



David Tod

# Sport Psychology

the basics

Second Edition

ROUTLEDGE







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# SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

## THE BASICS

*Sport Psychology: The Basics* provides an accessible introduction to the fundamental ideas at the heart of Sport Psychology today. This new revised and updated second edition examines the links between sport participants' behaviours, their personality, and their environment to identify the factors which affect performance. Exploring theory and practice, it uses case studies to illustrate how key areas of theory are applied within a sport psychologist's practice, answering such questions as:

- What is sport psychology and what do sport psychologists do?
- What factors affect sporting performance?
- How can sport psychologists help parents and sport organizations?
- Which psychological characteristics are associated with achievement in sport?
- How can sport psychologists help with athlete's mental health?

With a glossary of key terms, suggestions for further study, and ideas for improving performance, *Sport Psychology: The Basics* is an ideal introduction for students of sport and coaches who would like to know more about how sport psychologists address questions about human behaviour in sport.

**David Tod**, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University. David is a UK-registered practitioner psychologist who has worked with elite, professional, and Olympic athletes across several sports. David's research focuses on sport psychologist expertise development, training, and supervision. David teaches on the sport psychology, sport and exercise science, and strength and

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# SPORT PSYCHOLOGY THE BASICS

SECOND EDITION

David Tod

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# INTRODUCTION

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# CHAPTER LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define sport psychology
2. Distinguish sport psychology from exercise psychology
3. Describe sport psychology as an academic field and as an applied profession
4. Illustrate the scientific basis of sport psychology
5. Show how anyone can use sport psychology knowledge
6. Explain how to become a sport psychology practitioner

Buffy plays for Sunnydale High School's female basketball team. She is about to step up to the free throw line during the final seconds of a close game against a rival school. Her two points, if she puts both free throw attempts through the hoop, will win the game. Unfortunately Buffy has had a terrible year so far after returning from a knee injury that ended her previous season early. She had started the previous season strongly; feeling like the hoop was so large she could have scored with a beach ball. This year, however, Buffy has been hesitant in all parts of the game and has had self-doubts. Giles, her coach, calls a time out to help Buffy relax, but he does not know what to say. Think about what you would say to Buffy if you were the team's sport psychology practitioner.

Buffy's situation illustrates topics falling within the scope of **sport psychology**. Most people would give Buffy advice that had a psychological bent, such as telling her to think positively, to focus on the task, or to take a deep breath and relax. These opinions show that most people are familiar with psychological ideas. This familiarity is one reason why sport psychology is a fascinating subject: most athletes, coaches, and sports fans are able to have a conversation on the topic. As you read the following chapters, you will also probably understand the topics in this book, although you may not use the same scientific jargon as sport psychology practitioners. As well as using technical jargon, practitioners explore sport psychology topics scientifically to help separate valid ideas from those without any

evidence. Studying sport scientifically allows sport psychology practitioners to discover the knowledge and strategies that help athletes improve their performance, enhance their wellbeing, and gain satisfaction from playing sport. In this chapter I will (a) define sport psychology, (b) show how it is different from related topics (e.g., exercise psychology), (c) describe why it is both an academic subject and an applied discipline, (d) explain how it is underpinned by **science**, (e) show how all people can use sport psychology knowledge, and (f) discuss how a person can become a sport psychology practitioner.

## DEFINING SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Sport psychology is the study of behaviour in sport. It is a science that examines how our thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and environment interact during sport. More specifically, sport psychology practitioners try to describe, explain, predict, and maybe even change people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour so they can have more fun, play better, or accrue other benefits from sport, such as reduced **stress** or increased wellbeing. When helping Buffy, for example, a sport psychology practitioner may start by describing the situation. What thoughts does Buffy have at the free throw line? What does she feel? How does she act? What things and people affect her? After describing the situation, a practitioner may try to explain why Buffy behaves, thinks, feels, and performs the way she does. Perhaps her injury has lowered her **confidence** and increased her **anxiety**. Buffy's anxiety might have stopped her making decisions automatically and hindered her from moving in a fluid fashion. Her hesitancy and loss of form may be the reasons for her poor free throw performance. The sport psychology practitioner will then test the explanation to find out if anxiety predicts Buffy's performance. If anxiety does predict performance, then the practitioner can create strategies to help Buffy control her worries and fears, build her confidence, and improve her performance. If Buffy's performance gets better, the practitioner has evidence that the strategies work. The practitioner may then be able to use the strategies to help other athletes control anxiety and play well.

Based on the sport psychology definition above, the discipline has two broad questions (Williams & Straub, 2021):

1. How do psychological factors influence thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and performance in sport?
2. How does playing sport influence a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour?

Examples of the first question include:

- Will relaxation training help Buffy focus on the free throw and perform better?
- Do individuals with negative body image find it difficult to socialize with teammates and will they avoid sports with revealing team uniforms?
- Do sprinters' **self-confidence** levels influence their race times?

Answers to these questions assist sport psychology practitioners to find ways to help athletes achieve **goals** and gain happiness from playing sport.

Examples of the second question include:

- How will Buffy's free throw success or failure influence her self-esteem?
- Can playing team sports teach people leadership and teamwork skills?
- Does sport build character?

Answers to these questions assist sport psychology practitioners, and others, when discussing the value of sport for people and their communities. A common reason for spending public money on sport is the belief that people and communities will attain psychological and social benefits from playing and hosting sporting events. Sport psychology practitioners can examine if these claims about the social value of sport are plausible.

Sport psychology has been influenced by several other scientific fields, principally **psychology** and **sport and exercise science** (which was often labelled Physical

Education or **Kinesiology** when sport psychology grew in earnest during the 1960s and 1970s). Both psychology and sport and exercise science contain sub-disciplines (see [Table 1.1](#)). Well-trained sport psychology practitioners understand the basic principles of the sub-disciplines in Table 1.1. Sport psychology professionals need to understand the basics of these other subjects because psychological factors interact with variables from the other disciplines to influence thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and performance. For example, psychological factors like **self-talk** (the words people say to themselves) influence athletes’ skill levels and abilities, which then affect performance. To illustrate, sport psychology researchers have found that self-talk, such as “I can jump high”, influences athletes’ jumping technique and increases their jump height (Edwards et al., 2008). Understanding how psychological and other factors interact with each other gives sport psychology practitioners a greater understanding of sporting behaviour than if they studied these factors separately.

[Table 1.1](#) Example psychology and sport and exercise science sub-disciplines

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*Psychology*

*Sport and exercise science*

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Counselling psychology

Biomechanics

Clinical psychology

Exercise physiology

Developmental psychology

Motor learning

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*Psychology*

*Sport and exercise science*

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Health psychology

Sports medicine

Organisational psychology

Sport sociology

Abnormal psychology

Sport pedagogy

Forensic psychology

Coaching science

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## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPORT PSYCHOLOGY AND EXERCISE PSYCHOLOGY

Whereas sport psychology addresses thoughts, feelings, and behaviour in competitive sport, **exercise psychology** embraces physical activity, exercise, and health contexts. For many years sport psychology practitioners considered sport and exercise psychology to be a single field of study. More recently, practitioners have been able to specialize, studying topics and offering academic courses on either sport or exercise. Since the 1980s, the amount of **research** produced each year in both areas