1.2 Designing an Intervention Plan

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Introduction

An intervention plan refers to the programming used by those leading the work that will take place with a club, team or group of players.

This type of plan is useful since any applicable objectives and time periods are laid out in a concrete way, so those involved know which processes will be taking place. Furthermore, an intervention plan is practical for the sports psychologist as well, since he has access to information at any given time regarding the current stage of process and the direction in which he needs to be heading in terms of future activities, thus helping him to keep the procedures organized.

In order to develop a secure game plan, it is essential to gather as much information as possible about ***how the season is organized*** in the sport concerned, since this is not always known in detail. For example, the project will have a very different layout if you are talking about a standard soccer or handball season as compared to other sports such as golf, paddle tennis or swimming.

Another detail to take into account is knowing at which points during the season the athlete will need to be prepared to compete at their highest level. In a league-type format (domestic competition) and Champions League (European competition) it is well-known that the most important moments of the season will happen around April/May. Nevertheless, in other sports such as track and field, the athlete and his teammates may decide to put most of their effort into the indoor track competition that takes place during the first half of the season (which ends around March), and not towards second half of the season which is open-air. Understanding the **peak fitness** moments (the most optimum times for an athlete to compete) during a regular season, as well as why the athlete chooses this type of strategy, will guide the psychologist during his planning.

Figure 2: load breakdown

	Months that make up the season										
Area	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Sports											
Academic											

Red: heavy load - Yellow Light.
Source: Prepared by the author.

Keeping Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) **holistic perspective of the athlete** in mind, when it comes time to establish a work plan, it is important to evaluate the physical, intellectual and emotional loads placed on the athlete throughout the season. For example, if there is an athlete who places a lot of importance on academics who was able to get into their chosen university program last year, the entire coaching staff should take that information into consideration. This way, the athlete isn't burdened with any unneeded physical or psychological loads during key moments of the season that would jeopardize his studies.

Just like in the **technical/tactical realm where the basics are worked on step-by-step** in a way where one needs to have first acquired the basics in order to be able to move on to the foundations in the next level, **the psychological realm woks in a similar fashion.** If everyone is aware of both the individual and group needs (if it is a team sport) that will arise throughout the season, then there are a few variables that are advisable to work on during certain moments of the season.

1.2.1 Sequences of Variables to Work On. Examples

Figure 2: variables to work on during a season

Time frame	Topic	Objective
1	Cohesion	Improving self-awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, and getting to know teammates.
2	cooperation	Increasing teamwork within the group.
3	Identity	Boosting team spirit and oneness within the club. Creating a sense of belonging.
4	communication	Improving assertive communication among teammates.
5	Managing pressure	Dealing with stress during competition and high-pressure situations.
6.	Emotional management	Recognizing one's own emotions.

Source: Prepared by the author.

Self-reports are an interesting tool that can be used to pinpoint the starting point of a given variable someone has decided to work on. On the one hand, the fact that the people that you will be working with will have to analyze themselves and the extent to which they possess the necessary abilities of a particular variable, it's possible that as a result, they may begin to reflect about the way they perform. The following could be an example of a self-report: an athlete makes note if he notices himself performing a certain behavior in the morning or in the afternoon. At the end of the week we will have a total number out of 14 weekly possibilities.

Figure 2: Self-report

		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Weekly Total
Week 1	Morning			Day 11	Day 12	Day 13	Day 14	Day 15	____ / 14
	Afternoon								
Week 2	Morning	Day 16	Day 17	Day 18	Day 19	Day 20	Day 21	Day 22	____ / 14
	Afternoon								
Week 3	Morning	Day 23	Day 24	Day 25	Day 26	Day 27	Day 28	Day 29	____ / 14
	Afternoon								

Source: Prepared by the author.

Once a person has decided what to work on and how to do it, they will implement their own course of action. Here you can see that one of the most frequent errors made in this case, both by sports psychologists and other agents who want to influence psychological variables, is a **lack of follow-up.** This can be illustrated with a practical example.

Imagine a coach who, from the very beginning of the season, has strongly emphasized the importance of team rules. This requires him to put a great deal of time into analyzing what sorts of internal procedure rules he wants in place for the team. In addition to that, he works alongside the players on certain points so they will feel as though they have played a part in creating their own team rules, hoping this will create a better bond and sense of belonging. However, a few weeks into the season, the athletes no longer feel that the coaches take the underlying values of these rules into consideration on a day-to-day basis. More specifically, it had been stated that arriving to games and training sessions on time was essential in order to show respect for fellow teammates, yet it was members of the STAFF who often failed to follow this rule. If, in addition to that, the breach of rules by the staff leads only to inconsistent sanctions, this will result in a lack of consistent long-term work throughout the season.

Sometimes people wrongly think that simply taking one day to talk about an area that needs to be worked on is sufficient enough to generate change. Usually this is not the case, and it is more likely that the group will need follow-up about the things that are most important. This follow-up needs to be done partly by the sports psychologist, with backing from the other agents associated with the athlete who are up to date with the work that is being undertaken; this is called multidisciplinary work.

We previously mentioned the importance of following up regarding the variables that have been worked on, in order to monitor whether or not any notable changes to the psychological needs have occurred.

If the follow-up is consistent with a modest vision from professionals who are continually growing, this will stress the need for a self-evaluation of the intervention plan underway. In this way, it's possible to test out the work method itself in order to explore which details were successful and which ones may require some additional changes.

1.2.2 Intervention Proposal

The variables that interfere with an athlete's athletic performance can be strengthened and improved by the proper implementation of intervention models on the part of the sports psychologists, who use this to improve their work methods. As previously mentioned, psychological programming should take place alongside trainer programming (Buceta, 1998), this way the athlete's performance is maximized.

In order to be applied correctly, psychological training, planning and programming involves prior planning based on the distribution of the content.

This psychological planning, when adapted to the training model proposed by the trainers, should be adjusted so that it is specific to the sports practice and type of competition. Any peaks in athletic performance from a physical point of view, should also match the programming from a psychological point of view. In a case like this, it is referring to the following: when an athlete lists performing in top condition during an important match as a part of his sports planning, in other words, to be in great physical shape, this also needs to coincide with physical fitness in his psychological planning. Out of this comes the need for teamwork together with the coaches, and to have the tools in place to be able to achieve the most effective form of planning.

Intervention examples

A study by Gracia and Zafra (2003) in which they carried out a psychological training plan based on a planning proposal, demonstrates how the implementation of this plan was managed.

1.2.3 Psychological Training was Based on Three Stages

- Initial evaluation.
- Planning; methods and techniques.
- Evaluation of the training program.

We will define each of these stages in more detail below.

Initial evaluation:

In this case it refers to the first things that need to take place, which will determine the subsequent stages. The intention is to comprehend the behavioral expressions of the athletes in order to understand what is happening, why, and the resulting consequences.

It should be clarified that, in this case, they already had access to the psychological variables data required to work the athletes; this data was obtained using Buceta's (1993) Psychological Characteristics Questionnaire Related to Sports Performance (CPRD), and was then compared with the interviews done with the athletes with the intention of strengthening the psychological profiles. In this way they were able to determine the strong and weak points to begin working towards in the planning.

Planning - methods and techniques

First they identified the objectives they wanted to achieve with the athletes throughout the season. It was concluded that the upcoming season, as well as beginning psychological support with the athletes who needed it most, were the was most essential things.

They put together an intervention calendar that was later used to contrast the coach's information with specific competencies. In this case, the coach is the team leader, and thus any steps that need to be taken must go through him.

Once the calendar has been completed and the coach, athlete and psychologist have agreed upon an action plan, they will then proceed on to the checklist of sports and psychology-related objectives that they want to achieve during the season. The athlete will contribute to the calendar and readjust his personal and sports-related goals throughout the season, and this makes up the psychological planning.

With this tailored calendar alongside the proposed objective for each stage of the season, they will move on to compare the player's proposed objectives with the psychological objectives that are suggested for each stage (psychological needs and demands). A common feature within sports planning is changing dynamics; they are prone to needing readjustments and this should this be kept in mind when it comes to psychological planning.

Qualifying competitions will require planning modifications, especially if the athletes are not demonstrating the minimum results required.

Continuous and final evaluation of the psychological training program.

In this case, reports are developed to verify, together with the athletes, whether or not the objectives were achieved. This regulates and controls the planning process throughout the season. Thus, self-confidence levels are boosted and the athlete feels more in control of the process.

In this study there are five points that should be noted:

- Adapting psychological training to the sports planning.
- Conducting a multidisciplinary work in coordination with other club professionals.
- Using an aspect of the sport that the athlete is involved in.
- Going through the assessment process both during and at the end of the planning.
- Planning to be flexible based on competition dynamics.

Let's continue on by analyzing another case where psychological planning was conducted as a long-term project. It refers to the Spanish women's Olympic basketball team, whose goal was to make it to the Olympics in the best possible way.

In this case, psychology plays a main role within a high performance team that has its sights set on success. The goal was to control

psychological variables, since they could affect performance negatively as well as positively.

The person responsible for carrying out the psychological planning was the team's own trainer (Buceta, 1992), who commented about the advantages and disadvantages of this dual role. A summary of the intervention model can be found below.

1.2.4 Intervention Model Used

The author suggests that when it comes to teams (group games), the best model to use is the two-track route, *direct and indirect.* Given the characteristics of competition, especially when it comes to teams, there is a very notable difference between psychological intervention used in individual versus team sports.

Direct intervention:

In this case, there is a direct relationship between the psychologist and the athlete. A therapeutic relationship is built where meaningful information is exchanged during their sessions. The psychological workload during these interventions depends on the psychologist's academic education and experience, on the athlete's willingness to be open during the sessions (therapeutic confidence), and also on the specific type of work that needs to be carried out with the subject. During this type of intervention, the work that the athlete does between sessions is very important, i.e. the tasks given by the psychologist to improve the dynamics of future sessions.

The objective here is to develop abilities which will allow the athletes to:

- Identify and anticipate issues that may affect their performance and state of health.
- Assess their abilities to face difficulties when they arise, and move forward in an effective way.
- Make use of the proper resources in each case.
- Objectively evaluate the facts in order to draw future conclusions.

As previously mentioned, an objective to work towards with an athlete is to teach him to act independently when dealing with the adversities he will face while training and competing. Specifically, that he would be independent and able to control the psychological processes that could

influence his athletic performance. Even once the athlete has mastered his own actions and has learned self-control, this does not eliminate the need to continue working with the psychologist, who will continue strengthening the athlete's abilities.

In the case of the Olympic basketball team, they purposefully worked with the athletes to develop self-control and manage their conduct in difficult situations, in order to improve their athletic performance.

This action plan was carried out alongside the athletic training plan. As previously mentioned, this is a requirement when it comes to psychological planning.

In the majority of cases, an individual approach was used to carry out this procedure. Only in very specific cases was the work carried out in groups, and even then they were groups of no more than three players. Individualizing the work allows for the proposal to be adapted to the specific needs of each athlete.

Indirect intervention

This proposal is based along the lines of community psychology. The context for this approach is the environment in which the athlete develops and the peers with which they have direct contact act as intermediaries. The objective here is to control the environmental circumstances that indirectly surround the athlete, in accordance with his psychological needs and with the support of his direct contacts. The psychologist's role is to observe, detect and analyze problem points in order to create suitable intervention strategies for the athlete.

Some of the advantages of this type of approach are

- It occurs in places where psychological benefit should be consolidated.
- It takes advantage of help from the athlete's direct contacts.
- It can be carried out in many different environments (schools, clubs, hospitals) and with all types of people.
- It can be combined with direct intervention methods.

The importance of this type of intervention is highlighted within sports, where coaches have a prominent role in athletes' lives and can appropriately monitor them in order to improve their athletic

performance. If the coach works together with the psychologist to put these types of intervention into practice, he will be able to communicate with his athletes in an appropriate way according to their current needs, adapting his message based on the psychological reality of the athlete. If there is no such coordination between the psychologist and the coach, this could affect the athlete's performance, especially if the coach does not understand the importance of his role within the subject's psychological structure.

In this case, the psychologist should do the following:

- Observe, identify and analyze the psychological variables that should be undertaken in this type of intervention.
- Identify the method that should be used to carry out the intervention.
- Provide follow-up for the possible intermediaries with the necessary recommendations and suggestions.
- Successfully adapt to the decisions that are made by the coach as the person who is ultimately responsible for the team. Know how to intervene when the situation calls for it.
- Evaluate the results of the planning.
- Draw conclusions with future interventions in mind.

In the case of the basketball team, both types of intervention worked hand-in-hand. Depending on the circumstance, sometimes the coach would emphasize one type more than the other, while when the situation called for it he would work with both simultaneously.

It is worth mentioning that with the women's basketball team he started out using an indirect intervention method. This is partly because there were other higher priorities during the first season, but it was primarily because the athletes did not trust the idea of psychological intervention and mental training, which resulted in less willingness on their part. In reality, if the coach had started out by using direct interventions it could have been detrimental. With indirect intervention, he laid the groundwork for future direct intervention and educated the athletes by demonstrating the relationship between athletic performance and psychological variables.

The implementation of direct interventions was carried out gradually, beginning with the players who demonstrated the most willingness towards these proposals. Their enthusiasm eventually lead others to join

in as well. This is important to point out because, when it comes to being part of a team, not everyone will be on board with a psychological intervention proposal. It is important move forward progressively, working together with the coach as the head, as well as the team captain if possible.

It was early in the third year when he was finally able to intervene directly with the athletes so they could master their psychological abilities to influence their athletic performance.

Below you will find some of the difficulties that came about during this study:

- Very little willingness on the part of the athletes to implement this type of proposal.
- The coach had a dual role (psychologist-coach).
- There were a large number of demands the players were required to adapt to. These demands are greatest when it comes to high-performance sports, as was the case here.
- Issues with coaching team availability.
- The novelty of the team members facing the Olympic games.

The present study is very useful when it comes to understanding the complexity of psychological planning and the variables that must be taken into account during the process.

In this case, we showed that psychological variables need to be placed within a plan, with an intention to work on them. It is vital to keep these aspects in mind according to Gonzales (1992), who suggests that 50% of athlete potential depends on their psychological capabilities. Any athlete who does not have these capabilities under control has relinquished 50% of their working capacity. It should be noted that the ideal time to initiate psychological training proposals is right from the beginning of the athlete's career, in order to aid in the maturation of mental structures that are more difficult to change later on.

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