Developing resilience in elite sport: the role of the environment

Dr Mustafa Sarkar discusses the role of the environment in developing resilience in light of recent cultural and athlete welfare issues in elite sport.

In recent years, there has been an increased scrutiny over the “winning at all costs” culture of Olympic, Paralympic and professional sports with particular concerns about athlete welfare. This has led to the publication of an independent report by Baroness Grey-Thompson to the issues surrounding the Duty of Care that sports have towards their participants. Interestingly, in the section on mental welfare, the report states that “The routine element of elite sport, where the regime is one of continuous training, performance, and selection, brings significant mental resilience challenges for both participants and coaches” (p.22), and for those on a high performance pathway, “Mental resilience is not something that all participants and coaches automatically have and this should be developed with the same consideration that physical resilience is built” (p.23). Building on this observation and recommendation, in this article, I discuss an evidence-based resilience training programme that has started to be used in elite sport to develop resilience, with a particular focus on the role of the environment.

Evidence-based resilience training

Put simply, mental resilience refers to the ability to use personal qualities to withstand pressure (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Over the last couple of years, there has been a burgeoning interest in evidence-based programmes and interventions to develop resilience in the workplace for both performance and well-being. Evidence-based resilience training programmes and interventions (e.g. performance directors) and key personnel (e.g. coaches) that have been encouraged to develop the unrelenting environment and a facilitative environment. If too much support and not enough challenge is provided then the comfortable environment will compromise well-being. The unrelenting environment is characterised by high levels of challenge and support. This facilitative environment is critical for developing resilience, with a particular focus on the role of the environment.

Resilience and the environment: challenge and support

Although changing policies and organisational practices is much more challenging than working at the individual level in terms of developing resilience, it is a vital step for practitioners if we, as a discipline, are to improve and maintain the success and well-being of British sport performers at the highest level.

References:


