

Mental health: an issue for coaches

October 20th was World Mental Health Day. To mark the occasion, and to find out why governing bodies of sport would be exercised by such an issue, Joe Coach read a book and went to a workshop.

It was something of a surprise to me to be invited by one of the coaching managers for whom I deliver that mental health is an issue for what we have learned to call the sport system. It may be that too long spent using words like 'deliver', 'system' and, my particular favourite, 'intervention' has seduced me into seeing the people I coach as something other than human beings. I know for a fact that one of the favourite jargons of the rugby fraternity is "big unit" and I wonder if we have industrialised the coaching process, started seeing players as cogs in a machine we are commissioned to build and whether this, in part, has led to a sport-related alienation and so to mental health rising on the agenda.

Flights of cod philosophy such as this may wile away a car journey or two but as a theory it needs to be tested and so, to the surprise of my manager, I signed up for the Mental Health Awareness in Sport workshop (their caps) offered by an amalgam of the Football Association, Mind and another mental health charity called Rethink. To complicate matters (and this is British sport so nothing can be straightforward) the workshop was being offered as part of a Rugby Football League (RFL) programme and I was offered the choice of a number of renditions being held in Super League stadia from one end of the M62 to the other.

The temptation to call the Halliwell Jones Stadium on a wet Tuesday evening a depressing destination, sitting as it does on a "link road" between car showrooms and industrially sized supermarkets, was strong but sensitivity to language was the first effect of the workshop and it seemed better, at least in my head as I parked up, to label the landscape 'dreary'. Inside the stand and on the way to the hospitality suite we were to be using the combination of modern ticky-tacky design – it could be any stadium anywhere – and the mournful effect of artefacts from the club's past at every turn served to deepen the gloom. Two hours of depression, OCD and bi-polar disorder in a dimly lit concrete box on an industrial estate with the ghosts of a glorious past looking on? Lovely.

It was reassuring to meet the two facilitators, one from Everton Football Club and one from Leeds City Council, both of whom seemed professional, relaxed and well able to deal with the half dozen coaches, from boxing, gymnastics, rugby and road cycling, in the room. With the introductions done the facilitators dived into the well-ordered and clearly well-thought-through material.

First lesson? We all have mental health. Some times it is good and some times people have issues with it. Second lesson? Lots of people have issues with their mental health and we are all on a continuum along which we slide as life impinges on us. All that is except a rather grumpy rugby league coach, the only one in the room who declared that "nothing bothers me" and offers as evidence the death of his dog: "Didn't bother me." As a patient facilitator sought to tease out whether this was indeed true, our colleague upped the ante: "My brother died. It didn't bother me." With an expression best interpreted as "ho hum", the facilitator moved on. As an aside the same chap refused to fill in any monitoring forms and went out the door as quickly as possible at the end, only pausing to ascertain exactly how many CPD points he would get for his attendance. It seems the very laudable approach of the RFL of using their CPD system to open the minds of their coaching workforce had rebounded somewhat.

The workshop went on to deal with the definitions of various mental health problems and how they might manifest in a sporting context, the stigma which attached to them, which had to be challenged, and the role of the coach in providing appropriate environments. The learning was offered in bite-sized

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chunks using exercises, discussions and a video; the workbook and resources were professionally produced and easy to use. The only false note was a section where high-profile individuals with mental health challenges were identified and the RFL had provided a list of, often antipodean, exponents of their game, none of whom meant anything even to the person reading them out. The sponsor's slot is a well-known mood killer of positive and lively CPD events and this section slid into that arena like a try-scoring half back sliding through the dead ball area and into the hoardings on a wet Friday night in Castleford. Unintended, slightly disappointing and avoidable with a little forethought.

While the workshop served to raise awareness of various aspects of the challenges presented to society by mental health issues – and one in four of the population will be treated for one or other of the conditions identified during the evening – it did not go into overmuch detail of causes and sport's role in countering the effects of mental ill health. Indeed at one point discussion centred on whether sport caused more problems than it cured.

What was clear is that physical activity is a valuable tool in the prevention and treatment of mental health issues and attendant physical conditions. To understand those you would need a text book called something like Physical Activity and Mental Health and, as luck would have it, the good people at Bloomsbury have produced such a thing as part of their "The Complete Guide to..." series.

Written by Debbie Lawrence, the head of Fitness Wales, and Sarah Bolitho, who has worked in the fitness sector for over twenty years, this text is a model of clarity and comprehensiveness. Aimed at Level 4 practitioners, the language is necessarily technical but the use of diagrams, a clear hierarchy of headings and panels to tell you what you will learn and what you have learned all make navigation and so understanding that bit easier.

With World Mental Health Day having been replaced in the calendar if not the public consciousness by National Pickled Onion Day (20 October) and the Time to Change workshop series under threat from budget cuts, it becomes difficult to focus on the issues raised by both text book and workshop. However, with the prevalence of mental health issues in society and the potential for physical activity as an antidote to some of these issues' causes the argument must surely be that more sports should follow the lead of football and rugby league where instead of gaining points for learning how to coach the tackle coaches are rewarded for finding out how to care.

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