

## Doing sport psychology in USA Curling

The purpose of this article is to give the reader an insight into the role of a sport psychology consultant and one approach to delivering mental skills training and team enhancement so that myths are busted and the curler reading this sees that a sport psychology consultant is a regular resource just as they are in many of the Olympic and non-Olympic sports performance activities.

As a sport psychology consultant working in curling I am often asked by curlers new to what sport psychology can offer questions like “So what’s mental skills training all about?” or my favorite question “Where’s your couch?” I am happy to have these questions because I take it as a sign of interest in the field and the benefits of sport psychology. The benefits of sport psychology when you boil them down are simple. They help to increase enjoyment, improve concentration when you need it most and enhance control and consistency over performance.

The thing to remember is that working with a sport psychology consultant is a choice. Sometimes I work with the whole team, others times just one or two curlers or just the coach. Nobody should be made to work with a sport psychology consultant. Sport psychology consultants are very different from other types of counselors because of the field of study and experiences that we need to have; the intensity of the performance relationships and the constant pressure to maintain confidentiality in an open environment means that our professionalism is tested every day.

Competitive sport works on very short term goal achievement that leads to long term accomplishment. Unlike other things in life there where things get foggy. In competitive sport there is a defined start and end and there is always a clear result that must be handled. Doing the work of a sport psychology consultant means lots of hours observing, listening, traveling and then acting effectively when called upon. When teams commit to using a sport psychology consultant over the long term, performance is sustained and enhanced. At other times, teams call a consultant only when things have gone wrong and it’s a last resort before chaos and underperformance starts. This is the least favorite place for many consultants (me included) to be in because the commitment is not there from the team and the tyranny of the urgent has taken over and before anyone knows it the time for a best performance is past and conversation turns quickly to what could have been done differently.

With such variance much of my work is brief in nature involving corridor consults, short walks between facilities, emails, individual telephone calls, and team conference calls. When my work is more formalized, team briefings, face – to –face consults, lunches and coffee breaks the work can take place anywhere the individual or team feels it can be done. Sometimes I work with the coach and curler at the same time on the ice and this is focused, fun and fulfilling because we are working as a performance team. It’s an exciting role because no two individuals are the same with the same needs and each team is completely unique in the way it functions and performs. Every day is a challenge to deliver the goods and be effective for the individual and team.

A typical day for me when I am working on site with an engaged team starts at 7am and can finish between 11p and 1am the next day and during this time several team meetings, individual curler consults, team coach/manager check-ins, tailored resource development can take place. Typically, I might have some idea of what the work will entail, often I do not and I work in the direction that the team needs to go in. The pace of the work, its intensity and complexity means that I often cool myself down because nothing is in my control apart from what I do. It would be great to have everything planned and have it work out but sport like life rarely goes exactly to plan. This means that adaptability and a reserve of approaches, tools and humor have to be on hand.

My work has to be documented and there is constant feedback involved. While there are resources available for practitioners they require tailoring for each curling team. When I am not on site with teams I email, correspond through surface mail and telephone calls. The hours I work are between 8am and 10pm are most likely to be scheduled ahead of time. The work is 'on demand' and this means that working with individuals our boundaries have to be set both ways to make things manageable. My work is evaluated by curlers, coaches and my employer (USA Curling). I am grateful for this because I know what I am doing well at and what I need to improve on in my work.

In my work with USA Curling I have found it most useful to use Jack Llesyk's 9 Mental Skills Model (9MS) (see below). I prefer it to other models because it's simple to explain and for many folks new to sport psychology it shows a natural pathway to personal best performance. I know Jack personally and he has been a friend to USA Curling allowing us to use his work.

The 9MS shows a pathway based on attitude, motivation, goals and commitment. These are the things that are important to proactive and responsible athletes. Self-imagery and positive self-talk help gain control over performance and managing emotions, nervousness and concentration are core skills for top performance. This practical model makes a lot of practical sense because research, practical insights from competitors and sport psychologists and my own perspectives support it.

When I start work with a curler I ask them to complete the self-assessment that Jack designed and we move on from there. The ongoing consultancy work that I do utilizes all kinds of evidence based tools to develop self-awareness, develop skills and support mental skills training integration. It is important for a consultant to conduct a mental skills assessment or a needs assessment to establish a baseline to develop a hypothesis with the athlete and for the athlete to check their own assumptions. Then a discussion about the assessment results takes place and a determination by the curler of how they want to progress is made. Then we work collaboratively to design an action plan with clear goals, timelines and expected results. Depending on the curler this can be a very detailed plan or bullet pointed or something in between. Then interesting work starts for me.

As many people know I am not a curler, but I try to be a quick study and I use the best available information and guidance from leaders in curling to work with curlers to understand their perspectives, roles, challenges and competitive desires. The best source of that information is the person or teams that I am working with. However, being an outsider to the sport is invaluable to me because I am free of

prejudices and previous knowledge and I have fresh eyes to look at old challenges. I find curlers appreciate that because they can talk freely knowing that they are teaching and educating me as much as I might be supporting them too. The outcome of this is that my work ends up being tailored for every individual based on a strong combination of evidence from sport psychology and the lore and technique of curling that individuals bring with them to our work together.

Sometimes I am asked what curlers interested in sport psychology should do to get started. If you're thinking about working with a sport psychology consultant decide what you want to accomplish from your participation in curling; know what you want and work with a consultant that is going to work with you to meet your needs.

The impact of a motivational speaker lasts as long as the meeting time and they maybe fun and entertaining but they'll leave and take their message with them. Work with a sport psychology consultant in your area to enhance your long term performance. They are part of your team and can help you unlock the door to your own personal best performance over the long term. There are many effective sport psychology consultants and they can be found at <http://appliedsportpsych.org/>

If you have any questions about sport psychology email me at [jcl@usacurl.org](mailto:jcl@usacurl.org)

Jack Llesyk's 9 Mental Skills Model. Ohio Center for Sports Psychology.

