

Sports psychologists suffer fear and uncertainty working with elite footballers

November 8 2017

Sports psychologists have to cope with "fear and uncertainty", job insecurity and long working hours when working with elite footballers, research shows.

The experts are being increasingly used to give teams a competitive edge, but they have to face the pressure of losing their job when the football managers they work with are sacked or move, as well as long working hours and the constant need to prove themselves and to please others.

The study, carried out with a psychologist who worked with a Premier League team, also suggests clubs are using sports psychologists who are untrained and unqualified and this could be dangerous for players. It warns there are few [job opportunities](#) for sports psychology and no structured career path.

The profession is relatively new, but sport and exercise psychologists are now regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council in the UK. The role of a sports psychologist is diverse, but it typically includes working with athletes, coaches, and teams to enhance performance or support athletes who are injured, stressed or having difficulties managing their emotions. They also help sportsmen and women to better communicate, develop leadership skills, build confidence and find motivation and make the transition to a different career. Psychologists can be based in universities or with directly with teams or players.

The research gives a rare glimpse into the working life of a sports psychologist in the English Premier League. "John", who co-authored with study with academics from the University of Exeter and University of Portsmouth, is in his mid-30s and had worked for over a decade as a sports psychologist within the English Premier League (EPL) and the higher echelons of English County Cricket.

John described how the role of a sports medic or psychologist can be incredibly rewarding when the team wins. But it is also precarious, and they often don't benefit from job security or statutory entitlements because of their links with managers and coaches, who themselves often dismissed with no notice. Managers and coaches usually bring their own, trusted, staff with them when they move from role to role, as well as their own practices and regime. This means there can be a high turnover of medics and [psychologists](#) in clubs, and the job is highly competitive.

John described how the changeover in managers could be "very volatile and unpleasant". He had seen five managers come and go in five years.

"This brings fear and uncertainty because any time there's change you don't know whether your face is going to fit. A lot of people will not believe that psychology has a place and that's not a reflection on you or your capabilities, it's just that they don't want it in their team, or say they do and just sideline you. Or they have their own people, or a friend or a psych who they've used before, so you're always at the mercy of one person's attitude or perception, their team and their networks. All of this adds to the precarious nature of the work. You do the best you can to survive and hopefully thrive as well."

John described sometimes having to "hide" what he did. He worked with two coaches who didn't believe in sports psychology. They wouldn't let him speak to any of their players but he was able to work with players as part of a programme designed to support them off-field. Once the

coaches saw this was successful they allowed him to carry out more sports psychology work.

John helped professional sportspeople to improve their performance, develop and secure a place in the first team and helping them with issues or crises. He used different techniques, including one-to-one sessions with players to help them regulate their emotions and concentrate and set goals. He has now left club football for a more secure career in performance research and consultancy.

John said: "It's a life decision that you make to be fully involved in a team. You live and breathe what happens to them. You do whatever it takes. Everything must be done now, it's a very instant culture and if you can do something to help the team win the next game then you need to do it. Ultimately it consumes your whole life and makes you vulnerable to change because you're invested in it."

More information: Sarah Gilmore et al, Sports psychology in the English Premier League: 'It feels precarious and is precarious', *Work, employment and society* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0950017017713933](https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017017713933)

Provided by University of Exeter

Citation: Sports psychologists suffer fear and uncertainty working with elite footballers (2017, November 8) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-11-sports-psychologists-uncertainty-elite-footballers.html>

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