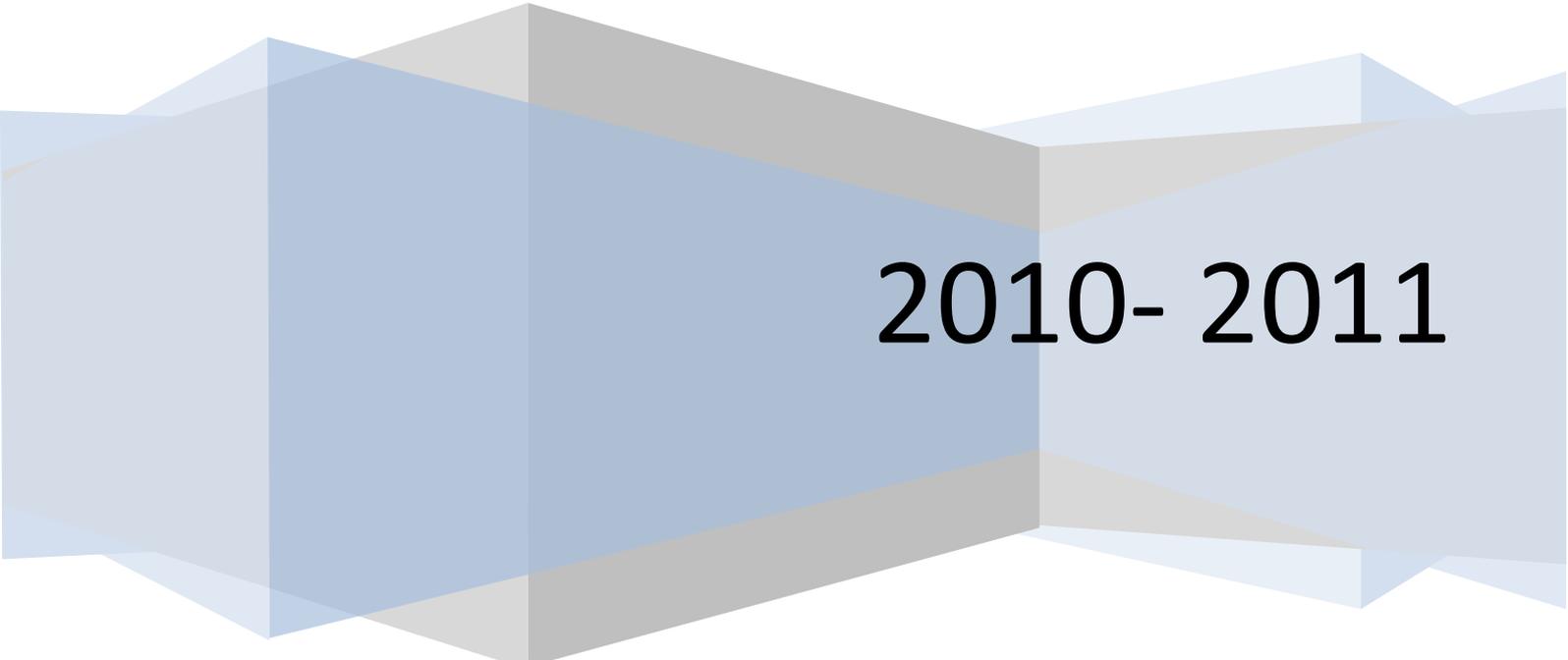


Level 3 Coaching Course

Stress, as it Relates to the Coach's Performance

Task 13 Written Assignment

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Introduction

Stress is a common problem that affects all of us at some point in our lives. In today's hectic life the demands placed upon us has meant stress awareness is much more to the forefront of our daily lives.

Coaching can be an extremely stressful profession or pursuit in an amateur environment. As well as expectation from organisation or club there are the diverse and fundamental components of the role including facilitating peak player performance, facilitating peak team performance, managing group dynamics, managing support staff and coping with the scrutiny and criticism of all involved.

Quality Corporate Stress Management and Resilience Programs have been in place in the corporate world for some time now. There is measurable return on investment in the corporate world where responsible businesses know the value of managing the health and well being of their workforce. Such programs vary from proactive stress identification and management to robust Employee Assistance Programs.

Many athletes suffer from stress and anxiety on a daily basis and much research has been done on how that can negatively impact on performance. There are also a number of stress responses or stress management approaches that are available to the athlete. Stress Response is covered in more detail later in this paper.

Research has also been conducted into sport related stressors, coping and emotion among professional rugby union players. In this research concentration in more directly on training and playing impact with the top three (3) stressors being Physical Errors, Mental Errors and Injury. As a point of interest Coach Criticism ranks fourth (4th).

When it comes to coaches, in this case specifically rugby union, there is little research and data available. There is no doubt however the fundamental causes and management are not dissimilar. Within the wider community especially the sporting community coaches appear to function effectively despite the exposure to issues of adversity that can lead to stress. Stress resistant (not stress proof) is a term that can be used and it will be resultant from building resistance to adversity.

Stress should not be viewed as negative phenomena; the right amounts of stress can actually enhance performance and this will naturally vary by individual. If a coach can learn how to recognise when their stress is getting too high and how to manage that then they are going to be able to more consistently function at an optimal level.

A key question that came out of the research for this paper was "does the contributors to, and management of stress, vary between professional and amateur coaches?"

Stress Definition

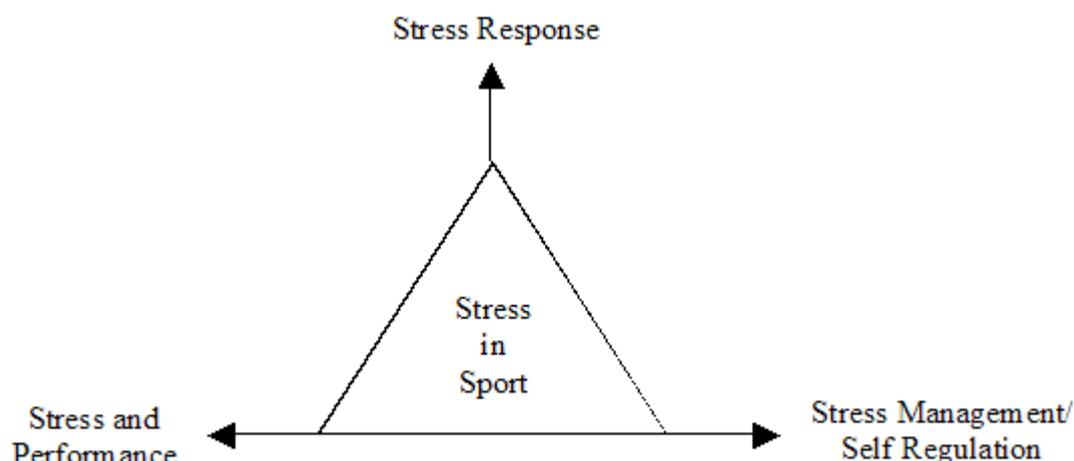
If In order to effectively manage stress or for coaches to build resilience to stress it is critical we understand what it actually is. There is no doubt it is a large and complex but this section of the document will provide for some context.

Stress is a term in psychology and biology, borrowed from physics and engineering and first used in the biological context in the 1930s, which has in more recent decades become commonly used in popular parlance. It refers to the consequence of the failure of an organism — human or other animal — to respond adequately to mental, emotional, or physical demands, whether actual or imagined.

Signs of stress may be cognitive, emotional, physical, or behavioral. Signs include poor judgment, a general negative outlook, excessive worrying, moodiness, irritability, agitation, inability to relax, feeling lonely, isolated or depressed, acne, aches and pains, diarrhea or constipation, nausea, dizziness, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, eating too much or not enough, sleeping too much or not enough, social withdrawal, procrastination or neglect of responsibilities, increased alcohol, nicotine or drug consumption, and nervous habits such as pacing about, nail-biting, and neck pains.

The term stress was first employed in a biological context by the endocrinologist Hans Selye in the 1930s. He later broadened and popularized the concept to include inadequate physiological response to any demand. In his usage stress refers to a condition and stressor to the stimulus causing it. It covers a wide range of phenomena, from mild irritation to drastic dysfunction that may cause severe health breakdown.

Another definition of stress and more relating to that of athletes and coaches, and more relating to stress for performance enhancement is from Martens, Vealey, and Burton (1990). Their research stated, "Stress has been defined as stimulus, intervening and response to variables by different researchers. As a stimulus variable stress is a precipitator; as an intervening variable, a mediator; and as a response variable, a behaviour." There are many factors which can cause stress for an athlete or coach. The diagram below demonstrates the stress model in sport.



Stress Model, Graham-Jones & Hardy (1990)

Influencing Factors

Off Field Stresses

Importantly we need to recognise there are on field and off field stresses. For the purposes of this paper off field is anything outside of the immediate coaching environment and activities associated.

Stress is your body's reaction to the demands of the world and there are two (2) main types of stress. Your body responds to stressors differently depending on whether the stressor is new, **acute** stress, or whether the stressor has been around for a longer time, **chronic** stress.

Also known as the fight or flight response, **acute stress** is your body's immediate reaction to a significant threat, challenge or scare. The acute-stress response is immediate and intense, and in certain circumstances it can be thrilling. Examples of acute stressors include a job interview, a car accident or an exhilarating ski run.

Mild **acute stress** can actually be beneficial; it can spur you into action, motivate and energise you. The problem occurs when acute stressors pile up and stick around. This **chronic stress** can lead to health problems, such as headaches and insomnia. The chronic-stress response is much more subtle than is the acute-stress response, but the effects may be longer lasting and more problematic.

The factors influencing stress will fall into either **external** or **internal** categories and can be positive or negative. Examples of **external** influences are major life changes, environment, unpredictable events, family, workplace and social. **Internal** influencing factors include fear, uncertainty and beliefs. **Internal** influencing factors are more related to thoughts and feelings.

On Field Stresses

Recognising that stress can be beneficial it is critical we also recognise stress can be and in fact is normally disruptive to attaining team goals and aspirations. Players will pick up on stress in a coach and that can result in performance issues.

If stress is not controlled then it is a hard cycle to break so we must recognise what the sources are before we can manage and build resilience to negative stresses. The most likely influences for a coach are:

- Performance of the players
 - Players able to embrace the coaches' philosophies, technical aspects and practical sessions
 - Player preparation is up to the expectation of the coach
 - Competitive performance is up to the expectation of the coach or even realising potential
- Environment and facility
 - Training field and other facilities are of an appropriate quality, including space

- Training equipment is of an appropriate quality
- The coach has the required confidence in the coaching and support staff
- Self performance demands
 - The coach has the right balance and expectation for training
 - The coach has the right balance and expectation for competition
 - In amateur and professional environments the coach has the right balance of family, work and coaching. Performance in any one of these can suffer if the balance is not right
- Club management administrative support
 - The coach is visibly supported in his or her role
 - There are adequate financial resources available
 - The coach endorses the club off field leadership
 - The correct balance is maintained in the on and off field management of the club
- Personal issues of players and coaches
 - Contract issues
 - Private and social life interference
 - Family
- Team Issues
 - Team culture and values are driving the correct behaviours
 - Team dynamic
 - Competition results
 - Team are executing to what is being coached
 - Injury rates and injury management

“We had a team watched two or three times and we analysed them down to the last minute and exactly what they were going to do and exactly what I wanted us to do ...right on cue they made this run and I knew they were going to do it because I had seen them do it and we didn't defend it or even make nearly the right decision. That's stressful!”^{vi}

Symptoms of Stress

There are many signs and symptoms of stress, which are not all experienced by each person, and each person can experience a variety of signs and symptoms.

Ray and Weise-Bjornstal (1999) described seven categories in which an athlete may experience stress. These categories are: affective, behavioural, biological/physiological, cognitive, imaginable, interpersonal, and sensory. Each category has its own signs and symptoms.

A coach may be impacted by one or multiple of these symptoms which in turn will probably have a detrimental impact on performance resultant from the high levels of activation or energy. That detrimental affect will manifest itself in a number of ways and even that manifestation will vary dependant on circumstance and could be pleasurable in one instance but negative in another.

For a player the example is straight forward, a hooker going into a scrum could experience lots of energy, which would help maximise his performance, and he could view this as positive. Alternatively, a goal kicker who is about to take a shot at goal and is experiencing high levels of energy could view this as being unpleasant, because it could be manifested in anxiety, which is not the optimal state for a goal kick.

For the coach the manifestation will take a number of symptoms and behaviours but also because of the high level of activation or energy. Typical response would be:

- Incorrect strategic or tactical thoughts at training or on game day
- Negative thoughts and emotions
- Behaviours that do not adhere to team culture and values
- Pushing the group too hard mentally or physically
- Losing all drive and enthusiasm for the group
- Ineffective communication where emotion can take too much emphasis

The group being coached are then likely to exhibit resultant symptoms such as:

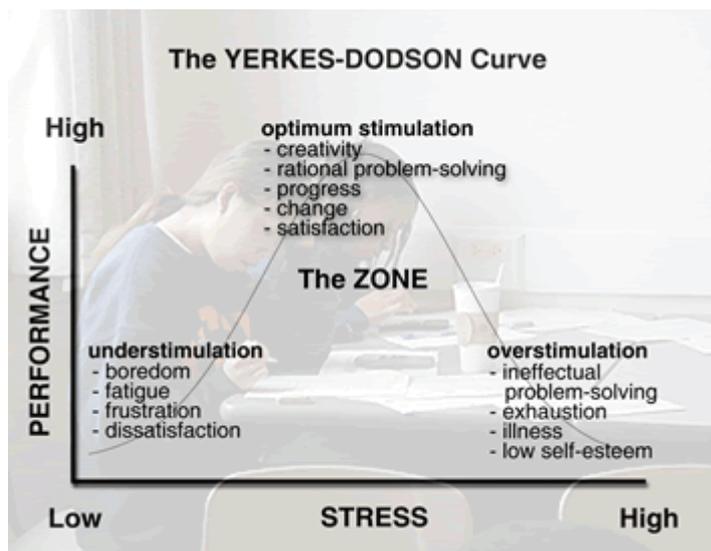
- Coach avoidance
- Variation in levels of confidence, motivation and enthusiasm
- Themselves starting to display and feel stress
- Loss of commitment to the coach and/or group

Benefits of Stress

Although generally thought of with a negative connotation stress does have benefits for both players and coaches. With enhanced activation or energy the player benefit is more obvious but coach benefit can also be apparent. There is no doubt achieving a balance is challenging and the reality is that influencing factors will always impact on any planned or strived for balance.

In the standard Yerkes-Dodson curve below you can see where optimum levels of stress enhance optimum levels of performance. The obvious outcome from this model is enhanced performance if optimum levels are achieved but with the variables in the role of a coach how many of the components can be planned and acted on with the intention of being in “the zone” as often as possible or probably even more so, when most appropriate?

The reality is that yes you can plan for optimum output but such a plan must also include contingency for when weather, injury, error, external influences and many more other events occur. In other words “control the controllables” with contingency.



Stress Management and Resilience

Stress Management

Recognising an issue is the first step to controlling it. A coach must be able to be aware of what potential stressors they are exposed to and from where they come from. They must also understand the potential impact and whether they can cope and control with it.

The previous sections of this paper have described the stressors, where they may come from and the potential impact. Coping and management of stress can be individualised and can be self managed but in more severe cases professional help should be sort.

A coach must concentrate on “controlling the controllables” but also be flexible enough to plan contingency. The more planned complete with contingency the more stress resilient the coach is going to be.

In addition to the planning there are a number of physical and mental approaches that can be considered. As previously stated this is individualised and the coach must work out themselves or with assistance what works best for them.

The model depicted in Figure 1 is a starting point for individualising individual stress management including establishing what the behavioural consequence or performance outcome that is attempting to be attained.

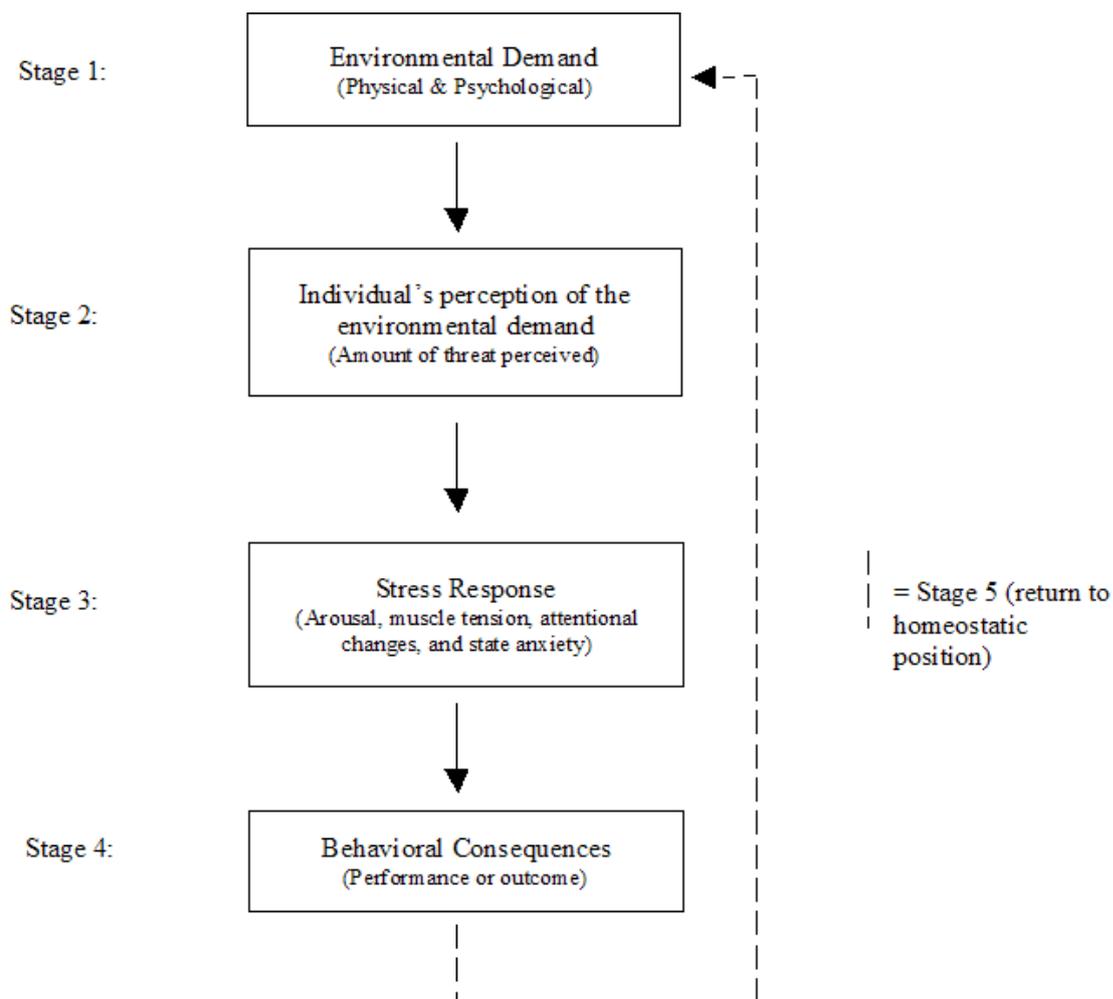


Figure 2

Whereas the following Stress Relievers are not specific to coaching they are recommended for general stress relief and are therefore a consideration for coaches with stress.

1. **Get active**

virtually any form of exercise and physical activity can act as a stress reliever. Physical activity pumps up your “feel good” endorphins and refocuses your mind on your body's movements; improving your mood and helping irritations fade away. Consider walking, jogging, gardening, house cleaning, biking, swimming, weightlifting or anything else that gets you active.

2. **Meditate**

during meditation, you focus your attention and eliminate the stream of jumbled thoughts that may be crowding your mind and causing stress. Meditation instils a sense of calm, peace and balance that benefits both your emotional well-being and your overall health. Guided meditation, guided imagery, visualisation and other forms of meditation can be practiced anywhere at any time, whether you're out for a walk, riding the bus to work or waiting at the doctor's office.

3. **Laugh**

a good sense of humour can't cure all ailments, but it can help you feel better, even if you have to force a fake laugh through your grumpiness. When you start to laugh, it lightens your mental load and actually causes positive physical changes in your body. Laughter fires up and then cools down your stress response and increases your heart rate and blood pressure, producing a good, relaxed feeling.

4. **Connect**

when you're stressed and irritable, your instinct may be to wrap yourself in a cocoon. Instead, reach out to family and friends and make social connections. Social contact is a good stress reliever because it can distract you, provide support, help you weather life's up and downs, and make you feel good by doing good. Take a coffee break with a friend, email a relative, volunteer for a charitable group, or visit your place of worship.

5. **Assert yourself**

you might want to do it all, but you probably can't, at least not without paying a price. Learn to say no to some tasks or to delegate them. Saying yes may seem like an easy way to keep the peace, prevent conflicts and get the job done right. But it may actually cause you internal conflict because your needs and those of your family come second, which can lead to stress, anger, resentment and even the desire to exact revenge.

6. **Do yoga**

with its series of postures and controlled-breathing exercises, yoga is a popular stress reliever. Yoga brings together physical and mental disciplines to achieve peacefulness of body and mind, helping you relax and manage stress and anxiety. Try yoga on your own or find a class — you can find classes in most communities. Hatha yoga, in particular, is a good stress reliever because of its slower pace and easier movements.

7. **Sleep**

other activities often mean sleep is a lower priority. You have too much to do and too much to think about and your sleep suffers, but sleep is the time when your brain and body recharge. The quality and amount of sleep you get affects your mood, energy level, concentration and overall functioning. If you have sleep troubles, make sure that you have a quiet, relaxing bedtime routine.

8. **Journal**

writing out thoughts and feelings can be a good release for otherwise pent-up emotions. Don't think about what to write just let it happen. Write whatever comes to mind. No one else needs to read it, so don't strive for perfection in grammar or spelling. Just let your thoughts flow on paper or computer screen. Once you're done, you can toss out what you wrote or save it to reflect on later.

9. **Get musical**

listening to or playing music is a good stress reliever because it provides a mental distraction, reduces muscle tension and decreases stress hormones. Crank up the volume and let your mind be absorbed by the music. If music isn't your thing, though, turn your attention to another hobby you enjoy, such as gardening, sewing, sketching anything that requires you to focus on what you're doing rather than what you think you should be doing.

10. **Seek counsel**

If new stressors are challenging your ability to cope or if self-care stress relievers just aren't relieving your stress, you may need to look for reinforcements in the form of professional therapy or counselling. Therapy may be a good idea if stress leaves you feeling overwhelmed or trapped, if you worry excessively, or if you have trouble carrying out daily routines or meeting responsibilities at work, home or school. Professional counsellors or therapists can help you identify sources of your stress and learn new coping tools.

Build Stress Resilience

“Resilience is the process of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances. It involves ‘bouncing back’ from difficult situations and experiences. Resilience is not a trait that coaches either have or do not have. It involves behaviours, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In addition to stress management building a coaches stress resilience capability is a key skill or tool for a coach to acquire.

Building resilience starts with identifying the protective factors that modify or alter a coach's response to stress. Many of the protective factors are already key components to the coach in normal activities and may already be in use intuitively. The following are the key protective factors:

- Proactive orientation – a positive and realistic approach that can act on environment and situation rather than being passive to it. With the use of resources and opportunities this skill allows for the confident management of obstacles
- Self regulation – the regulation and control of thoughts, emotions and behaviours. Regulating emotions will enable the coach to get positive attention from others so as to allow healthy relationships with players, fellow coaches and support staff
- Mentors – to provide thought stimulating, positive and supportive environment
- Connections and attachments – a strong support network of family and friends means a coach is less vulnerable to anxiety, depression and external problems. The coach must be active in this skill and not rely on others to initiate or cultivate the relationships
- Coaching achievements – the more success a coach has the more confidence they will have in tackling difficult and stressful situations. Building resilience requires the coach to know and focus on the strong areas of competence.

To build the best resilience you can as a coach trust in yourself and your abilities, and apply them each and every day.

Conclusion

Stress is a phenomenon in modern day life; it takes on many shapes and has many influences on our day to day lives. Coaches are more susceptible to stress but if the correct balance of identification, management and building resilience are adopted then stress can be used as a benefit.

Individual stress management and resilience building is not a cookie cut solution that can be rolled to the masses; it is an individualised and planned approach using the resources, experts and support available to the coach. Stress management must come with an assertive approach so as to achieve the optimum outcomes.

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ⁱ Unknown author but an apt quote picked up in research

ⁱⁱ *Justin McNamara, Psychologist, Performance Psychology, Australian Institute of Sport*