

Jonny Wilkinson on sports psychology

The Rugby World Cup winner tells Adam Morton how psychological preparation helps him to optimise his performance. Much of the content in this article is also relevant for the other exam boards

The Edexcel specification allows you to discover the importance of psychological preparation. This article aims to improve your understanding of some of the key theoretical aspects of sports psychology by placing them in the context of an elite performer.

Visualisation and Doris

Famed and feared for his kicking prowess, Jonny Wilkinson is international rugby's second-highest points scorer of all time. But what exactly is going through his mind as he prepares to take a kick? The answer is a textbook example of **visualisation** and this is where Doris comes in. This technique, developed with his kicking coach David Alred, means that instead of merely aiming to kick the ball between the uprights, Wilkinson's focus shifts to a much smaller target further back behind the posts. He imagines a lady, who they named Doris, holding an ice cream, sitting in a particular seat in the stand. Wilkinson's aim is to hit the ice cream cone in her hand.

Another part of the mental imagery that Wilkinson uses when kicking is a wire extending from the ground all the way up to the target and to which the ball is attached. By kicking the ball all he is doing is propelling

it along the wire, precisely to where it is intended to go. In this case, the 'where' isn't just over the posts but to a single point in the crowd.

AM Visualisation can be a powerful psychological tool for improving performance. Can you explain how focusing on a much smaller target, like Doris and her ice cream, improves your goal kicking?

JW Goal kicking and certain punts are dead ball situations and are therefore much more controllable. Visualising a tiny target is about taking dead aim, i.e. aiming for the middle of the middle and exploiting the opportunity to control the situation.

The iconic image of Wilkinson, standing, hands clasped, preparing to kick, is a study in sporting concentration. However, this position evolved over time as his understanding of the psychological aspects of performance developed.

AM Your goal-kicking stance has been imitated by young rugby players on pitches around the world. What do you feel the benefits of this stance are?

JW The position came about through attempting to find centre-deep focus. It also helps me to control my breathing and to channel all the power throughout my body to my left leg.

What Wilkinson describes here is a form of centring. This is a somatic relaxation technique that involves focusing on deep breathing, using the diaphragm to control it. Wilkinson's characteristic kicking stance evolved at the same time as his increasing



mastery of this technique. Used together, these cognitive and somatic techniques of visualisation and centring allow Wilkinson to concentrate more effectively on the task of kicking.

Decision making

Practice

AM As a fly half, decision making is an important part of your game. Could you describe how you set about improving your decision-making ability?

JW To improve decision making, you need to practise pressure situations in training. You also need to analyse match performance and consistently train all your skills hard throughout the week in order to create increased confidence, improved reactions and greater awareness.

Key terms

Cues The stimuli on which a performer acts. They may be visual, verbal or kinaesthetic.

Scanning Relating to visual awareness, this is the performer's perceptual ability to detect relevant events around them.

Selective attention The process of filtering out irrelevant information, e.g. crowd noise.

Channel capacity The brain has limited channels through which information can pass. Irrelevant information slows down the processing of relevant information.

The key word in Wilkinson's response here is 'practise'. Although mental rehearsal is a powerful psychological skill, it is physical practice that plays the central role in the development of a performer. While Wilkinson trains to improve specific components of fitness such as power or strength, a large proportion of his training time will be spent in game-based situations. These aim to replicate the match environment and require the performer to process and act on large volumes of information.

This ability to detect, compare and recognise **cues** is the basis of decision making. Models such as Welford's information processing model (Figure 1, see p. 18) usually represent decision making as a loop where information relating to the output is used to inform subsequent decision making.

Detection is closely linked to perception, which is the ability to interpret both external (sight, sound) and internal (kinaesthetic) sensory information. The eyes are an important source of this information and **scanning** is crucial to the performer's ability to identify relevant visual cues such as the movement of opposition, team-mates and the ball.

Filtering

Visual awareness itself comprises four main dimensions:

- Peripheral vision
- Depth perception
- Static acuity
- Dynamic acuity

However, not all of this information is useful in the decision-making process and

the performer must filter out any information that is irrelevant. This process of filtering out extraneous information, known as **selective attention**, allows the performer to subconsciously ignore inconsequential stimuli such as the movement and noise of the crowd.

As the performer becomes more experienced through training and competition, the process becomes increasingly effective, speeding up as less time is taken considering irrelevant information. This is particularly important in light of the limited **channel capacity** of the brain, which means that irrelevant information, which is not filtered out, will slow down decision making. The time taken from the onset of the stimulus to the initiation of the subsequent movement is known as **reaction time**. The time then taken to complete the movement itself is known as **movement time** and the combination of the two is referred to as **response time**.

Once the relevant sensory stimuli have been identified, the performer compares this with their long-term memory and prior experience of comparable situations. Having recognised what is happening, they are able to make an appropriate decision.

This process of detection, comparison and recognition is why consistent practice, particularly of pressurised games-based scenarios, is so effective: the greater the bank of experience you have to draw upon and compare the current information to, the better your decision making will be.

Feedback

The final part of the decision-making process is feedback. Information about the outcome of your response and its effectiveness is taken into consideration when making a subsequent decision. Feedback is vital in allowing us to learn from experience, and this is one of the reasons why video analysis is now commonplace in professional sport.

Wilkinson also spoke about increasing awareness levels through training. To do this there are several things coaches will consider when planning practice sessions:

- Is training game-based and run at game speed?

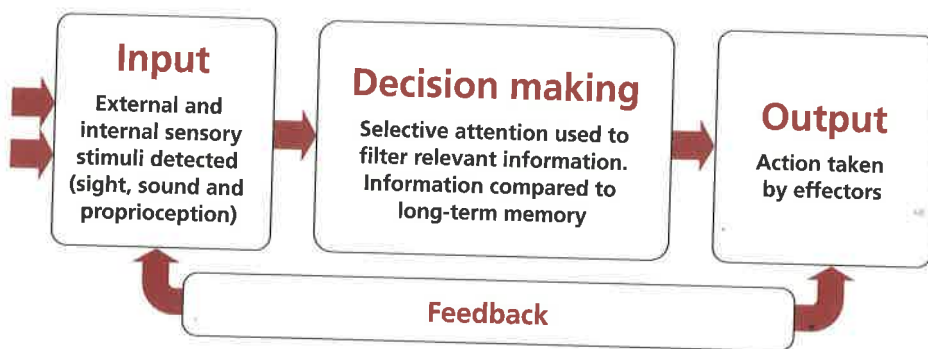


Figure 1 The decision-making process, based on Welford's model

Box 1 SMARTER principle

Goal setting can be made more effective by following the SMARTER principle:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Agreed
- Realistic
- Time-bound
- Exciting
- Recorded

- Are specific game-related problems set for performers to solve?
- Are performers required to make decisions and challenged mentally, physically and technically?
- Are performers reminded of key cues such as patterns of play, position and movement?

In summary, the pressurised training situations Wilkinson refers to are aimed at improving decision making by speeding up the process itself and making the performer more effective at choosing the best response in any given situation.

Goal setting

AM In your recent biography you talk about the fact that from a young age you've set goals for yourself. How do you think you've benefited from this process?

JW Goal setting is hugely important. It helps motivate, inspire, plan, stay on track, focus and ultimately commit.

Wilkinson's response highlights exactly why goal setting is potentially such a powerful tool. However, in order for goal setting to be successful, it is important that both the performer and their coach go about the process of setting goals effectively. By following the SMARTER principle of goal setting (Box 1) the likelihood of the performer achieving their goals is greatly enhanced.

There are several types of goals that can be set and they can be remembered using the acronym SLOPP (Box 2). A long-term goal, such as winning the Rugby World Cup, might be broken down into several, necessary short-term goals such as first being selected for the England squad.

The long-term goal of winning the World Cup might also be described as an outcome goal as it is concerned solely with a particular objective rather than how the performer might go about achieving that goal. Goals that focus on the detail of how you achieve a particular outcome are referred to as process goals. These are usually technical things that a performer can work on, such as improving kicking from a weaker foot. Outcome

Box 2 SLOPP goals

Types of goals:

- Short term
- Long term
- Outcome
- Process
- Performance

goals on the other hand involve more external factors such as the standard of the opposition and refereeing decisions.

The final type of goal is known as a performance goal. These are specific, easily measurable goals. For a performer like Wilkinson they might include things such as setting a personal best in the 30m sprint test. The question is, how do performers know which goals to select?

One method of identifying areas of strength and weakness is performance profiling. This commonly used technique involves the performer and their coach rating a range of different performance related attributes. These may be both psychological and physiological. Usually represented in the form of a wagon wheel, it is possible to compare the performer's own perception with that of their coach, and areas of strength and weakness are easily identified.

Conclusion

Psychological preparation is a huge part of preparing for optimum performance. Elite performers like Jonny Wilkinson routinely use many of the strategies you will study, such as visualisation, centring, decision making and goal setting. If you can incorporate some of these psychological skills into your training and competitive routines, then not only will your performance be enhanced but you will also have a better understanding of the topic come exam time.

PEReviewOnline



See PEReviewOnline for the answers.

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Test your understanding

- 1 Explain the difference between visualisation and visual awareness.
- 2 Name and define the four main dimensions of visual awareness.
- 3 There are several decision-making models. Research Whiting's model and Welford's information processing model. Comment on the similarities between the two.
- 4 Use a simple equation to define response time.
- 5 Define the terms **selective attention** and **channel capacity** and explain the relationship between the two.
- 6 Name and describe the key principles of effective goal setting.
- 7 Outline the process of performance profiling.