

Are You Thinking What Your Athlete is Thinking?

Athletes and coaches often have a very clear idea of their strengths, weaknesses and target areas for improvement. But how often are those ideas the same? Many coaches assume the athlete has the same understanding as they do. How do we actually know? In his work as a sport psychologist, **Simon Hartley** works with some world-class athletes and coaches. Here, he shares his experience of performance profiling.

Often, I ask the coach and athlete to independently use a performance profile to assess their views on the athlete's relative strengths and weaknesses. Even when the coach and athlete know each other incredibly well, it's rare that the two profiles are a close match.

What is a performance profile?

Very simply, a performance profile is a tool that helps to assess a number of things. Firstly, a performance profile helps us understand what the key elements are in an athlete's performance. When I profile with an athlete, I will start by asking her to identify the most important elements of her performance. Normally, we'll limit this to a maximum of around eight things in each category (mental, physical, technical, and tactical). These elements have to be the things that have the biggest impact on her performance (ie when she gets these right, she performs at her best). This is a great exercise in itself because it really gets athletes thinking about what is effective and what actually contributes to their performance. It also makes the profile incredibly personal. The elements that they identify should not be 'textbook headings'. The athletes need to really understand what makes a difference to them.

Secondly, the performance profile helps us to identify relative areas of strength and weakness by scoring the current level of performance. The easiest way to do this is to give it a mark out of 10. This exercise again provides a real opportunity to get the athlete thinking. I tend to challenge the athlete to explain her scoring to me so that both she and I understand the meaning behind the numbers. This can be really valuable as a coaching tool, to help understand the athlete's experience. If a long jumper rates her approach to the board as a six, it's useful to know that the six was given because she feels her stride patterns get choppy, she feels slightly too close and therefore feels as if she sinks through her hips in the last stride.

Thirdly, the performance profile allows us to set a target level and a date to achieve that target by. Often, meaningful events, such as competitions or the end of a phase of training, provide good target dates. The target should be realistic, based on the time available. Our long jumper, with a six out of 10 approach, may only be able to improve it to an eight before the European Indoors in six weeks' time, so that should be the target.

Using a performance profile

There are quite a few models that are used. Some people use a cartwheel model and colour in parts of each segment to indicate their scores (Figure 1). Some people use tables (Figure 2) and some prefer bar charts. My own personal preference is the cartwheel, because I love colouring in with felt tips and crayons! In reality, I don't think it really matters. However, there are some very important rules that I do abide by.

The first is honesty. Some athletes are unrealistically hard on themselves. Others are probably not hard enough. Some athletes never score themselves above three, because they see imperfection everywhere. Others will score nines and 10s because they feel that their performance is pretty perfect as it is. The reality is often somewhere in-between. Honesty at this stage is vital, because it will underpin their self-evaluation throughout.

This brings me to my second rule: objectivity. To help athletes to become objective, I ask them to consider a 10 as perfection (nothing needs changing). In contrast, a score of 0 is abysmal (so bad the performance cannot happen). To help provide an objective scale, I would consider that a world-record holder may have 10s in most areas, but not many other athletes would.

My third rule is that athletes must believe in the profile that they create and be able to justify the key elements that they identified, the scores and the targets. Only with this belief can it have any power. Without the belief, it becomes just another piece of paper that gets lost at the bottom of their kitbag.

The real power of profiling

To me, the performance profile's greatest attribute is as a vehicle to help structure a conversation. As a sport psychologist, I find that the discussion is the most valuable outcome of the exercise. I use the performance-profiling exercise as a way of talking with an athlete and listening to her thoughts and perceptions about her performance. It is the reasons and meanings behind the words and numbers on the profile that have the real value.

The performance profile can give us far more than just 'strengths and weaknesses'. It can give us a window into the athlete's self-perception. In one case, working with a coach and athlete, I found that the coach was surprised when his athlete scored herself as a three for 'confidence'. The coach scored her as a nine! The athlete appeared on the outside to be calm and self-assured before competition, but inside, she was wracked with doubt. Naturally, the coach assumed that because he saw calmness, the athlete felt confident.



'The athletes need to really understand what makes a difference to them.'

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Figure 1: A performance profile rated in segments

Using the power of profiling

Performance profiling can also be used by coaches and athletes to create a strategy for improvement. Once the coach and athlete have a good idea of the key elements of her performance, her current level and her targets, they can start to create a strategy, very simply, by asking how we can close the gap between our current score and the target score. What do we need to do? What needs to change? Often, this allows the coach to look at the processes employed in training, preparation and recovery. This exercise can also give some very valuable information. The strategies of the athlete and coach can often be different. The perception of what is working and the effectiveness of the current processes can also vary between coach and athlete. The areas of the performance that are considered to be the priorities may be different. For example, when working with a swimmer and his coach, we soon discovered that the swimmer felt that he needed to work on speed, whereas the coach felt he needed more endurance work to become quicker. Issues such as this highlight the need for coaches to know that the athlete really is thinking what they're thinking. If the coach and athlete are not on the same page, motivation can be compromised.

What do I mean? Well, to be 100% motivated in a session, athletes often have to know why they are doing the work and what it is going to give them. If they're doing it because they're told to, they are unlikely to be 100% tuned in.

Element	Score	Target	Notes
Psych			
Self-belief	5	7	in your ability
Confidence	4	6	
Mental toughness	3	7	and motivation – how much do you want it?
Aggression/assertiveness	5	7	going forward and being proactive
Control of nerves	6	8	
Know your job	1	6	see it, do it – be instinctive

Figure 2: A performance profile table

'Once the coach and athlete have a good idea of the key elements of her performance, her current level and her targets, we can start to create a strategy.'

If a swimmer knows that this session is working on turns (which he scored as a six out of 10, and identified as a priority area), he is likely to give it his total focus because he understands the need. I found when working with Premiership footballers that there was a significant increase in the quality of work, when I took time to really explain the reason for the session and how it was going to contribute to their performance.

Long-term gains

Many people use performance profiling as a single exercise. Indeed, used this way, it can give great benefit. However, it can also be used to monitor progress over a longer period. I find it useful to revisit the profile every few weeks to check progress against the target levels that the athlete identified. Is the strategy working? Is the gap closing? Are there any new priorities? Has she changed her views? Things change and it is always wise to know that, as they change, the athlete and coach are still of one mind. Everybody knows that it's important to develop great communication between coaches and athletes. However, great communication is more than just 'chatting'. Effective communication often requires a little focus, structure and direction. For me, performance profiling provides the structure and focus for really effective conversations.

profile

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