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Track Cycling in Australia

Georgia Ridler

In

Secrets of Asian Sport Psychology

Edited by: Peter C. Terry, Zhang Li-Wei, Kim YoungHo,
Tony Morris, and Stephanie Hanrahan





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Introduction

Track cycling is the flagship of Australian elite cycling. Its heritage is long and successful, with a record of achievement at the highest level that is second to none in Australian sport. The Australian Track High Performance Program maintains two distinct disciplines, endurance and sprint. This chapter focuses on my work with sprint cycling. Track sprint cycling involves individual and team events raced on indoor or outdoor velodromes. Track bikes have fixed gears and no brakes. In sprint events, athletes generally use large gears that take enormous power to get going. With fixed gears, cyclists are forced to continue to pedal, even when slowing down. Speeds of 40-60 km/hr are common in endurance track cycling events, while speeds of up to 80 km/hr are common in sprint track cycling events.

Sprint cycling includes pure sprint events such as the individual and team sprints; long sprints such as the 500 m and 1000 m time trials and the Keirin¹. Training varies according to the type and number of events being raced. Sprint track cyclists generally focus on short, high quality repetitions with long recovery periods, as well as strength training to build lean body mass. For the longer sprint events, athletes also include some extended sessions and endurance rides. Training is focused and explosive, as are the personalities of some of the riders.

Australian sprinters have been successful in competitions at the highest level for decades, winning many medals at World Championships, Olympic Games, and Commonwealth Games. Some of the most memorable champions include Ryan Bayley (dual Olympic Champion), Shane Kelly (4 times World Champion) and Anna Meares (dual Olympic Champion). The formation of the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) track cycling program with a base in Adelaide has enabled athletes and coaches to produce outstanding results at the Olympic Games (14 gold, 18 silver, and 17 bronze medals), World Track Championships (4 gold, 5 silver, 7 bronze), and Commonwealth Games (89 gold, 58 silver, 39 bronze). The track sprint program is managed by a head sprint coach who conducts the day-to-day planning, coaching, and competition preparation for the sprint team and is supported by a team of sport scientists, physical therapists, and sports medicine experts, including a sport psychologist. This chapter chronicles the highlights, challenges and some of the lessons learned during my work with Australian Cycling from 2004 to 2006.

In January, 2004 I was invited to work with the Australian Track Sprint Cycling team at the AIS training centre in Adelaide, South Australia. The head coach at the time was looking for some support to deal with the varied personalities in the team and to better understand the team dynamics. The squad ranged from 18 year old women through to 30 year old men with varying energies and attitudes. At the time, I was employed as a full-time sport psychologist with the South Australian Sports Institute (SASI). In this role I was responsible for providing sport psychology services to six SASI sports and the AIS Cycling program, if invited. In terms of time commitment, AIS Cycling and SASI negotiated an arrangement that allowed for 1/2 day per week of my time to be dedicated to the Track Sprint program.

¹ An explanation of the Keirin and other track cycling events can be found at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keirin>.





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Reflecting on my Professional Practice

I constantly strive to stretch myself as a professional and provide the best psychological support for the athletes, coaches, and support teams with whom I work. To achieve this, I reflect regularly on my performance as a practitioner, thanks to a supervisor from back in my university days at the University of Southern Queensland. He often challenged me to reflect not only on the content of what I delivered, but most importantly on my personal experience of the delivery (e.g. what felt comfortable, what felt uncomfortable).

Writing this chapter has presented me with a wonderful opportunity to relive two intense and rewarding years with Australian Cycling and reflect on my experiences with the entire program. There were many memorable moments and challenges that stretched my professional capabilities to the limit. In this chapter I review two of the more significant experiences in chronological order, interweaving lessons learned and lessons taught in a narrative format.

In the Beginning

I have vivid memories of my first two meetings in this sport. To say that some athletes were sceptical about the potential benefits of sport psychology would be an understatement. My first introduction to Australian Cycling was a meeting with the high performance manager. In this meeting I was casually informed that previous psychologists over the past 10 years “did not survive” and that turnover was high. I remember him saying “Sprinters are a different breed. They can see straight through you. They are competitive even in their sleep!” I was then given the option to stay or to leave. I chose to stay. Curiosity and challenge got the better of me and I had to see if I could not only “survive” but make a positive impact on the system. I knew from that moment that my work with this squad was not going to be about me and my expertise, but rather about them and their expertise. If I could let go of my agenda and truly immerse myself in their culture, then I may just stand a chance of succeeding.

When I was first introduced to the squad by the high performance manager, one of the senior athletes (who was three times the size of me, had a massive black beard and piercing black eyes) asked in a loud and sarcastic manner “So... what do you think you are going to try and make us do?” I had previously faced scepticism and sarcasm from athletes before, but rarely have I felt that an athlete could eat me alive! I kept my cool and simply responded with “Nothing... I am not going to try to make you do anything. I’m just here to watch if that’s cool?”

The athlete didn’t have much of a response to that. He was expecting me to run, defend, argue, or promote the benefits of my profession, but instead I just smiled and displayed a *laissez-faire* exterior (while on the inside I was doing my best to breathe and calm my own heart rate!). I can laugh about it now, but back then I must admit that I was a little nervous.



Credit: Parutakupiu/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain



I am fortunate to have had an amazing professional peer group in Michael Lloyd, Gene Moyle, and Rosanna Stanimirovic with whom to consult and debrief. Often in our profession we have expectations of doing, changing, or fixing. My experience with Australian Cycling cemented my philosophy that “Athletes want to know that you care, before they care what you know.” Hence rapport building and sincerity go a long way in building trust in the professional and the profession.

A Foot in the Door

By the end of February and with hours of observation, conversational interaction, and lengthy discussions with the coaches and sport science team, I finally found an opening. In discussions with the then strength and conditioning coach, I learned that sprint cyclists train hard and need to “rest hard” (that is, recover well) to be at their peak physical condition. In this sport, athletes and coaches valued recovery greatly and athletes were encouraged to rest after heavy training sessions.

The opening for me was that no mental recovery strategies were being taught, and hence many athletes were struggling to wind down physically and mentally. So, in discussions with the head coach, I ran a weekly relaxation session for four weeks following their strength training. This session incorporated progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, and visualization. We started with three athletes on the first occasion and grew over time to have six of the eight athletes in the squad. These sessions opened the door for discussion with athletes on other mental strategies.



Opportunity Calls

In early March 2004, Martin “Marv” Barras, then national head coach for sprint cycling, approached me to work with him and Anna Meares on her mental preparation for her Olympic debut. The focus of the work was on her individual time trial (500 m) event. Time trials are a race against the clock with no room for error. The difference between gold and silver can be as little as a thousandth of a second. The bike is locked into a special starting gate and the rider must time the first pedal stroke to exactly match the gate release. From a standing start they must quickly gain maximum speed and maintain it for the distance. The fastest time wins.

The year 2004 was Anna’s first at the AIS under the coaching of Marv Barras. It was one of the most successful years of her career. She won a silver medal at a World Cup event in Mexico, missing gold by a mere few thousandths of a second. She followed her first World Cup medal with an outstanding performance at the 2004 World Championships in front of a home crowd in Melbourne, with a gold medal in the 500 m time trial and a silver medal in the sprint event. With these results, she qualified for the 2004 Athens Olympic Games and was headed to her first Olympics.

Anna completed a lot of detailed preparation for the 2004 Olympics for both the sprint and the 500 m time trial. Being crowned world champion meant that she would start last at the Olympics after each of her rivals had already raced. It was the first time ever that she had to do this. Previously she had always been seeded early in the start list because she wasn’t among the favourites to win, but since winning the world title in May 2004 she was seeded as the favourite in Athens. Many in the world cycling community did not share the same belief in Anna, because she was young and new to the international scene. Many believed that the “true” favourites were saving themselves for the Olympic Games.

The last rider to race in any event requires intense focus, self-belief, and commitment to the plan. Following the World Championships, Marv requested my assistance to help Anna with her pre-race mindset. He knew that being in her first Olympics and the last rider in the time trial, Anna would need some specific focusing strategies. In discussions with Anna about her pre-race preparation it became apparent that she did not have a pre-race plan from the pit to the start gate. She had a physical routine in terms of a warm-up, and some technical self-talk in the starting block, but no overall mental plan. Marv and I met several times to talk through what he anticipated her pre-race experience to look and feel like. This plan covered everything from the size of the velodrome and noise of the crowd, to the heat and the other competitors, from the warm-up routine to the support staff. We carefully crafted a visualisation script that would enable Anna to regularly “live” the experience before she faced the reality. Then, with her input on the smaller details, we amended the script to more accurately represent her pre-race routine. Our goal was to reduce the unknowns and create the feeling that she had already done this race before. We then put the visualisation strategy into practice in the velodrome.



Anna's Account of the Preparation

This is Anna's personal account of what happened on the day we put the visualisation strategy into practice in the velodrome:

Georgia and I had spent quite a few sessions visualising my pre-race environment and routine. Once we had refined the script, Georgia would get me to close my eyes while I listened to a description of race day at the Olympics and pictured it in my mind: the crowd and all the variety of colours scattered around the audience representing the many different countries; the hype; the excitement building of the impending race; the nerves in my stomach; the riders competing before me and finally, me walking to the line facing my rivals and a time to beat. My coach, Marv, nominated the time he believed it would take to win at the Athens Olympics. This was 34.1 seconds - equal to an Olympic record. And so, the last part of the script involved Marv saying to me at the starting line, "Miss Anna (as he often called me), last rider at the Olympics, 34.1 to beat."



We regularly practised this script and three weeks later with approximately six weeks to the Olympics Georgia said that we were going to turn the script into reality by practising at the velodrome. I felt ready. I was good at visualising the script and at the end when I opened my eyes I felt ready to race. Little did I know that taking it to the track would be a whole new experience. In the velodrome I set up as if it was race day. I did my typical physical warm up routines and then lay down and we went through the script. When I opened my eyes ready to do a standing start my mind was far from focused. My mouth was dry and I had trouble swallowing, my hands were so sweaty I had trouble gripping the handlebars. And this was just training! My legs were shaking

and I could not focus on what I was doing. I usually breathe to the countdown of the clock but this time I couldn't focus enough to get it right. I did my standing start and it was the worst effort I had ever done in training - almost a second slower than I normally do. I was blown away, not because of my time but in that moment I realised the power of the mind. I was in an empty stadium, but having imagined what I thought it would be like on race day I couldn't handle it. It threw me like nothing I had experienced before.

I knew from that moment that mental preparation was going to be the key to my success. We practised every time I got on the bike with the same imagery preparation. I would sit in a chair near the start line imagining I was waiting for the rider before me to finish. I would go through my visualisation, Marv would say in a calm and confident manner "Miss Anna, last rider at the Olympics, 34.1 to beat". It was not in vain. On race day, the similarities to what I had imagined were uncanny (Meares, 2009, p. 29).

Race Day Arrives

This is how Anna described her experiences on the day of the time trial event at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games:

The women's 500 m time trial was the first event of track cycling competition - to say I was nervous on race day was an understatement. For my entire life I had always watched and supported our Australian athletes competing at the Olympic Games. It was a very surreal situation for me to be in now, because all of a sudden I wasn't watching the television cheering on all the Aussies, I was on the other side being cheered myself. The big stage certainly added nerves to the belly that I had never experienced before. Being a well prepared person, I like to know where everything is and have things organised so that I don't forget anything. On this occasion, though, I warmed up away from the track centre so as not to be overwhelmed by the atmosphere. I walked up ready to race, and while Marv was pinning on my numbers, I suddenly realised I had forgotten my bootie covers. Marv ran to get them for me. When he came up I told him I had forgotten my gloves too, so he ran down to get them for me. When he came back a second time I panicked and said I had forgotten my glasses. He went to turn around and he stopped then looked at me and said, "Miss Anna, you don't need glasses, you have a visor helmet." A little rattled, I just replied, "Oh, right."

I walked from the Aussie pits towards the start line. I sat in the chair facing the track with only one rider to go before I was on. When China's Jiang, the current world record holder with a time of 34.100 seconds started, I didn't watch. Instead I sat and went through my visualisation. I did notice that after one lap she went by me in a blur. The pitch of the crowd rose and I assumed she had the fastest time thus far but I did not look at the clock. She passed in front of me for the second and final time and stopped the clock. The crowd went crazy! Still I did not look at the clock. I stuck to our plan. I looked at Marv and he looked at me with a very confident look on his face (similar to what we had practised) and he said to me, "Miss Anna, last rider at the Olympics, 34.1 to beat." I was not aware of anything other than the time and what I needed to do. I didn't know that beating this time would mean a new Olympic record.

As weird as it may sound, a sudden sense of calm came over me and I felt at ease. This was exactly what I had prepared for over the last two months. This is exactly what was said to me every time I got on the track. I walked up to my bike, which was being locked into the start gate. The nerves were definitely there but under control. I shook them out as I waited for the all-clear to get on my bike. When it came I got on and locked my shoes into the pedals and tightened the straps around them. I did them so tight my feet were slightly numb. "Thirty seconds," came the call from Marv. I hung my head and controlled my breathing just as we had practised. I had my hands set in a comfy position and wasn't going



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to move them. Then the 10-second buzzer went off on the countdown timer. Once that buzzer went it was business. My head lifted and I breathed to the countdown. I squeezed my hands so tight on the handle bars, I tensed my legs and every muscle in my body down to my toes. Five, four, three, two, one and the gate released. I don't recall much of my race, only certain points. I remember the very first pedal stroke out of the starting block. I remember it not for how good it felt but for how incredibly slow and hard it felt. I thought that I had experienced a bad start but I just kept going. The next thing I remember was the halfway point. One lap around the velodrome. I remember this because the pitch of the crowd changed dramatically. It told me I was close to the lead if not in front at that stage. I don't remember anything else until I crossed the finish line.

In the space of about five seconds I crossed the line and looked up to the big scoreboard in the middle of the bend in front of me. I couldn't see much. I did however see that there was a red box with number 1 in the bottom right hand corner next to my name. It hit me - I had won.

The emotion - excitement and surprise and happiness - that filled me in that split second of realisation was like nothing else I have ever experienced. I looked for the time I had ridden and through the tears I could only make out - .9 seconds. I couldn't understand it; the time to beat was 34.1. It was then as I drew closer that I saw the green box in the same corner with 'WR' in it. World Record - I had broken 34 seconds and ridden a time of 33.952 seconds.



view video:
Anna Meares
500 m Time
Trial Athens
Final



The look on my face was a picture - my mouth dropped to the ground and my eyes lit up bright and wide. I drew a deep breath and let go a scream of delight. I cried so hard and held my hand to my mouth all the while thinking to myself, "Holy shit, you're the Olympic Champion!" In my moment of realisation I took six victory laps instead of the customary one or two. I was just lapping up the moment and didn't want to get off. I couldn't believe it (Meares, 2009, pp. 32-34).

In Athens at the age of 20, Anna became the youngest Australian female track sprint cyclist and the first Australian female track cyclist to win an Olympic gold medal. In doing so she set a World and Olympic record riding a time of 33.952 seconds, thus becoming the first woman in history to break the 34 second barrier for the 500 m distance. She followed up by winning the bronze medal in the individual sprint a few days later. It was a great honour for me to have the opportunity to work with Anna and Marv.

Crisis in Germany 2005



Credit: David Niblack/ Imagebase.net/Public Domain

In 2005 the Australian cycling community and the sporting world as a whole were shocked by the news that six members of our Australian women's road cycling team were involved in a tragic car accident during a training ride. Unfortunately one of our girls, Amy Gillett, was killed. On the 19th of July, 2005 I was contacted by Australian Cycling and asked to travel to Italy to support our team athletes and staff who were preparing for the Junior World Championships.

With four days' notice, an expired passport (that was quickly renewed), no experience of working with this particular group and certainly no knowledge of how this incident would affect this group of individuals, I flew to Europe.

With no tools, resources, or paperwork, I set forth knowing that this trip was going to be a stretch. What I didn't know was the extent to which I was going to be stretched. This trip was about practising the art of psychology and practising what I had preached with Anna in the earlier years of preparing myself for what lay ahead. In a whirlwind effort to prepare for this trip, I found myself sitting on the airplane thinking "I have no idea what to expect, no idea who I am meeting and no idea of the relationships between all involved." I would need to be extremely aware, ask good questions, maintain a sense of calm, and possibly lead people through the grief process. This 3-week period was the most intense I have ever experienced and one that stretched me both professionally and personally.

I flew direct to Italy, where I was met by the AIS bike technician (the person who looks after the road bikes and transports them to all the events across Europe). Little did I realise that this gentleman spent hours working with the road cyclists, particularly the women's team. He was a friend, a confidant to the girls. It was a long drive to the Australian base camp but an invaluable one for both of us. The technician shared the history of his work with the girls, their idiosyncrasies, the different approaches he used with each, and had his first opportunity to express his emotions about the incident.



Credit: Rory Finneren/flickr/CC-BY-2.0

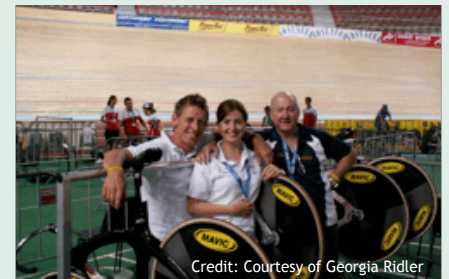
I don't think I spoke much on that drive. There was no need. He simply needed to talk it through. We drove to the AIS Italy residence in Reggio Emilia to meet with Shayne Bannon, the AIS national head coach.

Upon arrival I met the national head coach, the World Juniors head coach and the team manager. In Australia it's a rare sight to see grown men hug and show mutual support, but this was a unique group of people who really cared about their athletes. The bike technician then opened the back of the truck and everyone broke down emotionally. What I hadn't realised was that prior to picking me up from the airport, he had just collected all the broken bike pieces from the accident.

Over the next hour I left the men to unload the truck, grieve, talk, be silent, shout. What was I to do? This was a very raw experience. I had so many questions racing through my mind. Should I show support and help? But they may want to be on their own without having a stranger around. Should I leave them alone? But then they may think I don't care. Should I sit and watch? But they may not want to be watched. I chose a combination of the latter two. I left them and headed into the kitchen where I put on the kettle in anticipation of a kitchen table debrief and then returned to the garage and simply sat in the corner and observed and absorbed the emotion.

It's difficult to not get emotional in these situations and as I reflect I think it was okay that I also shed a few tears on that day. As time progressed the talking increased and some of the conversations were directed to me, as if telling me the stories.

Once the truck was unloaded we all congregated over a cup of tea in the kitchen and I introduced myself and briefly explained my role in supporting them. I outlined the grief process to the group using napkins and my lipstick, because we had no pens and paper at the time. The aim of this brief education session was to gently normalise the feelings and thoughts they might be experiencing. I chose to stay focused on their current experience rather than try to shift them into thinking about the road ahead, the impending World Junior Championships. That could be discussed once we arrived in Austria, giving them another 10 hrs to have their own space.



Me (centre) with the bike mechanics at the Junior World Championships

While all of this was going on in Italy, Rosanna Stanimirovic and Ruth Anderson (senior psychologists from the AIS) were providing direct support to the injured athletes, their families, and the family of Amy Gillett, in Germany. We kept in regular contact to maintain peer supervision and support.



Credit: Adrian Tritschler (ajft)/flickr/CC-BY-NC-ND-2.0

Arriving at the Training Camp

The next day we arrived in Austria for a 7-day training camp that led into the Junior World Championships. I met with the head coach and team manager (fantastic men who showed such strength and vulnerability over the next 10 days). I suggested a 3-step approach: introduce myself, provide an opportunity for the athletes to grieve, and only then focus on performance. I introduced myself and explained that my role was to support them and reassure them that there would be plenty of time to prepare and get in the zone for Junior Worlds.

Three days into the camp the Amy Gillett memorial service was held in Australia, which our athletes were obviously unable to attend. What could we put in place instead? How could we give them the same sort of experience? In discussion with the head coach and team manager we decided that hosting our own memorial service would be great for the athletes and staff, and may create a small sense of closure and an opportunity to refocus on the task ahead. The question was... who would organise it? The answer... me!

There are many debates about the role of a psychologist, and this experience demonstrated the diverse nature of the situations in which sport psychologists can find themselves when “on the road” with athletes and teams. There is no black and white when it comes to human behaviour and human needs. This experience in particular taught me that flexibility, clients’ best interests, and creative thinking are at the core of sport psychology servicing. Obviously we work within ethical guidelines and boundaries, but it is near impossible to predict how humans will behave in high pressure situations, with limited personal support structures and within the dynamics of a group setting. Plus, at times there are no sound-proofed rooms, no separate dining areas, and no time for long-term intervention. Does this mean we don’t or can’t have an impact? Absolutely not! What it means is that we need to ensure our communication and pre-framing are clear so that clients (athletes and coaches) know the parameters and that we keep talking as things evolve.



Credit: johnthescone/flickr/CC-BY-SA-3.0

The Counselling Side of Sport Psychology

Over the next two days I prepared a memorial service. I gathered stories of Amy's history from the junior athletes and I invited athletes to share a story, poem, or reading. We had flowers, a main candle, and music, and I purchased tea light candles for each athlete to hold alight throughout the ceremony. I closed the memorial service with a wish using some words of inspiration based on Amy's approach to training. After the wish, I invited everyone to blow out their tea light candle to signify letting go. It was a heavy morning but a time of bonding.

The staff and I had agreed that following this service the team would get on their bikes and just go for an easy ride around the country side - an experience that they could do together but didn't necessarily need to talk. I contemplated joining them, but decided that it would be a good opportunity for the team to begin to rebuild on their own and reconnect with their coaches. I decided to eat on my own that evening to reflect on the day, enjoy some down time, and gain some email-based peer supervision.

That night, unbeknown to me, some of the more senior members met to discuss how they could show respect for Amy and her family while racing at the World Championships. The next day, the athletes announced that they would wear pink armbands to show their respect for Amy and the Women's Road Team. What a great initiative!



The boys displaying their pink armbands

The Performance Side of Sport Psychology

On Day 4, the athletes indicated that they didn't feel ready or focused for the impending Junior World Championships due to their interrupted training. Together with the staff we brainstormed a plan for the remainder of the camp, introducing some brief sport psychology interventions to support the competition mindset. We decided on three workshops built around the themes of

“managing my nerves,” “controllables,” and “visualising the space,” plus optional individual sessions. The remainder of the camp was fantastic! Athletes soaked up the training regime and engaged in the workshops, particularly on the topic of managing their nerves. Athletes indicated that they were feeling a little nervous about competing in their first international competition and wanted to know how to manage these nerves. The coaches also sat in on these workshops to show their support and learn a strategy or two. The first workshop addressed the theory of the stress response and how people can perceive nerves as either a destructive or constructive part of race preparation. We also talked about adrenalin and its key role in performance preparation, and the physiological factors associated with an increase in adrenalin.



Credit: Australian Paralympic Committee/wikimedia/CC BY-SA-3.0

The second workshop focused on the controllables, helping them to understand those aspects of racing over which they had no control and other factors over which they could exert control. I used a card game that I have developed to make the learning interactive and interesting. The card game includes 40 factors that athletes may focus on or worry about prior to competing.

Each athlete was asked to pick up two cards and place them along the continuum from *I Have No Control* at one end (e.g., weather, crowd), *I Can Influence* in the middle (e.g. parents, race times) and *I Have Control* at the other end (e.g. self-talk, hydration). The workshop became a debate and fruitful discussion about those factors over which we have direct control, those factors over which we have some influence, and those factors that are not worth worrying about or focusing on because they are clearly beyond our control. When playing this game with athletes I often find that although there are some factors that are clearly controllable or not controllable, it is the discussion of where the other factors lie on the continuum that creates the most valuable discussion and learning.

The final workshop was a visual imagery exercise (similar to the work I did with Anna Meares) that guided the athletes through their arrival at the velodrome, entering the velodrome, looking around the inside of the stadium, imagining the crowd, hearing the noises, setting up their bikes, and assembling for the team meeting. Prior to this workshop I asked the head coach to take me to the velodrome and walk me through the arrival and all the key checkpoints so that I could create this imagery script in as much detail as possible. Throughout the 12-day period of the training camp and subsequent competition these young athletes learned about peer support, vulnerability, team cohesion, performing under pressure, switching focus, and race preparation, all of which culminated in some great success on the track.

Celebration and Acknowledgement

All things considered this Junior World Championships was very successful on many levels and I have great admiration for the care, consideration, and collaboration of the coaching and support staff team, including Gary Sutton, Rick Fulcher, and Gus Dawson.

As health care providers we don't often celebrate or acknowledge the great work we do, but I think it is important to hear your clients' experiences of your service. A snippet from the team manager's report stated that

“Georgia was an unbelievable asset to this team (including the staff) in helping everyone cope with and process the grief we were all feeling after the tragedy involving the Australian women's road team. Georgia found a way to then help us switch from grief to performance within days by assisting the athletes in their competition preparation and I suggest this role would be an integral part of future junior teams.”



Credit: Australian Paralympic Committee/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA-3.0

From Peak Performance to Personal Growth

I am often asked whether sport psychology is about mental skills or personal development. My answer remains ... both. At the very core we are all human beings with thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that shape our lives and our performances, so we cannot develop mental strategies without tapping into who we are and how we operate.

Here is a great example of how Anna Meares had to learn more about herself and her strengths and weaknesses to change her approach to racing. The period between the 2004 Athens Olympics and the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games was a challenging time for Anna. The International Olympic Committee decided that due to the introduction of another Olympic sport, cycling would have to drop one event. It was decided to discontinue the Women's 500 m Time Trial. Never again would Anna have the opportunity to compete for an Olympic Medal in this event.

Anna recounted her feelings at the time of the announcement:

I felt as though my career had been cut in half. The Olympics was the pinnacle for me. I didn't have the option of road events where I could go and make millions, and I didn't have the Keirin series in Japan (as it is only for men). I had gone from two shots to one and I was furious. I knew this would have a significant impact on my ability to gain sponsors. And it did. I was back at the sporting canteens on the weekends selling burgers and chips in order to top up my income. For a while there I denied that the decision was final and I stayed focused on the Time Trial and just dabbled in the Sprint. But there came a time when I realised that I would have to make the switch and focus on the Sprint. (Meares, 2009, p. 47).



Credit: chrsjc/flickr/CC BY-NC-ND-2.0

The Switch

In mid-2006 I received a call from Anna. She needed some strategies to be able to race successfully in the sprint event and was unsure why she hadn't already had great success in this event. Unlike the sprints in athletics, these events do not usually start with riders sprinting from the starting line and they are not confined to lanes. The early part of each race is typically highly tactical with riders pedalling slowly, as they carefully jockey for position, often trying to force their opponents up high on the track in an attempt to get their rivals to make the first move. Some even bring their bikes to a complete stop, balanced upright with both feet still on the pedals and both hands on the handle bars, in an attempt to make the other rider take the lead. To the lay person, this race looks more like a cat and mouse game, and there are some truths to this.



Credit: cas_ks/flickr/CC BY-NC-2.0

When racing at high speed, the riders who manage to stay just behind their opponents can draft, expending less effort. By riding behind the “lead out” riders, the second riders reduce their aerodynamic drag. If all goes to plan, just before the finish, the trailing riders pull out of the slipstream, and aided by fresher legs, may be able to overtake the opponent before the line. To prevent this, leading riders may choose to accelerate quickly before the last lap, hoping to catch the opponents off guard and establish a large enough gap to negate the aerodynamic effect or to keep the speed high enough to prevent their opponents from overtaking. This event is all about tactics, awareness, courage, and commitment.

Up to 2006 Anna hadn't experienced great success in the sprint. In discussions with her head coach, Anna had the speed and power but wasn't good at reading the tactics in the race. This information raised a flag for me, because I knew Anna was articulate and focused, and understood the tactics in training. Was she really unable to read the “game”, or was she just not engaging the right strategies? I knew that Anna had a good understanding of pre-race routines based on the work that we did in 2004. So, before diving into the depths of why she could train well but not race well, I was curious to know if her pre-race routine was having an impact on her race success. It is tempting when working with athletes to explore for deep-rooted reasons why they aren't performing. In my experience it is often what the athlete is doing and thinking in the two hours before they race that has the most significant impact on their focus, energy management, and self-talk. Hence I wanted to understand what her mental pre-race routine entailed for the sprint event. As I had suspected, Anna was using pre-race language and strategies that were similar to her time trial approach. That is, she was narrowing her focus, controlling her breathing, focusing on time, and using specific action-oriented cue words (e.g., fast legs, strong). I had a sense that this mental preparation was not conducive to sprint racing, but I needed more information and organised a meeting with her head coach and strength & conditioning coach to really learn about this “cat and mouse” race.



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The Insight

Over the next few days and with the support of a few jumbo lamington cakes (I have learned that cyclists don't eat regular size food!) Anna and I brainstormed the differences between the time trial and the sprint. We went back to the basics and brainstormed why she was so good at the time trial and how her pre-race routine supported her. Anna identified that she liked to be in control of her body and mind, that she was good at creating a narrow focus, that she loved having a race plan with no external interference, and that she loved racing the clock. Because Anna responds well to visual learning, we jotted these points down on one page and then brainstormed the sprint on another page. She explained the purpose of the sprint, the style of racing, the importance of decision making, the need to be flexible and aware, and a list of her physical strengths regarding this event. She identified that the sprint event required a broader attentional focus, less control, lots of ambiguity, the need to read and respond to tactics, and to have lots and lots of Plan Bs in her race plan.

Then I asked her what pre-race routine she uses for the sprint. It was in this moment that Anna clicked. She realised that not only was there a technical and tactical difference between the events, there was also a mindset difference and that her mental approach was too constrained for the cat and mouse game called the sprint. So we worked through a revised plan. Each time she trained the individual sprint she would remind herself that she was a sprinter. In conjunction with her coach, we redesigned some of her training to create more opportunities to practice responding to changing tactics.

persistence
is the key
to success

I'm unsure of exactly how Anna would recall this period of time, but from where I sat it seemed that Anna began to gain a sense of excitement about becoming a successful sprinter. There was a sense of

hope, an air of confidence, and when you add Anna's determination all concerned just knew that there was going to be success. The question was simply... when. Later in 2006, Anna went on to win a silver medal in the sprint at the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne followed by a silver medal in the 2008 Olympic Games where she was closely beaten by arch rival Victoria Pendleton of Great Britain. In 2010 Anna won gold at the Commonwealth Games, she won three gold medals at the 2011 World Championships, and then most recently, in a nail-biting final, Anna defeated Victoria Pendleton at the 2012 London Olympics to claim her second Olympic gold.



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Closing Remarks

On reflecting upon my 12 years' experience as a sport psychologist, I have come to appreciate that for me, sport psychology is a blend of organisational psychology, systems management, detailed needs analysis (for athletes and coaches), hypothesis testing, mental skills training, mindfulness coaching, coaching psychology, and wellbeing counselling, all within a solution-focused framework. I continue to be stretched personally and professionally and enjoy the personal development journey that this career provides to me. I have a supervisor from my Master of Psychology program, completed in 2000, to thank for this approach. Steven Christensen opened my eyes to the benefits of practising what I preach and through our group supervision sessions he constantly encouraged us to step outside our comfort zones. Although at times the experience was quite uncomfortable, it is exactly what I ask my clients to do every day to be the best they can be.



Credit: Courtesy of Georgia Ridler

The author - rested and recovered

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VIDEO

page

8 Anna Meares 500 m Time Trial Athens, www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiPb05TxCY



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Georgia Ridler MPsych MAPS is a Registered Psychologist who has worked with athletes, teams, coaches and high performance managers to create strategies that lead to enhanced performance. Over the past 12 years, Georgia has consulted to a range of sports at both the Olympic and professional level, playing a significant role in the success of Olympic gold medallists and several Olympic teams, including Track Cycling, over the last three Olympic cycles. She is currently the consulting Team Psychologist for Swimming Australia. Her vibrant style and insight is drawn from a hybrid of experiences in high-performance sport, psychology, science, leadership, and organisational development.