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Why stress in sport need not leave you stumped

Jonathan Trott's decision to leave England's Ashes tour of Australia due to long-term stress related illness highlights the critical role of stress and anxiety in sports. Stress results from a perceived imbalance between the demands placed upon an individual and the resources that the individual has to deal with such demands (e.g. social support). Many theories have been proposed in the psychological literature to explain how stress affects performance in sport. Most of these theories argue that stress undermines sport performance, however, it has also been argued that for some individuals stress can be perceived as facilitative to sport performance. In fact, some athletes can thrive under pressure. For example, Michael Johnson, four times Olympic gold medal winner in athletics, has remarked that "pressure is nothing more than the shadow of great opportunity".

High pressure situations are evident in many sports. For example, the England football team has a notorious record on penalty taking in international competitions. In cricket, batsmen such as Trott, have to deal with balls aiming at them at very high speeds. Other factors on and off the pitch can cause stress. For example, very high expectations from teammates, coach, friends, fans, and the media, the importance of the competition, taunts from opponents (as might have been the case with Trott) can increase levels of stress. Sometimes athletes face problems outside sport (e.g. romantic relationships) or have mental health problems that are broader and not related to their sport experiences.

Although some athletes feel that seeking psychological support is a sign of mental illness, these athletes tend to be in the minority. Many athletes acknowledge that sport psychology is an integral part of modern sport science provision and can help to optimise sport performance. For example, a suitably qualified sport psychologist (e.g. with a clinical psychology background) can offer advice about broad life issues or support with clinical levels of depression and anxiety. Further, sport psychologists, including those with a non-clinical background, can teach athletes a number of mental skills such as visualisation, positive self-talk, developing focus, practising under simulated match conditions during training, using relaxation techniques, and identifying skills or actions that are most affected by pressuring situations.

Developing athlete confidence and mental toughness can also be instrumental in dealing with stress. Further, social support by teammates, coach and family members, and enhanced communication can also help athletes (or other sports personnel) to deal better with debilitating levels of stress, and avoid tragic incidents such as Gary Speed's suicide due to depression.

Mental health issues among sports people are increasingly being recognised and discussed among sport professionals. Such issues need not to be hidden under the carpet nor treated as trivial or as indicators of poor athlete motivation. Hopefully, the sympathetic response that Trott has received from his teammates, Australian cricketers, and the press, will encourage other athletes with similar mental health-related problems to be more open about these problems and seek professional help.

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