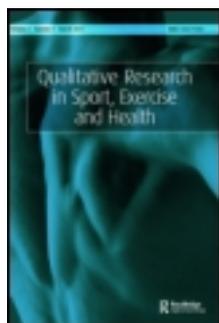


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### Helping youth sport coaches integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice

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## Helping youth sport coaches integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice

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Researchers have demonstrated the benefits of psychological skills training for athletes, but few studies have examined how coaches integrate such skills in their coaching practice. Empirical evidence indicates that the coaches have a preference to learn psychological skills in a user-friendly manner with consultant support. The purpose of the current study is to help youth sport coaches integrate psychological skills (leadership, goal-setting, self-awareness, visualisation) in their coaching practice. A sport psychology researcher worked with nine high school coaches from the sport of Canadian football during an entire season conducting interviews, workshops and observations. Findings indicated that the researcher was able to put in place an initiative that helped the coaches integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice. Generally, the coaches indicated that the partnership was beneficial but also mentioned how it could be improved in various ways. Findings are discussed using the current literature on youth development through sport and suggestions are offered to professionals working with youth sport coaches.

**Keywords:** leadership; goal-setting; self-awareness; visualisation; adolescents

In recent years, a growing number of empirical studies have demonstrated how psychological skills training (PST) effectively enhances athlete performance and that athletes enjoy using psychological skills (e.g. Rogerson and Hrycaiko 2002, Thelwell *et al.* 2006). Vealey (1988) defined PST as the implementation of strategies designed to help sport participants learn psychological skills that allow for the assessment, monitoring and adjustment of thoughts and feelings. Examples of psychological skills include leadership, goal-setting, self-awareness and visualisation, which can be employed to increase performance, encourage a positive approach to competition and achieve personal well-being.

### PST with young athletes

Many PST programmes have been developed for elite athletes (e.g. Thelwell and Maynard 2003, Beauchamp *et al.* 2012) but for many years, researchers (e.g. Vealey 1988) have argued for more programmes to be designed for other populations, particularly young athletes who are undergoing considerable psychological

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development. PST programmes for young athletes can be effective because they can facilitate athletes' personal growth and provide them with the mental toughness needed to thrive in and out of sport (Gucciardi *et al.* 2009b). In the last decade, several researchers have developed programmes designed to provide PST to young athletes. For example, Fournier and colleagues (2005) designed a 10-month PST programme for 11–13-year-old French female gymnasts. Results indicated that the programme was effective in helping the athletes learn imagery, relaxation and focusing skills. Sheard and Golby (2006) conducted a seven-week PST programme with 10–18-year-old swimmers in the UK. Results suggested that the programme helped participants develop better coping skills and led to improvements in swimming performance. Gucciardi and colleagues (2009a, 2009b) conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses of two PST programmes for Australian football players who were on average 14 years of age. Quantitative results demonstrated that participants involved in the PST programmes reported more positive changes for mental toughness, resilience and flow than control group participants. Qualitative findings indicated that participants enjoyed the PST programmes because they helped them improve their preparation, increase their work ethic and enhance their mental toughness. Collectively, these studies form a growing body of evidence indicating that PST can facilitate sport performance and personal development.

### **PST with youth sport coaches**

Although a number of studies have examined the efficacy of PST for young athletes, relatively few studies have explored how youth sport coaches integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice. One study examined junior tennis coaches and found that they did not make use of psychological skills frequently, citing a lack of content information and practical training resources (Gould *et al.* 1999). Other researchers have found similar findings, demonstrating how a lack of knowledge of sport psychology results in inconsistencies in the application of this material (Pain and Harwood 2004, Paquette and Sullivan 2012). Gould and colleagues (1999) suggested that coaches receive information on PST in more user-friendly manners such as hands-on activities as well as coach education opportunities that offer support from consultants. Moreover, Thelwell and colleagues (2008) suggested that coaches become more aware of the psychological skills they require in order to maximise their use in different coaching activities. However, there have been a very limited number of interventions developed precisely to promote coaches' knowledge of PST. One of the few examples is a study conducted by Harwood (2008) who developed a four-month programme in a football (soccer) academy in Great Britain. The intervention's aim was to help coaches teach psychological and interpersonal skills to young soccer players ranging in age from 9 to 14 years. In total, six coaches were involved in the programme and they were responsible for the development of 95 young players. The intervention was centred on commitment, communication, concentration, control and confidence (the '5Cs' of football), and instructions were provided during five 90-min workshops dedicated to each skill. Following each workshop, the coaches worked to integrate strategies in their coaching practice to teach each skill. The coaches expressed increases in knowledge as a result of having participated in the intervention. However, the researcher noted how the coaches would have benefited from additional workshops

focusing on the PST process in order to implement these principles with greater confidence during training sessions.

Based on the past research on PST that has been reviewed, more interventions offering practical workshops and consultant support are needed because they have the potential to help coaches increase their knowledge and confidence in using psychological skills. Herein, the purpose of the current study is to help youth sport coaches integrate psychological skills (leadership, goal-setting, self-awareness, visualisation) in their coaching practice. Emphasis is placed on examining the process of how a sport psychology researcher worked with nine high school coaches from the sport of Canadian football during an entire season. Events are chronologically detailed with a focus on the initiatives undertaken as well as the challenges faced from the researcher's and the coaches' point of view.

## Method

### *Context*

The current study was conducted within the context of high school sport, which is considered a developmental level sport setting (Gilbert and Trudel 2006). In Canada, high school sports are practised after school hours and allow student-athletes (14–18 years of age) to participate in organised competitive leagues that lead to annual regional/provincial championships. Participation in high school sport is viewed as an activity that can enhance fitness, keep student-athletes connected to school and foster the global development of student-athletes, because it serves as a natural extension of the classroom (Gould and Carson 2008, Holt *et al.* 2008). A popular high school sport in Canada is Canadian football which is very similar to American football but with minor differences such as a bigger playing area, larger team size and different sized ball. At the high school level, football is played during the fall semester and teams play eight to 10 games during a condensed season that spans approximately eight weeks. According to School Sport Canada (2011), there are nearly 900 high school football teams across the country.

### *Participants*

#### *The coaches*

The nine coaches in this study were male, aged 23–52 ( $M=35$ ) and had zero to seven years of experience in coaching football ( $M=2.5$ ). The coaches were all part of one football team at a high school in the province of Quebec. Four coaches were teachers at the school while the five other coaches were members of the external community who volunteered to coach. The team was composed of one head coach, two coordinators (offence, defence) and six position coaches. All coaches had post-secondary education and three coaches held post-graduate degrees. Four of the coaches were certified through Canada's National Coaching Certification Programme.

#### *The researcher*

At the time of the study, I (researcher and first author) was a 28-year-old PhD candidate in sport psychology in the process of finalising my dissertation. I was responsible for the project in all three phases: before (i.e. initiating

discussions, getting school administrators' approval, partnering with coaches), during (i.e. conducting interviews, delivering workshops, observing practices and games, writing reports, providing reading material) and after (i.e. analysing data, writing and disseminating findings) the football season. As preparation for my role in this project, I took several advanced courses in the area of sport psychology during my graduate studies. Moreover, I coached high school basketball for four years and gained practical knowledge in the process of teaching psychological skills to student-athletes. However, I had no playing or coaching experiences in the sport of Canadian football.

## **Procedure**

### *Pre-season*

The process was initiated when informal discussions occurred in January 2011 between a former colleague and me. He was now a high school teacher and shared how his school had a sports programme mandated to promote the global development of student-athletes. Canadian football had recently been added to the sports programme because the sport was deemed an effective tool to facilitate the positive development of numerous student-athletes, due to the large team size (approximately 30–50 student-athletes per team at the high school level). The teacher volunteered to serve as one of the team's coaches and asked if I could assist them in applying their sports programme's mandate. I agreed to work with the coaches to help them integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice during the fall 2011 season.

I met with the teacher and school administrators in March 2011 to discuss the nature of my involvement with the team. During the meeting, the administrators emphasised how the football team was deliberately created to facilitate student-athlete development. I explained to them how I could, based on my experiences, help the coaches integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice. Following discussions, the administrators deemed it beneficial for me to work with the coaches during the season.

Upon having formally partnered with the school, I applied for and gained approval from the University's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity to conduct the current project. In April 2011, I met briefly with all nine of the team's coaches after a practice to introduce myself and explain how I could work with them over the course of the upcoming season. The coaches expressed a desire to participate and suggested I take part in a coach meeting at a local pub in May 2011 to explain my intentions in greater detail. During the meeting, I described how I could help them learn more about psychological skills and that their input was important in determining the specific skills we would work to develop during the season. To gather the perspective of each coach, I conducted a first round of semi-structured individual interviews in June 2011 which were framed as informal conversations rather than formal interviews. I asked the coaches to provide demographic information and to discuss their past experiences in sport to better understand their biographies. As the conversation progressed, the coaches also detailed their expectations as it relates to my involvement. For example, the following questions were asked: How do you see my role this season? and What do you wish to gain from my involvement with the team? The interviews ranged in length from 35 to 63 min ( $M=48$ ). Upon being transcribed, I summarised the interview content in an 11-page

document which was shared with the coaches during a meeting in early August 2011. The meeting allowed coaches and me to determine how I would help them integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice.

### *Season*

During the aforementioned August meeting, the coaches expressed how they wanted to be observed throughout the season and wanted me to organise workshops. Therefore, I conducted participant observation (Dewalt and Dewalt 2011) of all eight regular season games and 15 practices. Observations focused on coach–student-athlete interactions and how the coaches made use of psychological skills in their coaching practice. Field notes were taken during each observation session resulting in 50 single-spaced pages of data. Three 90-min workshops were held with the coaches during the season and occurred after practices in the coaches' office at school. At the start of workshops, I provided the coaches with an individualised report based on my observations of their behaviours during previous practices and games. Time was allotted to discuss the reports and for the coaches to ask questions. Following the discussion of reports, I provided the coaches with practical information and strategies on how to integrate psychological skills into their coaching practice. I also offered coaches reading material to further their learning outside of the workshops. Based on the material I presented during the workshops, the coaches decided to implement several strategies to integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice. The strategies used by the coaches (i.e. captains' breakfasts, goal-setting sessions, a peer evaluation and visualisation sessions) are explained in the results. To document my impressions of workshops, I kept a journal resulting in eight single-spaced pages of data.

### *Post-season*

At the season's end, I interviewed the coaches for a second time for them to share what they had experienced during the season. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted and gave each coach the opportunity to discuss the benefits and challenges of integrating psychological skills in their coaching practice. Questions such as: What were your impressions of the workshops? Can you describe your experience of integrating psychological skills? and Did you face any challenges integrating psychological skills? were asked. Interviews were 29–54 min ( $M=40$ ) in length. All interviews occurred in person, were audio recorded, and started by having the coaches provide informed consent.

### *Data analysis*

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by research assistants and resulted in 268 single-spaced pages of data. Upon being transcribed, I reviewed the transcripts thoroughly to check for errors and I sent them to coaches via email to have them confirm the accuracy of the shared information. Only minor changes were made. The software NVivo 9 (NVivo 2011) was used to organise the interview transcripts, field notes and journal entries which I read in their entirety twice to identify preliminary trends. I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) whereby the data were organised into meaning units, themes and categories. For example, some meaning units were grouped in the themes of 'lack of openness' and 'being a

rookie coach' which were grouped and organised under the general category of 'challenges'. Regular meetings were organised with a fellow qualitative researcher who reviewed the categories to help increase the credibility of the interpretations. The last step in the analysis consisted of writing the results section. I wrote several versions which were reviewed by the fellow qualitative researcher mentioned above. Ultimately, it was decided to organise the themes and categories chronologically in accordance with the three phases of the study to illustrate the process that was undertaken to help coaches integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice. Excerpts from interviews, field notes and journal entries are offered to present the findings from the coaches' and my own perspective.

## Results

### *Pre-season*

During the first interview, the coaches were asked to comment on the role they thought I should play during the season. The general theme that emerged was that of 'support' as the coaches explained how they wanted me to complement their work with student-athletes. The coaches stated that having my support was important, especially because this was the football team's inaugural season. For example, one coach said that when establishing a new football team, coaches must spend most of their time teaching student-athletes the fundamentals of football, which leaves little time for other aspects of coaching: 'Someone that makes us reflect on what we're doing. That's what we're missing. With a new team, we have to teach student-athletes all the technique so having someone that keeps us on track with the other things, that's useful' (C1). Under 'support' appeared the sub-theme of 'material'. The coaches stated how they specifically wanted me to provide them with practical material to support and improve their practice. Two coaches in particular believed that my involvement with the team could help them acquire much needed pedagogical tools: 'I don't have many strategies to work with student-athletes. I'd like more tools and opportunities to test them. Someone who says "according to your needs, these are suitable tools, here's how to implement them"' (C3) and 'Sometimes I have ideas to help student-athletes develop but I don't always know how to apply them. Tools to do that; that would be the best' (C8). Another sub-theme of 'support' was 'feedback' as coaches believed I could provide them with useful comments based on their coaching behaviours. One particular coach discussed how he believed my involvement could benefit him greatly, being new to coaching: 'I'm starting, I'm like a sponge for information. It's great that I can get feedback from the start, to go in the right direction immediately' (C9).

As it relates to the initiatives to be implemented, a number of themes emerged. First, the theme 'workshops' appeared as the majority of the coaches discussed how they wanted meetings to be held. The coaches believed that having regular group meetings was essential to help them integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice. For example, one coach said: 'Have sessions, maybe once every two weeks, to look at what we did during those two weeks and ask us questions that make us reflect' (C1). Second, the theme 'observations' emerged as the coaches stated how they wanted me to observe their activities during practices and games. One coach explained how observing would be useful and allow me to understand how the team of coaches operates: 'You'll be working with us so to me, you're part of the team. If your intention is to help us, you need to observe us to know what

you're talking about' (C4). Third, there was the theme 'articles' as some of the coaches mentioned how they wanted me to provide them with reading material related to psychological skills. Coaches discussed how time constraints often impede them from consulting this type of material and that having a person who suggests relevant material would be of value to the team. For example, one coach said: 'Give us articles ... that would be useful because we don't have time to do research on sport psychology and things like that' (C1).

During a meeting in August 2011, I shared with the coaches a report I had prepared that summarised the major themes they had discussed during the interviews. The purpose of the meeting was to decide on the nature of my involvement with the team and it was agreed that I would observe two practices and one game a week and that workshops would be held biweekly. Additionally, I presented many psychological skills during the meeting and offered examples of strategies designed to put those skills into action. The coaches settled on four psychological skills they wanted to try to integrate in their coaching practice during the season: leadership, goal-setting, self-awareness and visualisation. (Journal Entry 17 August 2011). As a result, through this process, I was responsible for selecting and proposing material but the coaches, based on their wants and needs, ultimately had the final say in terms of how I would be involved with the team and what psychological skills I would help them implement in their coaching practice.

### **Season**

#### *Workshop one: leadership*

On 31 August 2011, a workshop was held during which I provided the coaches with a personalised report based on my observations of training camp. The coaches had mentioned in prior meetings how it was a priority for them to use appropriate language around student-athletes by avoiding swearing and disrespectful comments. Therefore, the reports I prepared focused on coach-athlete interactions, and I provided the coaches with samples of comments they had made to student-athletes during practices. Some of the coaches were surprised when reading their reports based on the number of their remarks which included swearing and derogatory comments. A discussion ensued and some coaches proposed measures to minimise swearing, while others stated such comments are part of football. Ultimately, no measures were formally adopted. (Journal Entry 31 August 2011). During the second part of the workshop, I presented information on leadership inspired by recent empirical work in sport (e.g. Voelker *et al.* 2011). Specifically, I discussed the importance of explaining to student-athletes what defines leaders and what their role is in promoting team cohesion, conflict resolution and communication. The aim was to have the coaches use this information during the captains' breakfasts, a weekly initiative conceived by the coaching staff. At meeting's end, I asked the coaches if I could be present at the first captains' breakfast and they approved (Journal Entry 31 August 2011). After the workshop, I emailed Gould and Voelker's (2010) article on leadership to all the coaches as additional reading material.

#### *Integration of leadership*

The morning of 3 September 2011, the first captains' breakfast was held at a restaurant near the school. The goal of this activity was for the coaches to build

relationships and discuss leadership principles with the team's captains. The head coach had organised notes and stood up during the breakfast to explain to captains how it is essential that they inspire others, interact positively with referees and try to get the best out of their teammates. Additionally, he talked about Charles de Gaulle in politics and Mark Messier in ice hockey as examples of great and effective leaders. The two coordinators also addressed the captains and discussed how being a leader is a big responsibility and that as captains, they should always strive to be exemplary team ambassadors on and off the field (Field Notes 3 September 2011). Several themes emerged from the interviews related to the coaches' perspective on the initiatives undertaken to promote leadership. The first theme was labelled 'positive outcomes' as the majority of the coaches expressed how the first workshop and the reading material on leadership had helped them organise the captains' breakfasts effectively. For example, the head coach said: 'I read and I took away things from the email you sent me. How to reach out to student-athletes, how to motivate them. That was useful material definitely' (C7). However, another theme labelled 'less positive outcomes' also emerged because several coaches discussed how subsequent captains' breakfasts were not as productive. Two coaches in particular stated how leadership was not often the topic of focus during captains' breakfast later in the season: 'The first breakfast was awesome. They saw that we're interested in them. You were there, coaches delivered messages. But other breakfasts, we didn't talk about leadership except on a few occasions' (C6) and 'We shared our expectations but we didn't use the breakfasts as well as we could have' (C9). Finally, the theme 'other settings' emerged as it relates to leadership. Several coaches acknowledged that the captains' breakfasts were not always optimally used but explained how the principles of leadership presented during the first workshop were often discussed during other moments of interaction with the student-athletes. This one coach said: 'We used those techniques more during practices, at school, on the bus. That's when it happened, less during the breakfasts' (C6).

#### *Workshop two: goal-setting and self-awareness*

During this workshop, held on 14 September 2011, I prepared a four-page individual report for coaches based on my observations of the events that occurred during the first two weeks of the season. The coaches took time to read their reports and asked questions. I commended the coaches for their work during the first captains' breakfast and shared how I had observed some captains taking on important leadership roles during games (Journal Entry 14 September 2011). The ensuing part of the workshop was dedicated to goal-setting and I presented material on how to design goal-setting strategies based on recommendations from the scientific literature (e.g. Burton *et al.* 2001). I told the coaches how I had observed during the first two weeks of the season that goal-setting was used as a strategy by some of the coaches. However, goals were decided by the coaches, promoted a performance climate and were not revised. I explained to the coaches the benefits of having student-athletes involved in the goal-setting process, having goals that promote a mastery climate and revising goals periodically. The last part of the workshop was used to discuss self-awareness. I offered material on this psychological skill and explained to the coaches the benefits of having student-athletes identify and become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, I presented to the coaches a peer evaluation strategy that can

be used to promote self-awareness and they decided to conduct this activity the following week (Journal Entry 14 September 2011).

### *Integration of goal-setting*

To promote goal-setting skills, the offensive and defensive coordinators decided to meet in classrooms before games with their respective groups to establish goals. Relating to goal-setting, the theme 'evolution' emerged as a number of the coaches indicated during the interviews how they witnessed a clear progression in how goal-setting was used after the second workshop. For example, two of the coaches shared how the workshop triggered a reflection process that made them realise how goal-setting can be an effective tool when appropriately used: 'What you said during the workshop, it made us reflect. After, we asked players "What do you want to achieve?" It motivated them and they always had their goals in their heads on the side-line' (C6) and 'At the beginning, we said "here are our goals for the game". After, we realised that they're the ones on the field so we should have their goals' (C8). Several coaches explained in detail the actual steps that were taken by the coaching staff to promote effective goal-setting. One coach said: 'At mid-season, we saw changes. There were individual goals, goals were written on the board, we revisited goals at practice. It helped us to have specific things to work on' (C3). Finally, one particular coach explained how the importance of revisiting goals with his unit was the most significant lesson he took away from the workshop: 'The first practice after a game, I'd say "What went well? What didn't go so well? Did you achieve your goals?" I'd take 8–10 min for student-athletes to reflect on the game' (C9). During practices, I observed on several occasions how goals were discussed and revisited collectively following games (Field Notes 15 October 2011).

### *Integration of self-awareness*

On 21 September 2011, student-athletes participated in a peer evaluation activity to promote self-awareness. At the start of practice, the head coach explained the rationale for this activity and provided instructions. Student-athletes were separated in groups according to their playing positions (e.g. linemen, receivers), given a clipboard, sheet and pen, and asked to write a strength and weakness for each teammate playing their position. Some coaches actively oversaw student-athletes completing their sheets while others stayed back and observed. The coaches gathered student-athletes' sheets and the following week, a customised report was prepared for each student-athlete detailing what their teammates believe they are good at and what they need to improve on. During my observations, I noticed how most of the coaches appreciated this activity but after 20 min, some of the coaches became impatient because it was taking away practice time for technical skills. The offensive coordinator even started the warm-up, while two student-athletes were still completing their sheets (Field Notes 21 September 2011). The theme 'useful' emerged from the interviews as most of the coaches mentioned how they found the peer evaluation valuable. One particular coach even expressed his intention to employ this activity in other settings: 'For me personally, the peer evaluation, I thought it was great. Eventually, I'd like to integrate that activity in my physical activity classes' (C3). Another coach mentioned how he believes that when feedback comes from peers, it has a special impact on student-athletes: 'It's great

because you're being told "You do this good" and "You need to work on this" by people you consider to be practically your brothers. If that doesn't motivate you to improve then I don't know what will' (C8). In contrast, the theme 'negative comments' also emerged. A few of the coaches discussed how they believe the peer evaluation was not positive for some student-athletes who focused solely on the negative remarks. One coach explained how some student-athletes found it difficult to receive critical feedback: 'Clearly, they reflected. Some were frustrated by comments made and the positive points, they didn't talk about them. They just said "What's all this stuff that I don't run fast enough?"' (C6). The final theme related to self-awareness was 'priorities'. Several coaches reflected on how the peer evaluation activity was implemented rather superficially and should have had a bigger influence. One coach, in particular, discussed that the timing of the activity might not have been optimal as coaches had other things on their mind during that practice: 'I don't think we provided instructions seriously. We were stuck in football mentality, getting prepared for the playoffs and it was put aside too quickly' (C6).

### *Workshop three: visualisation*

A workshop was held on 3 October 2011 during which I presented to the coaches a two-page individual report based on my observations of coaches integrating goal-setting and the peer evaluation activity in their coaching practice. I shared how I had observed substantial improvements in how goal-setting was being used. I gave the example of how I had observed the defensive coordinator forming a huddle before a game and having his group of student-athletes choose three task-oriented goals (Field Notes 24 September 2011). Moreover, we talked about the peer evaluation activity and some of the coaches said they had discussed the results with student-athletes, while others had not (Journal Entry 3 October 2011). During practice, I observed the defensive line coach talk to his student-athletes one-on-one in the bleachers to discuss their strengths and weaknesses (Field Notes 28 September 2011). The last part of the workshop was dedicated to defining visualisation, explaining its purpose and detailing the benefits. To demonstrate how visualisation can be used, I shared a YouTube video of Michael Jordan discussing his mental preparation before games. I also talked about the Quick Set routine developed by Jeff Simons and suggested that the coaches use this activity to help student-athletes improve their focus (Crust 2012). This three-phase routine takes 20–30 s and is designed to be used as a means of refocusing after a distraction. First, athletes close their eyes and focus on maintaining deep rhythmic breathing. Second, athletes envision a successful performance and direct their attention to the positive emotions associated with that performance. Third, athletes return their attention to the present and focus on what they must do, in the moment, to achieve optimal performance. Finally, I explained how coaches can use keywords to promote self-talk and help student-athletes refocus during games.

### *Integration of visualisation*

The main theme that emerged from the interviews as it relates to visualisation was 'application'. Most of the coaches were able to provide concrete examples of how they integrated proper visualisation strategies in their coaching after the third workshop. One coach discussed how his initial conception of visualisation was

transformed based on the information he received in the workshop: ‘I had ideas about visualisation, you sit down, close your eyes. However, you said “That’s good but you need to have them thinking more specifically” My idea was just to keep them calm. It was interesting to learn that’ (C5). Another coach mentioned how he encouraged student-athletes to use visualisation after they had just committed a mistake on the field: ‘It’s something I encouraged a lot. On the side-line, I’d say “Imagine the next series, how opponents make their move and how you react”’ (C9). Also related to the theme of ‘application’, some of the coaches explained how they integrated YouTube videos during their pre-game preparation to provide student-athletes with cues to visualise their performance: ‘To help visualise, we had a clip of Ray Lewis, we used it all the time, players were really pumped, it helped them a lot’ (C3). Two coaches in particular mentioned being inspired to use keywords as verbal cues to help student-athletes refocus during games: ‘One thing I really used was keywords. As you suggested, we watched clips and my keyword became “Ray Lewis”. I saw results and visualisation is something I want to use more’ (C1) and ‘I used the word “game time”, the name of the song in the Ray Lewis clip. When they went back on the field, it was “game time”! They thought of the song. I think it worked’ (C8). That same coach mentioned how he believes visualisation and the videos were well received by the student-athletes: ‘We’d tell them “close your eyes, think about your performance”. After, we saw that they were ready. I think it had an influence and they were eager for videos because that meant the game was close’ (C8). During the second half of the season, I often observed the coaches using visualisation during games. For instance, I observed how a coach talked to a student-athlete after he had just fumbled the ball and told him to practice seeing himself grab the ball, secure the ball and then run (Field Notes 8 October 2011).

#### *Final part of the season*

A workshop to discuss with the coaches their experience of integrating psychological skills was scheduled for 17 October 2011 but did not occur because few coaches were available to meet. Some of the coaches were too busy with school-related obligations, while others wanted to concentrate their efforts on making the play-offs. Nonetheless, several coaches continued to be interested in integrating psychological skills during the rest of the season. Several coaches were regularly in contact with me via email and asked for additional reading material which I gladly forwarded. I made efforts to provide articles relevant to the coaches that specifically discussed high school football and student-athlete development (e.g. Gould *et al.* 2007) (Field Notes 3 October 2011). Moreover, one coach asked to meet individually before a practice. During our conversation, he mentioned how the articles he had read had triggered a reflective process that made him realise the importance of deliberately integrating in his coaching practice activities that promote student-athletes’ global development (Field Notes 11 October 2011).

#### ***Post-season***

##### *Perceived benefits*

A number of themes emerged related to how my involvement with the team benefited the development of coaches. The first theme was labelled ‘transformational’ as

a few of the coaches discussed how the information they had been exposed to during the season had significantly influenced their coaching approach. For example, this one coach explained how the material presented during workshops and in the articles provided him with the structure necessary to focus his efforts on promoting the global development of student-athletes:

In my head, I knew the results I wanted to achieve but I didn't have the tools to do it. This year, I was able to try new things. It allowed me to change my style and I was positively surprised. I realised that it's ok to not always be focused on winning. Now, I try to make student-athletes understand that football can be more than just learning techniques. I try to work harder to develop student-athletes as people. (C1)

The second theme of 'articles' was developed because the majority of the coaches discussed how the reading material was beneficial. For one coach, the articles helped him comprehend the messages I was communicating during the workshops: 'The articles you sent me, I read them to see how other football coaches promoted development. Having those readings really helped me understand what you were trying to show us' (C1). For another coach, the reading material proved useful in helping him coach beyond the technical side of sport: 'You provided a lot of literature which helped. I learned important processes that as coaches we must implement on a regular basis during a season' (C5). The third theme 'reports' was created as several coaches discussed the benefits of receiving individual reports based on my observations. For example, one coach explained how the comments I provided allowed him to modify how he interacted with student-athletes: 'It influenced me because at the beginning, rightfully, you said I was negative and didn't participate much. I wasn't seeking out the positives. It was good. Being observed, you can only benefit from it' (C4). For another coach, the reports served as a great self-evaluation tool: 'I liked it. It was a rare occasion where we got to assess our comments and behaviours. Often, we said: "Ah, I'm really like that!"' (C7). The fourth theme was labelled 'selection' as some of the coaches discussed how they did not integrate in their coaching practice all of the material that was presented during the season. For example, one coach reflected on how he incorporated certain skills (e.g. goal-setting) but decided to maintain his original approach in other areas (e.g. swearing in front of players): 'For sure I reflected. I thought about things when you gave us feedback "What should I change?" "Is this for me?" Some things I changed but others, it's my style. I purposely decided not to change' (C2).

### *Perceived challenges*

Although the coaches stated that my involvement with the team was beneficial on several levels, it was not without its challenges. Three themes emerged that represented challenges from the coaches' perspective. The first theme was labelled 'lack of openness' and refers to some of the coaches' initial reticence to fully participate in the intervention. For most, this reticence was attributed to a lack of exposure to sport psychology principles and their utility in coaching. For example, one coach said: 'It took me a while to understand what you presented during workshops and how it could help me. It's about personal openness and for some, it takes longer than others' (C1). Some of the coaches offered explanations for their initial apprehensions. One coach blamed football's subculture which promotes very specific ways of doing things: 'When you provided feedback, some coaches were thinking

“Well, this is how football works”. Your comments went against football’s mentality but when we got past that, what you said was really good for coaching’ (C7). For another coach, my lack of football experience was a key factor: ‘My point is that you probably would’ve been a more effective resource had you played football. You haven’t lived football’s culture. We probably would’ve been more receptive had it come from someone who played’ (C2). The second theme was labelled ‘responsibilities’. Most of the coaches discussed how it was challenging to balance professional, personal and coaching obligations and finding time to actively participate in the project. For example, this one coach expressed how he was initially open to participating in the activities that were organised during the season but simply did not have the time to invest himself appropriately: ‘I don’t think the workshops had that big of an influence on my coaching. It’s my fault. I’m still chasing my time. The articles you sent, I didn’t have time to read them’ (C3). The third theme was labelled ‘being a rookie coach’. One of the challenges of being a new coach consisted of coaching while knowingly being observed. Due to a lack of confidence in his coaching competencies, this particular coach discussed how he would lose focus when he knew that I was on the field observing the coaches and taking notes: ‘I found it difficult when you observed. I asked myself “Did I do this right?” “Should I have said that?” “What is he going to say in his report?” I always questioned what I was doing’ (C6).

### *Recommendations*

The coaches provided valuable suggestions to improve the learning process. The theme ‘summary’ emerged and was related to the reading material that was provided to coaches throughout the season. Some of the coaches mentioned how they would have preferred receiving summaries rather than entire papers, because these are less time-consuming and easier to read. For example, one coach said: ‘I consulted the articles you sent but next time, I’d like more precise information. Don’t give me the 45 page report; tell me to go to page 11 or 12 because sometimes it was a bit long’ (C7). Another theme labelled ‘role of the head coach’ emerged. Specifically, a number of coaches suggested how the head coach should have played a more prominent role in helping deliver the information on psychological skills. One coach expressed how this recommendation could be implemented during a future intervention: ‘You joined progressively, negotiated your place. For a first year, we can’t ask for more. If we were to pursue, the head coach should take the lead, be the facilitator to have maximal influence’ (C3). The final theme in this category was ‘individual meetings’. The coaches had varying levels of motivation to learn psychological skills but those who were very interested in this type of material suggested that individual meetings could be organised to supplement the group workshops. This one coach expressed how individual meetings would represent a value-added feature to the intervention: ‘The workshops we had with you, they were after practices and it was difficult to have a big impact. Long-term, for the coaching staff, I think we’d need individual meetings’ (C1).

### **Discussion**

During an entire season of Canadian football at the high school level, a researcher worked with a group of coaches to help them integrate psychological skills in their

coaching practice. Workshops were organised during which individual reports were provided and material on psychological skills was presented. The approach used during workshops was consistent with the recommendations of Gould and colleagues (1999) who suggested that coaches should be provided with material on psychological skills in a user-friendly manner through concrete examples and activities. Although workshops were well received, additional workshops would have been beneficial to further facilitate the integration of the material. Harwood (2008) noted in his study how coaches needed more educational sessions on psychological skills to feel confident enough to implement these principles in training. However, as this and other studies have indicated (e.g. Winchester *et al.* 2012), many high school coaches want to develop their coaching practice but their numerous obligations leave them with sparse time to invest in continuing coach education. Moreover, football seasons are condensed which makes it challenging to plan and deliver workshops like those in the current study. Researchers have discussed how more initiatives that complement formal coach education programmes are needed and for those initiatives to be effective, they must be designed to fit within coaches' daily realities (Gilbert *et al.* 2009, Winchester *et al.* 2012). One initiative that was undertaken in the current study to help coaches integrate psychological skills consisted of offering reading material that they could consult at their own discretion. The coaches shared how the articles were useful and complemented the workshops but also discussed how summaries tailored to their needs would have been even more beneficial. Such findings correspond to those of Reade and colleagues (2008) who found that scientific publications are unlikely sources of information for coaches because they do not have the time to conduct literature searches and prefer summaries that help them solve problems immediately. Thus, it appears that professionals working with youth sport coaches must increase the accessibility of scientific work and present information in a manner that is relevant to coaches' needs.

Although the strategies presented during workshops were believed to be useful, the coaches did not use all of them optimally on a consistent basis. For example, leadership was irregularly discussed during the captains' breakfasts and the peer evaluation was rushed at the start of practice. Several explanations can be put forward to try to explain such findings. First, it might be that as a researcher, I did not effectively convey to coaches the complexities of coaching multifaceted concepts such as leadership and self-awareness. Second, behaviour change takes time and the length of the partnership might not have allowed the coaches to get comfortable using psychological skills (Gould *et al.* 1999). Third, some of the coaches commented on how they sometimes lost sight of the programme's mandate and wanted to maximise practice time to work on student-athletes' technical skills in order to make the play-offs rather than allocate time for psychological skills. High school sports are indeed competitive but as Camiré and colleagues (2009) have argued, it is essential that coaches always keep in mind the fundamental reasons why sports are practiced in academic institutions. Gould and Carson (2008) discussed how increasingly, coaches must deal with a professionalised approach in youth sport where the attainment of extrinsic outcomes is often the primary focus of involvement, diminishing the potential of sport to positively influence athletes' personal development. Although strategies were not always optimally used, some of the coaches shared how having a researcher work with them during the season had a meaningful impact on their coaching practice, allowing them to integrate material that goes beyond simply teaching technical skills. This is an encouraging finding

because the establishment of a coherent philosophy and practice is essential for using sport as a tool for development (Camiré *et al.* 2011). As Gould and Carson (2008) discussed, personal growth does not occur through simple participation; skills must be taught deliberately by coaches in order to foster favourable developmental environments.

The interviews at season's end allowed the coaches to reflect on the challenges faced during the season and to provide suggestions for improving the process. For example, the coaches discussed how they were initially apprehensive about the material presented during workshops, mainly because they felt that I, the researcher, did not understand football's subculture. Trudel and colleagues (2007) discussed how each sport has its own distinct subculture with implicit norms and rules that influence how participants interact with one another. In addition, Pain and Harwood (2004) have stated that academics are often viewed by coaches as being too theoretical and are accused of presenting material with little applicability. To be deemed relevant and increase coaches' openness toward psychological skills, Pain and Harwood stated that it is essential to learn to deal with the cultures of specific sports, present material clearly, and demonstrate the value of psychological skills through concrete examples. Of note is how the coaches in the current study suggested that material on psychological skills might have been better received had the head coach acted as a facilitator. The rationale is that there exists a hierarchy in football where higher-level coaches (e.g. head coaches) have much more influence and decision-making power than positional coaches (e.g. receiver coaches). Therefore, having the researcher deliver workshops with the head coach might have given greater legitimacy to the strategies presented and led even more of the coaches to integrate psychological skills in their coaching. Another advantage of having head coaches involved in the facilitation process is that they have a greater ability to deliver content in a sport-specific language (Pain and Harwood).

An additional challenge faced by some of the coaches consisted of coaching while knowingly being observed. This proved to be especially challenging for less experienced coaches who maybe lacked confidence in their approach to coaching. Individual meetings were not organised in the current study because the coaches did not request them during the pre-season. However, integrating individual meetings might be valuable in future interventions of this type to give coaches opportunities to voice concerns. Moreover, individual meetings can help build connections, promote empathy and further engage participants in the learning process.

### ***Reflections from the field***

The following are the key reflections I share with fellow researchers interested in conducting similar research. First, ensuring the success of the current project required commitment. During the season, I conducted interviews, prepared/delivered workshops, observed practices and games, wrote reports and provided reading material. These initiatives required significant investments in time and energy but were necessary to help the coaches integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice. Second, maintaining the coaches' motivation to participate was testing because they had varied biographies, aspirations and opinions. As a researcher, I constantly had to be in contact with the coaches via email to remind them of upcoming activities because they were often overwhelmed with other obligations during the intense football season. Finally, ensuring that the coaches had a strong input in the

decision-making process was crucial to the successful completion of the study. While designing the study, I initially had conceptions of how it could be efficiently structured; however, I had to allow the coaches to decide the nature of my involvement with the team. For example, I had initially planned to deliver a few more workshops during the season but various factors allowed for a total of three workshops to occur. Consequently, researchers should be cognisant that an ability to constantly adapt to the needs of participants is challenging but ultimately necessary to ensure the success of such studies.

## Conclusion

There are limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, as the primary researcher and first author, I was responsible for overseeing the study in its entirety and the organisation of the findings reflects my interpretations and personal biography. Readers should be aware of the subjective nature of the perspectives provided, even though efforts were made to control for assumptions. Second, a total of three workshops occurred during the season, reflecting the challenges of generating learning activities and dealing with the coaches' multiple obligations during the short and intense football season. Third, the study was conducted with coaches affiliated to a single high school football team. Readers are cautioned from inferring that identical findings would emerge in other sport settings. Nonetheless, more research is needed to better understand how coaches working in different settings can effectively integrate and use psychological skills. Fourth, I as a researcher had no experience in football which might have influenced the coaches' openness to the information and strategies presented during the season. Moving forward, studies are needed to examine more closely how researchers' biographies and credentials affect coaches' receptiveness during interventions.

In spite of these limitations, this study contributes to the scientific literature by examining the process of helping coaches integrate psychological skills in their coaching practice. Although challenges were faced, findings suggest that the coaches believe they benefited from having a researcher work with them during an entire season as they were able to improve their coaching and better facilitate the development of student-athletes. The findings provide viable strategies and suggestions that can be used to facilitate positive change in youth sport settings.

## Notes on contributors

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