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Rowing in Australia

Jeffrey W. Bond

In

Secrets of Asian Sport Psychology

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



Introduction

The Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) was established in Canberra with funding from the Australian Government in mid-1981. The role of the AIS was to provide the very best coaching, sports science and medicine support, training facilities, and administrative support resources in order to assist the development of internationally competitive Australian athletes.



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When I commenced as Head of Sport Psychology at the AIS in early 1982, I was responsible for establishing the Sport Psychology Department within the fledgling Sports Science and Medicine Centre, and for the provision of psychological support services to the coaches and athletes awarded AIS residential training scholarships across 8 sports and 120 athletes (subsequently to grow to 36 sport programs and some 700 elite athletes). In line with the growth in the number of AIS sport programs and an increase in demand from across Australian sport in general, the Sport Psychology Department grew to employ up to 12 psychologists and interns.

In addition to a typical professional appointment system where athletes could self-refer or in some instances coaches or AIS medical professionals could refer an athlete for psychology consultations, AIS sport psychologists were integrated on a day-to-day basis within different sport programs. We provided educational workshops on key performance principles, conversed regularly with coaches, consulted individually or in small groups

with athletes and/or coaches, conducted small applied research projects (sometimes as part of a multi-disciplinary sports science/medicine team), attended training and conditioning sessions, accompanied teams to national and international competitions, and generally were involved in all aspects of preparation, competition and post-competition debriefing.

I consider that we were very privileged at the AIS because our job descriptions and day-to-day activities were very strongly focused on athlete and coach development and elite performance. We were an integral part of the sport system in Australia and we had ongoing access to coaches and athletes as well as the benefits associated with being in a multi-disciplinary sports science and medicine centre. Not only did coaches and athletes seek us out, we were also able to facilitate varying levels of integration and involvement within AIS and national sport programs because of our defined role, our co-location and our ongoing presence.

Against the backdrop of moving to the AIS and establishing the sport psychology program from very humble beginnings in 1982, I will chronicle in this chapter my work with the AIS and Australian rowing teams over a 13-year period from 1991 through 2004. This included assisting AIS rowers in their preparations for the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, holding accredited positions as sport psychologist to the rowing teams at the Atlanta (1996) and Sydney (2000) Olympic Games and several World Rowing Championships up until 2002.

Rowing at the AIS

The AIS rowing program commenced in Canberra in 1984, partly based on the success gained by the Australian Olympic rowing team in Los Angeles (1 silver and 2 bronze medals) and partly because of the impressive impact brought about by the employment in 1979 of an ex-Romanian as Head Coach of Australian rowing.

Reinhold Batschi was arguably responsible for facilitating and leading the rise of Australian rowing in world terms over a 25+ year period. Through his roles from 1984 as Head of AIS Rowing and Head Coach of the Australian and Olympic rowing teams, he influenced the growth in international performances of Australian rowers in a very significant way. Arguably the peak of his influence was realized at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games where Australia topped the rowing medal table with 2 gold, 1 silver and 3 bronze medals.

I was fortunate enough to work with Reinhold and his various teams from 1991 through to 2004, a most exciting period for Australian and AIS rowing. There was a strong relationship between the AIS and national rowing programs. AIS coaches often doubled as national coaches for World Cup regattas, World Championships and Olympic Games. Rowers were either based in Canberra as AIS scholarship holders or trained in their home locations spread around Australia, coming to the AIS Rowing Centre for national training camps from time to time. AIS sport scientists and medical staff provided professional services to both AIS and national teams.



view Rowing
Australia
promotional
video



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Australian Rowing Environment

The selection process for Australian World Championship and Olympic rowing teams was amongst the most complex and stringent of any sport in the country. A series of national selection trials, including ergometer tests, 5 km and standard 2 km races, were conducted annually leading into major international events. National crews/squads were initially selected from a combination of crew and seat racing (the latter where crews were modified sequentially by introducing a new rower and racing until accurate figures indicated the fastest combination). There were times when seat racing would continue whilst crews and squads were training and competing internationally at World Cup and other smaller regattas, right up until the very final preparations for a World Championship or Olympic Games competition. Rowers (and coaches) were placed under great stress, not only in training, but also in attempting to win through the selection process. Then the really difficult training began as the selected crews entered the final phase of preparation for competition.

Typically the Australian team traveled overseas for a series of training camps and World Cup regattas leading into the major international championships (World Championship or Olympic Games). The team traveled with approximately 75 rowers, coaching staff, sports science and medicine personnel, and team managers. It was a major logistical exercise to move this large team plus their boats and other equipment from various international training camp locations to lead up and major regattas. The team usually travelled for periods of between 8 to 13 weeks at a time, with all of the associated challenges of travel, such as maintaining equipment and adjusting to new accommodation and training venues, whilst having to make final crew selections from the various squads and then peaking the crews, fine tuning the settings on the boats, enhancing overall team cohesiveness and final on-water training, and eventual competition performances.



view video:
*Drew Ginn on
ergo thought
processes*



My Role as Rowing Team Psychologist

My role as the touring team sport psychologist was to work 24/7 with all members of the team and to make a positive contribution to overall team and individual crew cohesiveness, work intensively with the Head Coach and crew coaches, consult regularly with individual and small groups of rowers, and assist the other members of the team staff to manage the pressures and issues they faced. It was not uncommon for example, for sports medicine professionals from private practices to join the team at various stages of the competition tour. It was understandably difficult for private practitioners to be absent from their practice for lengthy periods of time. The national rowing team typically employed a rotational system for these professionals to ensure overall medical and physiotherapy coverage across the tour whilst recognizing the demands of private practice. Incoming practitioners occasionally attempted to make a positive impact by over-servicing the athlete group. Others found it difficult to feel integrated within the team if they arrived part way through the tour. Others simply struggled with the pressure to balance the demands from coaches to get athletes back in the boat, whilst looking after the medical needs of the athlete. Part of my role was to provide support and advice to the coaching staff and the medical professionals.



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the right thing
at the
right time

The location for program delivery varied considerably. Standard consultations were held in a room at the team hotel where, for example, an athlete might present with symptoms of anxiety associated with an upcoming regatta, another might raise the issue of interpersonal conflict with a member of her crew, whilst another might be working on his pre-race and during-race plan. Other sessions involved impromptu discussions during travel to and from the training or competition venue, or breaks during rowing training (I spent a good deal of time in various crew coaching boats). Sometimes discussions were held over lunch or coffee post-dinner, at other times formal workshops or team/crew cohesiveness activities were facilitated, and many formal visualization/mental rehearsal sessions were conducted with individuals or crews. There were important regular evening meetings with individual crew coaches or groups of team coaches over a quiet drink away from the team hotel. Many good decisions were made or an important message delivered during these informal and relaxed coach meetings.

I believe it was essential for a team sport psychologist to maintain ongoing communication with the coaching staff, both for the purpose of passing on relevant information and also for picking up on where the 'hot spots' might be within the team. On occasions, I would be included in disciplinary meetings alongside the Head Coach when, almost inevitably, the pressure had become too great for a coach, crew or a rower and an irrational decision had led to unacceptable behavior.

Overview of the Rowing Sport Psychology Program

The following section briefly outlines the major aspects included in the rowing sport psychology program that was provided during preparation, international travel and regattas:

- PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILING** - I have been an avid supporter and user of Nideffer's Test of Attentional and Interpersonal Style (TAIS; Nideffer, 1976, 1977) for the past 30+ years. I found it to be a very satisfactory means of identifying both individual attentional style and for gaining an understanding of additional psychological factors associated with an individual athlete's (or coach's) behavior and performance under high stress. I found the use of the TAIS to be very beneficial for my various rowing clients. For example, the results helped me to better understand the unique psychological characteristics of individuals and to assist athletes and coaches to develop detailed and individualized warm up and race plans based on their TAIS profile which we later used as the basis for high quality visualization and debriefing. For example, a rower with a high score on the scale measuring the tendency to become distracted and overloaded by external cues under high pressure, might be advised to include specific narrow focus points (such as arm/hand position, angle of blade entry, etc.) at critical stages of the race where becoming externally distracted has been a source of technical errors in the past.

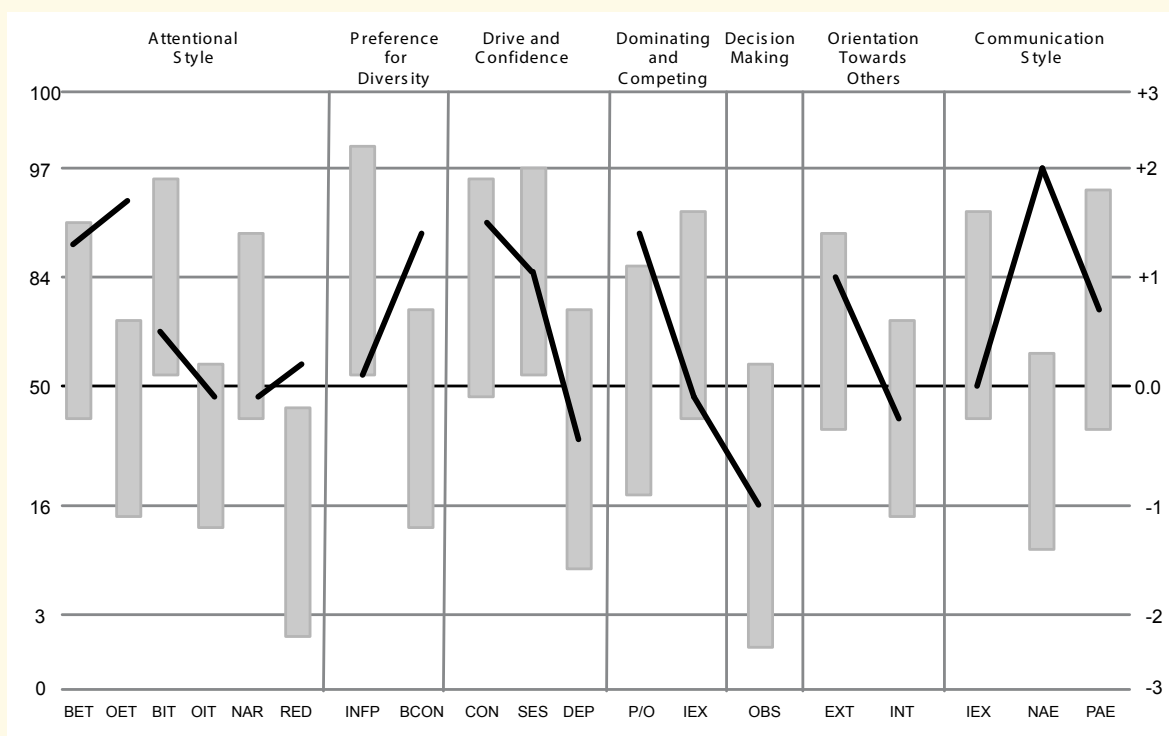


Figure 1. TAIS Profile for an Olympic Rower





Credit: Parutakupiu/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

This sample TAIS profile for an Olympic rower (see Figure 1) shows high scores on the need for control (CON), physical competitiveness (P/O) and risk taking (BCON). He has a very strong desire to compete and win, to control others and his environment and if necessary to take whatever risks are required for success, combined with a very strong tendency under competition pressure to experience external overload (OET) and difficulties maintaining a narrow focus of attention (low NAR). Because of this rower's difficulties in competition with external overloads/distractibility (being too aware of other boats and distracted by noise from other crews and the crowd), he struggled to maintain a clear narrow focus on his technique, made mistakes and 'forgot' critical aspects of his race plan.

- **MINDSET PROFILING** - *I have always been very interested in gaining insights into an individual's competition performance mindset. I believe that the mindset of an athlete or coach is very predictive of how the individual thrives, merely copes, or experiences performance decrements under the high pressure of competition. I believe that the more the individual knows about aspects of their core motivation and how it might impact performance motivation, the better they might develop effective strategies for competition. Together, we would explore key elements of their motivation. For example, in my view there is a critical balance issue when it comes to the juxtaposition of an individual's motivation to achieve success and their motivation to avoid failure. This balance impacts directly on their capacity to maintain a task- or process-oriented approach rather than an outcome-oriented mindset under high stress, and also affects their ability to control their inner voice and ultimately their composure. I believed that it should be possible for an athlete or coach to move from a position of seeing international competitions as somewhat threatening towards a position of wanting to seize the opportunity and thrive in the international sporting environment.*
- **AROUSAL CONTROL AND COMPOSURE** - *I adopted the rather simplistic Yerkes-Dodson (1908) model of arousal and performance in my ongoing work with rowers. I found over the years that the vast majority of coaches and athletes across all sports seemed to grasp the concept of being under-aroused, over-aroused or in their ideal performance zone. The simple inverted-U model clearly shows the relationship between arousal level and performance in a way that Australian athletes and coaches can understand. I worked with rowers and coaches to develop effective arousal adjustment and composure under pressure strategies. For example, a rower might have developed and practiced specific muscle relaxation techniques whilst rowing. These might include being able to reduce muscle tension across the shoulders on the recovery stroke (as the blade is feathered and the rowers slides the seat forward to prepare for the entry of the blade on the next stroke).*

seize the
opportunity
and thrive

I found that composure could be enhanced for many rowers with a well-developed and practiced race plan, based on their respective attentional profiles. The key objective for the rowers was to execute the perfect race plan and in so doing, produce the desired outcome at the completion of the race. A focus on executing the process (i.e., the race plan) rather than ruminating about the possible outcome provided an antidote to loss of composure. A key objective for me has been to encourage athletes and coaches to have a repertoire of arousal monitoring and adjustment strategies that they can take into performance situations by integrating them into performance-related routines.

- **EMOTIONAL CONTROL** - *It was back in the early 1980's when I first read William P. Morgan's article on the importance of mood states in athletic performance (Morgan, 1980). I began using the Profile of Mood States (POMS; McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1971, 1992) and short versions of the scale, in my work with Australian swimmers during the 1980's. Since then, there has been a great deal of research in the area of mood and emotional state profiling in elite sport (see Beedie, Terry, & Lane, 2000; Hall & Terry, 1995; Terry, 1994). I did not collect a lot of formal mood state data from rowing teams, but I did work with individual rowers on the issue of monitoring moods and emotional control strategies during preparation phases of training. I found that specific mood adjustment strategies suited different individuals. For example, some rowers responded positively to music, others to visualizing colours (e.g., blue for calmness, red for aggression), some to mild forms of exercise (warm-up), and others to socializing with those who elevated their moods. A refocus onto specific process goals and short forms of relaxation seemed to assist rowers who appeared to be very nervous, anxious, frustrated or angry. Being in close proximity to coaches and rowers during international tours made it reasonably easy to assist those individuals for whom emotion regulation was critical.*



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- **CONCENTRATION STRATEGIES** - *The old adage that it is essential for athletes to focus on 'the right thing at the right time' in elite sporting performances has been proven to me over and over again. My belief is that many of the seemingly technical errors we see in elite sport often have their roots in the area of concentration focus. I have always proposed that for highly talented athletes who have received years of technical training only to find it break down under high stress competition conditions, the answer may not lie in simply more technical training. Rather, there will be a great deal to be gained by investigating the athlete's performance mindset (motivational profile) and attentional profile (Nideffer, 1976). It may be that an excessive fear of failure, subsequent loss of arousal control and an inappropriate focus of attention will provide clues to effective solutions.*

I profiled the attentional styles of rowers and their coaches and worked with them to develop a range of practical concentration strategies for application in the high-pressure international regatta environment. Based on a rower having good awareness of their attentional style and the importance of maintaining effective levels of arousal for the performance at hand, strategies I introduced involved the usual arousal control adjustment followed by a shift in focus away from the predicted area of attentional breakdown. For example, a rower with a very high TAIS score on the tendency to become internally overloaded under pressure would develop a strategy based on recognizing the early warning signs of an internal overload, taking one or two centering breaths (to lower arousal), then purposefully shifting focus of attention to an appropriate external process cue, such as forcefully pointing the toes at the end of the drive phase of the stroke.



Credit: Rex Boggs5/flickr/CC-BY-ND2.0

- **PERFORMANCE ROUTINES** - *The concept of race planning has existed in sports like rowing and swimming for a very long time. What I believe I brought into the Australian rowing environment was a more comprehensive and systematic approach to race planning. I encouraged coaches and rowers to extend their plan outside the actual 2000 metre race to include the pre-race (on land) preparation, the warm up, paddle to the start, waiting for the roll call, and start. The main body of the race would be broken into meaningful segments identified by the coaches and his crew. At the other end of the race I included the immediate post-finish phase, the warm down and return to the boat shed. All phases were to be clearly segmented and included appropriate technical, mental and physical cues (see Figure 2). For example, an appropriate technical cue during the mid-race segment might be to focus on a clean and crisp entry of the blade into the water at the start of the drive phase of the stroke. A mental cue might be to focus on the feeling of relaxation during the recovery stroke, while a physical cue might be to focus on an explosive leg drive early in the drive phase of the stroke.*

Race Stage	Technical Focus	Physical Focus	Mental Focus
Warm-up	Work on stroke length and catches	Get heart rate up Feel strong	Relaxed, positive visualization
Paddle to Start	Short race pace Piece	Strong drive	Reinforce crew Relaxed recovery Race rhythm Relax into holding area
Start	Connection Blade depth	Back set Weight on feet	Control arousal Ready to explode
Start Signal	Leg drive Pressure through stroke Quick slide	Fast and strong	Quick together
0-250m	Ease out stroke length Finish position Catch angle	Shoulders down Breathing Weight over	Relax on recovery Smooth Precise
250-500m	Drive position Finish position Follow stroke	Long and strong Transition to mid-race rhythm	Relax HR settle Comfortable
500-1000m	Respond to technical calls Blade entry and exit	Mid-race rhythm Strong leg drive	Smooth and long In sync
1000-1500m	Legs, hips, back Work catches Finish position	Stroke rate and rhythm	Feeling strong Eyes in boat
1500-1750m	Stroke length Quick catches	Strong leg drive Relaxed recovery	Begin to build Together
1750-2000m	Stroke rate and length Finish stroke	Respond to effort calls All out now	Thrive on the challenge Work together
Post-finish		Breathing Muscle relaxation	Savour the moment Congratulate team mates
Paddle to Landing	Maintain technique	Sit tall Ease out lactate	Let emotions flow

Figure 2. Race Plan for an Olympic Rower



In addition to performance planning, I was very keen to encourage individual rowers and crews to ensure that there were logical and effective post-race and post-regatta debrief plans in place. Traditionally, the sport psychologists accredited with Australian Olympic teams struggled to implement formal debrief programs before the end of the Games because the athletes were difficult to find as they either celebrated or commiserated after their performances. I was very interested in reinforcing the need for effective debriefing and the inclusion of this in the normal logistics surrounding rowing competitions.

I found that coaches and rowers at the AIS and on various Australian teams were very open to building their skills and applying them to the race preparations in conjunction with their prepared and well-practiced race plans. I have very fond memories of numerous race plan visualization sessions with rowing crews.

Historically, the most famous Australian rowing crew is the ‘Oarsome Foursome’ (multiple Olympic medals from 1992 onwards), a men’s straight four (no coxswain). They were what I would call ‘masters’ of race planning.

At their peak in Atlanta in 1996, they demonstrated a great ability to visualize a successful race plan from both inside-out (internal) and outside-in (external) perspectives. They were very competent at using all of the visualization ‘tricks’ to enhance the vividness and quality of their imagery. These included using slow motion, zoom, stop frames, single frame advance, 360 degree rotations around the boat as they ‘rowed’ down the Olympic course, realistic race calls, etc. They did manage to execute their plan perfectly in 1996 as the final race unfolded exactly as they had visualized. From their outside lane they forged ahead of the field in the last 200 metres in a great come-from-behind effort to take the gold medal.



view video
of Oarsome
Foursome
1996 Atlanta
Olympics



Credit: Ken Hackman/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

- **CRISIS INTERVENTION** - *The mental health of the rowing community is generally very positive, although the advent of lightweight rowing (where the average crew weight for men is 70 kilograms and for women 57 kilograms) certainly impacted on the existence of various forms of eating pathology. As is so often the case across all elite sports, most eating pathologies in rowing are kept well and truly undercover. Where a rower did self-disclose, referral to others with specific professional expertise was indicated. Rowers, like all other elite athletes, experience performance-related anxiety, depression related to injury, non-selection, poor performance and other off-water issues, crew/team dysfunction and conflict among crew members and between individual rowers and their coach. My role included working in all of these areas with varying degrees of success.*

I have very strong memories of being part of an inquiry, instigated by the Head Coach, into a complaint by a rower about the excessive stress brought about by conflict between a crew and their coach, and amongst the crew members. This discussion took place immediately prior to the team moving into the Olympic village and there was obvious concern about the impact of the rower's request to be released from the team and to head home on the next plane. My role, as determined by the Head Coach, was to take a forceful position with the rower in the resolution of this issue. The Head Coach made it very clear to the crew coach that this situation should never have developed to this stage. After listening to the inputs of the crew coach and the individual members of the crew, I informed the rower that there was no possibility of release from the team, and that the rower should sit in the boat and follow the crew coach's instructions, pull very hard on the oar handle and not complain. I explained that there was a potential Olympic medal beckoning and that the needs of the crew, the entire rowing team and the country, were more important than the challenges of an individual rower in managing the associated stresses. This decision was understandably not welcomed by the rower, but the final outcome was an Olympic gold medal! Most would have thought that the complaining rower might have at the very least acknowledged that the decision taken during the enquiry meeting was in retrospect the correct one, but this was not forthcoming. In fact, the rower refused to speak to me again and to this day all attempts to resolve the situation have failed.



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- **DEVELOPING A HIGH PERFORMING TEAM** - Most Australians clearly remember the highly publicized and hotly debated ‘meltdown’ in the women’s eight final at the 2004 Athens Olympics. In this race one rower exceeded her physical and mental tolerances, stopped rowing and collapsed in the boat within 750 metres or so of the finish line. The reactions of her crew mates and coach clearly demonstrated the fractures in crew cohesiveness.

There were many challenges facing the desire for high levels of team cohesiveness across Australian Rowing teams. Aside from the existence of discreet boat categories (sweep/sculling, singles, pairs/doubles, fours/quads, eights, coxed and straight boats, heavyweight and lightweight, and men’s and women’s teams), all with their own goals and specialist coaches, there was the issue of sheer bulk of numbers. As would normally be the case, at the individual crew level there were signs of the standard ‘forming, storming, norming and performing’ (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) at various stages during the preparations for major events. At the larger team level, the team would go to great lengths to bring the entire team together for special dinners and events. At times there were specific activities designed to enhance team cohesiveness and, periodically, special speakers and events were introduced.



Credit: David Niblack/imagebase.net/Public Domain

Rowing regattas at Olympic Games rarely take place in a venue close to the centre of major cities. We always found ourselves located in an athletes’ ‘sub-village’ sometimes many kilometres from the central Olympic action and resources. We were unable to attend the Opening Ceremony (rowing heats took place on the first day of Olympic competition) or gain the benefit or otherwise from living in the main Olympic village and enjoying the vast resources provided to most Olympic athletes and coaches. We learned to be very self-contained and in Atlanta, for example, we planned and conducted our own ‘Olympic Opening Ceremony’. Our team dressed in their official marching uniforms and marched into the ‘stadium’ to the strains of typical Olympic music. The coaches and team staff dressed and acted as key Olympic officials (with some very funny speeches). Some athletes donned costumes of their own design and performed for their team, and so on. We even staged our own fireworks display, which was no mean feat given the tight security and understandable sensitivities about possible bomb threats, etc.

- **MANAGING THE TRAVEL COMPONENT** - Over the years of my employment at the AIS, I researched the literature for information about minimizing jet stress and jet lag. Australian athletes travel regularly to international competitions in the northern hemisphere, so effective travel strategies are of interest to many coaches and athletes. We all understand what it feels like to be jet lagged after flying across time zones, but there is also the issue of jet stress to be addressed. Jet stress occurs during international flights because of the dehydration associated with pressurized and air conditioned cabins, uncomfortable seats, endless background noise, questionable food, and the demands associated with stopovers and transit lounges. I saw part of my role to educate coaches and athletes about the potential impact of jet lag and jet stress and to propose specific strategies for the minimization of both. Preparation for international travel and comprehensive ‘what if...’ discussions became a regular pre-departure feature of many Australian teams, including the rowers.

‘Secrets’ to Success as the Rowing Team Sport Psychologist

In attempting to explain some of the factors that contribute to success as a team psychologist, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of extended team involvement and the interactions between various facets of the rowing sport psychology program. The list of key messages and brief explanations that follow are not in priority order, but hopefully they contribute something of value to the overall theme of this book.

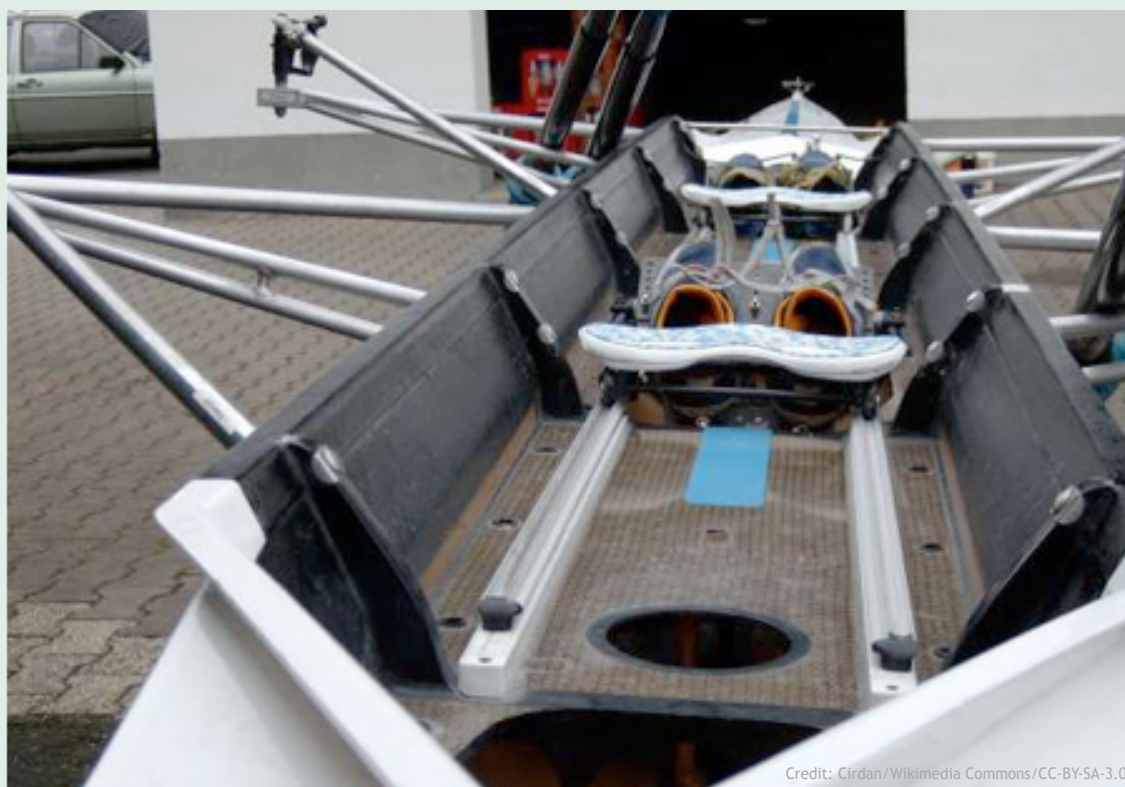
- *The senior leadership position I held within the AIS and the experience I had obtained over previous years working with other high profile sports placed me in a very strong position with the rowing coaches and athletes. The fact that I was available across the years leading into important international competitions and could immerse myself in all aspects of the rowing environment was an outcome of my role at the AIS. This situation enabled me to commit the time and effort to be with the teams and to understand coaching goals and philosophies, and the technicalities and logistics of the sport.*

There were a number of personal qualities and beliefs that I suspect aided my acceptance and integration with Australian rowing teams.

- *I believe that one needed to be practical and logical in approach and communication with clients, minimizing the use of the technical jargon associated with our profession and only using theoretical models and frameworks where they added value and could be readily understood by coaches and athletes.*
- *My experience would suggest that it is very important for the team psychologist to exhibit a strong drive for peak performance that mirrors that of the coaches and athletes. This combined with a high level of commitment to the team and preparedness to contribute in multiple ways to the effectiveness of the team sits very comfortably with elite sport clients. I was never very precious about sticking steadfastly to my role as a psychologist. If there was a need for a driver or someone to temporarily fill another role for the team, then I considered this to be part of my engagement. As long as the additional role did not compromise my capacity to fulfill the expectations of my position, I was happy to contribute to the overall team effort. On many occasions I was pleased to see that additional roles often opened up useful opportunities to input key sport psychology messages.*
- *I took a deliberate decision to identify and align with the Head Coach and the team as my primary clients, rather than individual rowers. Whilst I respected and empathized with the needs of individuals and their desire for peak performance, I was always conscious of the overall needs of the team, led by the Head Coach.*
- *My position on the confidentiality of information was made clear to all of my clients, such that individuals understood that they could consult with me in a confidential and supportive environment, but any key issues that were likely to impact the greater team’s performance were likely to be taken forward (with appropriate consent) to the Head Coach. The culture that I reinforced was that we were all part of the same team, striving relentlessly for the same outcomes.*

- *I have always believed that sport psychologists must adopt a ‘no credit’ approach to their work. By that I mean that the glory and recognition associated with competition performances rightly lies with the athlete and coach, not with others who provide support, however significant the contribution might be perceived to be. My role was clearly in the ‘engine room’ of the team, and I was more than happy to take a low profile. This enabled me to remain calm under pressure and to consistently provide objective feedback and an unemotional view of situations.*
- *In parallel with this belief I have always espoused the view that as a sport psychology professional we cannot fall into the trap of placing athletes on a pedestal, or playing favourites because of the perceived high status of particular athletes or coaches. To me, elite athletes are not unlike any person from any walk of life who dedicates a significant portion of their lives to excelling at something.*
- *I took particular care in getting to know my rowing client(s), and to view the client (athlete, coach or team staff) as a whole person with all of the challenges that we all have to face. My experience was that when a highly trained and talented elite athlete struggles to cope, there is more often than not something that is problematic for the athlete in their non-sport life. I believe that we do a disservice to our clients if we narrow our focus only onto their role as an athlete or coach.*
- *I believe it is very important for a sport psychologist to be careful about engaging in any form of technique coaching. Once we have become educated about a sport and have spent countless hours sitting with coaches and athletes, it is all too easy to slip into a part-technical coaching role. This can be a very dangerous temptation. For example, in my work with the rowers, I always included the crew coach in race plan visualization sessions. I left it to them to work with their rowers on appropriate technical calls during race plans.*
- *An important skill for a sport psychologist working in team environments is to be able to identify what I call the ‘cultural architects’ within the group. Not all of these people have appointed leadership positions, but they do exert a significant influence over the attitudes and behaviors of those around them. I took care to target these individuals, be they coaches or athletes, as I felt that if I could enlist their support it would make my job more effective and impactful.*
- *I found that I needed to accept that not all coaches are strong supporters of sport psychology or the presence of a sport psychologist on touring teams. Because of my ability to be immersed in the rowing scene over long periods of time, I could afford to be patient in targeting the few non-supporters amongst the coaches and athletes. I was able to wait for the teachable moments that inevitably arose. I did spend considerable amounts of time and effort in cultivating my relationship with coaches, athletes and team staff. All were possible sources of relevant information that might allow me to intervene before potentially difficult situations had developed into something more than they needed to be.*

- *The rowing sport psychology program was deliberately developed to be logical, practical, focused on performance, and integrated into training and competition. Because of my ongoing involvement in the sport, I was able to write rowing-specific materials for the coaches and athletes, enhance my group workshops and meetings with specific rowing examples, and to be around the team and individual crews and coaches to reinforce the key performance principles at relevant times, such as race debriefs.*
- *There are times when the team psychologist is tested by a range of factors, including poor performance by clients, lack of support at crucial times, and the general stresses of traveling with teams and being away from family for extended periods. I maintain that there are four key pillars, derived from some of the current research on mental toughness in elite athletes, that sport psychologists should revisit during times of uncertainty and high challenge. There are times on tour with teams where it is possible for the sport psychologist to take time out to reflect on **self-belief** (Do I really value myself and believe in the contribution I can make?), **motivation** (Why am I doing this and what amongst the complex team environment is meeting some of my motivational needs?), **focus** (What needs to be my key focus, and what is the most important and relevant?), and **mindset** (Am I seeing the opportunities in the current situation, and have I adopted and implemented a glass half full, thriving-on-the-challenge mindset?).*
- *'Patience is a virtue' is a very old saying, and very applicable in the case of the touring sport psychologist. Getting the balance right between remaining calm and patient (the art of waiting for the right moment or the next opportunity) and displaying the appropriate sense of urgency and strong drive for performance is a delicate tightrope to walk, but essential when working with elite teams.*

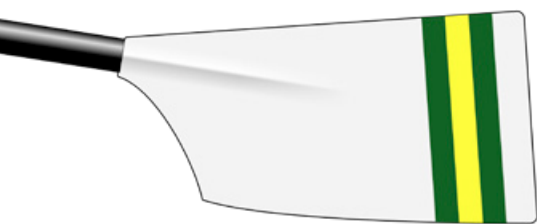


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Summary

As I look back over the period 1991 through 2004 I have many fond memories of my time with the AIS and Australian Rowing teams. There is little better in professional practice as a sport psychologist than being privileged enough to be ‘in the trenches’ at the frontline of international sport. It also occurs to me that sport psychology contributions are but one part of the giant jigsaw that requires completion before the very best international performances occur.

I’m very humbled to have been asked to contribute a chapter to what I believe will be a book full of insights and stories from the ‘engine room’ of elite sport. I’m not sure if the above key messages qualify as ‘secrets’ of applied sport psychology practice at the international sport level, but the list above does include most of the factors that might have contributed to any successful contributions that I might have made as a sport psychologist to the overall team effort across the 13 or so years of my involvement with Australian rowing. Of course I value very much what I learned from the coaches and athletes and I believe that those talented and hard-working people have value-added immensely to my experience and knowledge as a sport psychologist.



Credit: Gary van der Merwe/Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0

It is my pleasure to have been invited to contribute to this book and I sincerely hope that there may be something within the text that the reader finds interesting. As I have often said to groups of athletes and coaches participating in one of my workshops: ‘If you learn just one thing from this experience that helps you to become even better or more knowledgeable tomorrow than you are today, then it has been worth the time and effort you have committed to being part of this workshop’.

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VIDEOS

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3	Rowing Australia promo video, Sydney International Rowing Regatta 2013,	www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HhFcEZSloo
4	Drew Ginn video on ergo thought processes,	www.youtube.com/watch?v=_t69N-ipbrM&feature=player_detailpage&list=UUv1eV-Lqa-YATff20e5ZJdg
11	Oarsome Foursome 1996 Games,	www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mm4v5a9quSM&feature=player_detailpage

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11	Rowing at the 1988 Summer Olympics by Ken Hackman, used under a [U.S. Air Force] Public Domain Licence, from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ARowing_at_the_1988_Summer_Olympics.JPG
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeffrey W. Bond OAM, FAPS is the Director of Bond Performance Consulting. He was previously Head of the Sport Psychology Department at the Australian Institute of Sport from 1982-2004 and one of the founding group of the Australian Psychological Society's College of Sport and Exercise Psychologists. In addition to working as a sport psychologist for many of Australia's international athletes and teams, Jeffrey has provided business performance consultant services to numerous international corporate organisations. He has a background in physical education, psychology and sport psychology and has worked as a sport psychologist for the Australian Team at nine Summer and Winter Olympic Games.