performance environment.

KEY FACTS

- The demands of modern-day professional sport are as psychological as they are physical.
- In recent years many high-profile athletes, particularly from the world of cricket, have admitted to suffering from depression and other psychological conditions.
- Such problems need to be identified as soon as possible if the would-be stars of the future are to realise their full potential.
- Working with the University of Exeter, the England and Wales Cricket Board is developing a comprehensive psychological profiling system to address this issue.
- The system will assess players' life histories – including demographics, early childhood and personality factors – and how these might shape adjustment and wellbeing in a training and performance environment.

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A Psychological Profiling System for Elite Cricketers (cont.)



Comments and implications

"It's all about educating the individuals themselves and the people who look after them," says PhD researcher and ESRC CASE studentship award holder Jodie Green.

"Players whose potential is spotted at an early stage experience various transitions – not only in their lives outside cricket but as they move up the performance pyramid. They have to continually adapt and maintain their wellbeing.

As we've increasingly seen lately, that's not easy. The popular perception is that being a professional sportsman is a wonderful life, but the psychological demands can be extraordinary. Depression, loneliness, anxiety – these are all too common problems that can ruin sporting careers.

Our goal is to develop a system that will 'red-flag' those who might suffer in the future so that coaches and support staff can help them adjust. The idea isn't to stop them carrying on but rather to help them to continue to function normally and, ultimately, to perform excellently under the pressures of elite cricket."

The study, which will conclude in 2013, has so far worked with more than 100 young players, many of whom are at an age when even they might not fully understand the difficulties they could face.

"One key finding so far is that they need to feel a part of as many groups as possible," says Green, who is working with experts from Exeter's health

sciences and psychology departments and Dr Wil James, National Lead of the ECB's Performance Psychology Team.

"It's very important they have a life beyond cricket. That can't be taken away from them – they mustn't feel they have nothing left and no-one to turn to outside the sport."

Building on the ECB's existing approach, the research comprises a mainstream psychology framework and uses both quantitative and qualitative methods. The results will eventually be used to develop a profiling system that will be widely disseminated within the ECB.

Dr James said: *"In recent years even players at or near the level of world's best have suffered mental health problems that in some cases have cut their careers short, and the pressures they cite are typical within the modern game.*

We need everyone to gain an in-depth understanding of players' individual needs so they can assist their transition, adjustment and performance on our programmes. We want to create exceptional training environments so those who show talent at an early age have the greatest chance of enjoying sustained success."

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Jodie Green
ESRC Researcher

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Dr Wil James
National Lead, ECB Performance Psychology Team

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