Using positive psychology to promote well-being in student athletes:

A pilot evaluation at St Peter's College, Adelaide

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Shaping minds, shaping the world

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Introduction and Aims

Positive Psychology is a relatively new branch of psychology that conducts scientific inquiry into the factors that help individuals, communities and organisations thrive by building on their strengths and virtues *(Gable & Haidt, 2005)*. Positive psychology aims to expand the focus of psychology from a preoccupation with repairing the negatives in life to also extending the positives *(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000)*. The application of positive psychology to sport advocates "a focus on strengths and flourishing rather than weaknesses of athletes, coaches, and individuals" *(Association for Applied Sports Psychology)*.

The emphasis in sport on peak performance, athlete resilience and team flow makes sport an interesting field for the application of positive psychology. Indeed, a number of influential studies show significant relationships between optimism and sporting performance *(Gordon, & Kane, 2002; Seligman, Nolen-Hoeksema, Thornton, & Thornton, 1990)*. This poster reports on a pilot implementation of the Positive Sports Coaching program on the well-being of students at St Peter's College, Adelaide

Positive Sports Coaching

The Positive Sports Coaching© program was developed by Mr Matthew Scholes, Lecturer in Sport and Recreation, Swinburne University. The Positive Sports Coaching© (PSC) program is an innovative, evidenced-based and effective way of coaching teams and individuals built around the science of positive psychology. The program is built around the science of optimism, positive feedback and process praise and has dual aims: 1) to assist with performance and 2) to promote well-being.

The Positive Sports Coaching Wheel© is a simple, but extremely effective, tool that helps coaches and players learn the skills to develop and implement the PSC approach. The model is used as a reference to help them follow the PSC program as they coach. The focus is on learning to look for positives while dealing with negatives using an optimistic mindset.

St Peter's College

Established in 1847 St Peter's College, Adelaide, Australia, is a leading independent Anglican day and boarding school providing the highest quality education for boys from Pre-school to Year 12 (1239 students). Our vision is to be a world-class school where boys flourish. Based on Christian values St Peter's College aims to provide an education that brings out the best in every boy. St Peter's College focus on boys' education, values diversity and individuality, and welcome students from a broad cross-section of society. St Peter's College aims to develop educated, considerate and outward-looking young men who will use their talents responsibly for the good of the wider community. With a strong commitment to social justice and building character anibgst her alumni are 3 Noble Laureates, 42 Rhodes Scholars and 8 South Australian Premiers and former Geelong Football Club Captain Tom Harley. St Peter's College promotes a culture of respect, encouragement and working together in a professional, ethical and cooperative manner. In 2011 St Peter's College Senior Leadership Team commenced incorporating well-being as a central part of school life. One method technique central to this has been to integrate positive psychology into areas of curricular, co-curricular and pastoral programs. One of the early adopters of positive psychology was school's sports program.

Evaluation of the PSC - does it promote well-being in students?

The Positive Sports Coaching program was delivered by Mr Matthew Scholes to the coaches and students of the First Football squad (n = 25; year 10 – year 12) and First Soccer squad (n = 15; year 10 – year 12) over a 4 week period, just prior to both sporting teams competing in the school's most important sporting fixture of the year: the intercollegiate playoffs. A within group pre-test, post-test design was used to test for differences in positive emotions and negative emotions. Prior to the program, students were asked to complete the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) (PANAS) and then again upon completion of the program. The PANAS asks the participants to rate (5 point scale 1 – only minimally, 5 – Extremely) how they feel across 20 emotions of which 10 are positive and 10 are negative.

Negative emotions		Positive emotions	
hostile	distressed	interested	inspired
nervous	upset	enthusiastic	excited
irritable	jittery	determined	proud
guilty	ashamed	attentive	strong
scared	afraid	alert	active

Results

Scores on the 10 positive emotions were totalled to get a global score for positive emotions (total possible scores = 50). The student's positive emotions improved considerably from 37 to 41.7 (out of a 50 point scale ie 9.4%) over the 2 week period. Looking at each individual emotion, students reported feeling more interested, inspired, enthusiastic, excited, proud, determined, attentive, strong and active following the Positive Sports Coaching© program with the level of Alertness remaining constant.

References

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Gordon, R. A., & Kane, J. M. (2002). Explanatory style on the soccer field: Optimism and athletic performance. Poster presented at the 3rd annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Savannah, GA.
Seligman, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, M.. (2000). Positive Psychology: An Introduction. American Psychologist, 55, 5-14.
Seligman, M. E. P., Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Thornton, N. & Thornton, K. M. (1990). Explanatory style as a mechanism of disappointing athletic performance. Psychological Science, 1, 143-146.

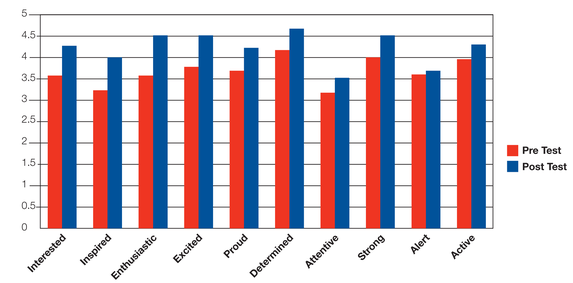

Table 1: Pre-test and post-test scores on positive emotions

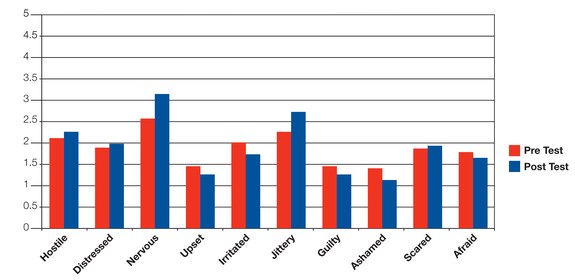

Table 2: Pre-test and post-test scores on negative emotions

Scores on the 10 negative emotions were totalled to get a global score for positive emotions (total possible scores = 50). The global score on the students' negative feelings remained constant at a very low level of 19.05. However, further examination of the data shows that their levels of distress, hostility, nervousness, scared and feeling jittery increased. Whilst their levels of feeling upset, irritated, guilty, ashamed and afraid went down and their levels of feeling hostile, distressed and scared remained constant.

A one-way repeated-measures MANOVA was used to test for pre-test and to post-test changes in total score for positive emotions and total score for negative emotions. A significant effect for time was found ($F(2,28) = 3.64$, $p < .05$). Total positive emotions were statistically higher post-program than pre-program (pre-program mean = 37/post-program mean = 41.7 ; $F(1,29) = 6.23$, $p < .05$). There was no difference in total negative emotions between pre-program to post-program scores (pre-program mean = 19.05/post-program mean = 19.05; $F(1,29) = .51$, $p > .05$).

Discussion

This initial evaluation of the Positive Sports Coaching© program suggests that positive psychology is a beneficial approach to assisting the well-being of student athletes. Students who participated in the PSC at St Peter's College provided the following comments:

Has helped me turn my nerves into excitement

I am more enthusiastic about training and playing hard

The coaches were more positive with us after being trained

Made me less nervous and scared before intercol, now feel excited and keen

However, the students reported an increase in the following negative emotions: distressed, nervous, jittery and scared. The results need to be considered within the context that students completed the post-program PANAS/emotions survey the week of the Inter collegiate playoffs. It may well have been the any benefits in terms of reducing negative effect that came from the program were offset by the pressure of the impending sports final against the school's long term competitor. The results also need to be considered within the context that the program was only in operation for 4 weeks and it may take longer time for the students and coaches to embed the positive psychology approach and, thus, see reductions in negative emotions when it comes to sport. The results of the PSC on positive emotions is highly encouraging and is a direction the school wishes to head in – that is, to help all boys enjoy their sport.

Future Directions

In 2012, St Peter's College will be rolling out the Positive Sports Coaching© program to coaches and students in the first and second teams for the following team sports: Cricket, Water Polo, Tennis, Basketball, Football, and Soccer (approx = 175 students). The roll out will use a stage approach which will allow for an experimental-control waitlist design to be used in the evaluation. Baseline measures of positive emotions, negative emotions, grit and growth mindsets will be taken from all students in November of 2011. As each team of students completes the Positive Sports Coaching© program, a brief paper based well-being survey will be re-administered. Latent growth curve analysis will then be conducted to determine if student well-being is improved as a result of participation in the Positive Sports Coaching© program compared to the students teams waiting to complete the program. The long term effects of the program on well-being will also be statistically analysed.

Mr Matthew Scholes, Swinburne University, and St Peter's College Captains of Soccer and Football