

Bats, Balls, Bouncers, Googly's and Sledging: The Psychology of the 2015 Cricket Ashes

"I think ability is a 10 to 20 per cent requirement, you need 80 to 90 per cent mental strength". (Glen McGrath, former Australian cricketer)

"Cricket is a game that obviously requires talent, but when talent is equal, as it so often is, the formula for success comes from strength of mind". (Steve Waugh, former Australian captain)

Introduction

In July the England and Australian men's cricket teams will go head to head in a 5 test-match series for the honour of winning the prestigious *Ashes*. Competing for the Ashes urn dates back to August 1882 and England's infamous defeat to Australia at The Oval. The *Sporting Times* ran a mock obituary of English cricket outlining the "Death of English Cricket", finishing with "The body will be cremated and the ashes taken to Australia". England set sail to Australia several weeks later, with captain Ivo Bligh given the responsibility of leading England. While he was playing at a social match at Rupertswood Estate, a group of ladies presented him with the four-inch urn, believed to have a burned bail inside, as a symbol of the Ashes of English cricket. To this day *The Ashes* test series remains one of the most fiercely contested and prestigious competitions in cricket. The ferocity and intensity of this rivalry is apparent and unique, with Australia holding the upper hand in relation to *Ashes* success. Indeed, many cultural differences may exist between England and Australia, contributing to the uniqueness of this rivalry and for developing talent to deal with the challenge of the *Ashes*. First, Australia was one of the first test playing nations to establish a national cricket academy which over the years has found and developed some of the best players in the world. Second, the reduced playing schedule and the quality of the Australian domestic Sheffield Shield competition (in comparison to that of first class cricket

in England) has been suggested to be a nurturing arena for preparing elite cricketers for the intensity of test match competition. Finally, the game of cricket was invented in England whilst Australia is still part of the commonwealth and the UK the mother country, therefore any sporting contest against England is an opportunity rather than a threat to put one over on the '*old enemy*' and provide further evidence for independence and autonomy.

This summer's *Ashes* has particular significance for the England team as they attempt to banish memories of the crushing 5-0 series defeat they suffered in the last *Ashes* contest in Australia during 2013-2014. A series which also included many challenges for the England team including batsman Jonathan Trott returning home due to a 'stress-related illness', spin-bowler Graeme Swann retiring from cricket midway through the series, and Kevin Pietersens' alleged consistent disapproval of the team's management and leadership style. The psychological readiness of the players and the team will arguably take on more prominent significance during this series given the negative experiences last time around. One of the main challenges for the England team will be bouncing back from this adversity and delivering consistent and effective performances under high levels of pressure. In comparison, the Australian team are likely to be approaching the series against the '*old enemy*' with renewed confidence following their first *Ashes* victory since 2007. It will be interesting to observe if they are able to maintain their high level of recent performances and how they deal with the expectations of being current *Ashes* holders. The series may also carry extra significance for the Australian team as they will be without their much respected batsman Philip Hughes who tragically lost his life after being hit on the head during a domestic game in November 2014. It is likely players will experience a series of thoughts, feelings, and emotions relating to his loss along with an increased motivation to want to retain the *Ashes* in Hughes' memory. Accordingly, the challenge for the Australian players will be regulating these emotions to perform effectively.

Cricket is a unique sport on many levels. On the one hand it is a team game played by eleven individuals who combine to form an effective fielding unit, where thinking and acting as one is the ultimate aim (similar to sports such as football, rugby, and basketball). On the other hand cricket is an individual sport with the batter playing, in some senses, for themselves and their own individual performance. At the same time though cricket is also a contest between two individuals where the batter and bowler spar and joust to try and get the upper hand in an attempt to land the knockout blow. Cricket also has many different formats and can be played over many days (usually three, four, or five days), over one day (40 or 50 overs), or over just a few hours (in the case of T20 cricket; Cotterill & Barker, 2013). The constraints of the game, including the long duration of play, breaks in play for drinks, lunch, tea, and of course weather, all create a series of obstacles which successful players need to respond effectively to. In sum, arguably the biggest challenge to a cricketer is not the learning of the skills (most players have reasonable techniques), often the biggest challenge for players is being able to deal with the many psychological factors that can affect thinking and ultimately performance during a game. Speaking to this point, let's explore what performance-related psychological factors will be at play for England and Australian players during the 2015 Ashes series.

Self-Efficacy (Confidence)

“When you have it (confidence) you feel like you’re never going to lose it, when you haven’t got it, you feel like you’re never going to get it.” (Matthew Hayden, former Australian Cricketer)

Due to the many uncontrollable factors in cricket (e.g., playing conditions, umpiring decisions) and the fact that statistically cricketers fail more times than they succeed the ability for cricketers to regulate and maintain self-efficacy is crucial for success (Bull, Shambrook,

James, & Brooks, 2005). It is important players have an awareness of how self-efficacy is influenced, their most important sources of self-efficacy information, along with developing strategies which enable them to regulate self-efficacy throughout a game, test series, and season. When batting out in the middle, a batsman's efficacy can change from situation to situation as they are faced with different bowlers, changing playing conditions, and fluctuating match situations. Empirically, data indicate self-efficacy to be a strong and consistent predictor of individual athletic performance (e.g., Kane, Marks, Zaccaro, & Blair, 1996; Treasure, Monson, & Lox, 1996). Self-efficacy levels are proposed to impact sport performance by determining levels of motivation which will be reflected in the challenges individuals undertake, the effort they expend, and their levels of perseverance (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy judgments have also been shown to influence certain thought patterns (e.g., goal intentions, worries, causal attributions) and emotional reactions (e.g., pride, shame, happiness, sadness) that influence motivation (Bandura). Typically persons exhibiting high self-efficacy, work harder, persist in the task longer and achieve at a higher level over and above persons who doubt their capabilities (Bandura).

Because self-efficacy is important for success in sport (and cricket) a variety of psychological strategies (i.e., modelling, feedback, imagery, self-talk, and hypnosis) have been used by sport psychologists to engender athletes' regulation of self-efficacy levels (Short & Ross-Stewart, 2009). Typically, these strategies are suggested to be effective by influencing one or more sources of self-efficacy information (as outlined in Bandura's 1997 taxonomy) which in turn influence expectations and then behaviour. To illustrate, observing competent models successfully perform actions or the self-modelling of actions conveys information to observers about the sequence of actions one should use to succeed and thus influences self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Clark & Ste-Marie, 2007). Self-modelling in cricket may involve a player recording their own performance (either in practice or competition)

completing a series of cricket tasks or skills that they perform successfully (e.g., playing a particular shot or taking a catch in the slips). The player subsequently views the tape as part of their preparation for games to boost their efficacy by providing key past experience and modelling experiences information (see Barker & Jones, 2006).

“Before the Trent Bridge Test, he had had 10 days without an innings in the middle, so he spent an hour watching his big score at Lord’s ‘to get the blood flowing, and rekindle good memories’. In the bus back from the ground to hotel at the close of play, the whole squad watch a video of personal highlights during the day’s play. Smith thinks this works well, even with those who have had a bad day; they try always to find something good for everyone”. Mike Brearley writing about Graeme Smith (former South Africa Cricket Captain).

Research has also examined the impact of feedback on self-efficacy. For example, Escarti and Guzman (1999) investigated the effect of feedback on self-efficacy, performance and task choice. Through the use of manipulated feedback and estimates of self-efficacy relative to an athletic task it was concluded that performance feedback was significantly related to increased self-efficacy, performance and task choice. Self-efficacy can also be maintained via images of successful performance (Bandura, 1997). Therefore, the use of imagery focussing upon images of competence and success has been found to elicit a positive relationship between imagery use, self-efficacy and performance (e.g., Jones, Mace, Bray, McRae, & Stockbridge, 2002). To illustrate, players may use imagery prior to batting, following the call from the captain to get loose prior to a bowling spell, or in the days leading up to an important game. Further, research has outlined the positive contribution made by self-talk on efficacy expectations (Hanton & Jones, 1999). For example, data indicated self-talk altered perceptions of anxiety responses, increased levels of self-efficacy, and improved performance in a sample of elite swimmers (Hanton & Jones, 1999). When used properly, positive self-talk

can direct attention to task relevant cues (i.e., watch the ball), raise efficacy and prevent the possible debilitating consequences of self-doubt (often due to negative self-talk). Finally, in our recent program of research we have explored the use of hypnosis including the use of ego-strengthening suggestions (Hartland, 1971) to facilitate self-efficacy beliefs in athletes. The concept of 'ego-strengthening' involves helping participants to enhance feelings of self-efficacy, self-worth and to minimise anxiety and worrying. The essence of this approach is to repeat suggestions of confidence and belief over and over so that the suggestions take hold in the person's subconscious mind and exert an automatic influence on feelings, thoughts and behaviour (Hammond, 1990). Across a series of studies using both idiographic and nomothetic designs we have demonstrated substantial increases in athletes self-efficacy and performance(s) were noted (see Barker & Jones, 2006, 2008, Barker, Jones, & Greenlees, 2010). Relative to cricket, we explored the effects of an intervention comprising hypnosis, technique refinement, and self-modelling on the self-efficacy of a male cricket leg-spin bowler (Barker & Jones, 2006). Using a single-subject (A-B) design data were collected across 24 games (i.e., eight baseline, 16 post-intervention including eight collected 7-months after the intervention). The multi-modal intervention comprised three aspects. Aspect one focussed on using hypnosis and self-hypnosis procedures. Ten hypnosis sessions were delivered including cricket-specific ego-strengthening suggestions and self-hypnosis. A pre-performance routine was developed for the cricketer to use the night before, and on the morning before each match. Aspect two was based around refining the bowler's technique, focusing on the run-up, head position and follow-through. Aspect three focused on self-modelling through the use of an edited videotape. Overall, the results revealed a statistically significant difference between pre and post-intervention self-efficacy levels with this positive change being maintained in the long-term follow-up data. An increase in bowling performance was also noted across the post-intervention phases. The use of hypnosis in

cricket is not a recent occurrence as illustrated by Bob Willis (former England fast bowler) who remarked: “I’d played one of the self-hypnosis tapes to myself and was in the optimum state of readiness” prior to taking 8-43 against Australia in the Headingly Test 1981. Interestingly Sir Ian Botham said as a dismissal of sport psychology – “sport psychology did not help Bob Willis take ‘8 for’ at Headingly!”

Concentration

“The key to concentration is filling your mind with what you need to do to ensure a successful action, for me to bat there must be nothing but the ball in my mind, this occupies my thoughts before every shot”. (Justin Langer, Australian Cricketer)

Given the start-stop nature of cricket, the potentially long durations involved, and the many internal and external distractions (e.g., player self-talk, scoreboard, spectators, opposition ‘sledging’), cricketers are required to be proficient in regulating their concentration to be successful (Bull et al., 2005). The current England captain Alistair Cook has reflected many times in the media that his ability to bat for prolonged periods of time (and deal with distractions) is mainly due to his experiences of belonging to a school choir from an early age which required him to spend long hours rehearsing and focusing on the words and chords. One of the notorious aspects of the *Ashes* is the ‘sledging’ that will go on between players whilst out in the middle to provoke a poor decision or a loss of emotional control. In the 2013-2014 *Ashes* series Michael Clarke (Australian Captain) was heard on the stump microphone saying to James Anderson (England player) “...get ready for a broken f***ing arm” between deliveries in an attempt to unsettle the player. Being able to deal with such situations is crucial for players to be successful. Because concentration is a skill, it is important that players develop strategies to maximise their concentration and performance. One of the most common strategies used in sporting activities with start-stop structure is that

of pre-performance routines (Cotterill, 2010). In cricket, pre-delivery routines are a consistent feature. Watch any game of cricket and you will probably observe that the batter does the same things before facing a delivery (e.g., checking their gloves, touching their pads, tapping their bat at the crease, or marking middle stump), the bowler will have some consistent behaviours (spinning the ball from one hand to another, or always turning the same way at the end of their run up) and the wicket keeper will have some consistent movements (e.g., checking their gloves in a specific order before then crouching). Usually this is a natural process where they will look to prepare the same way to execute their skills. Routines offer a natural ‘trigger’ to either begin focusing, or to refocus (recognising as humans we cannot focus with the same intensity all of the time). The individual components of the routine are actually not that important, although it does help if these components relate to what a player is about to do (execute their skills). At the same time we need to remember that we do not want players to be having technical thoughts as this will ultimately stop efficient skill execution and encourage possible choking responses (e.g., paralysis by analysis; see Beilock, 2011). The ideal approach would be to develop consistent thoughts that link with the behaviours that already exist as part of a players preparations. So it could be that the batter’s routine involves setting their stance, checking their balance, preparing to face the delivery, and then watching the ball. So a very simple mental routine would involve saying ‘stance, balance, prepare, watch the ball’ (Cotterill, 2011).

Emotional Control

“(Cricket) it’s a mix of high skill levels and being clear mentally, strong minded. With the noise and pressure it’s about how you control your emotions” (Ashley Giles; former England cricketer)

“... if someone says something, you want to reply, but you realise he is trying to get importance out of picking a fight with you. So then I think, I look and I move. Normally we react emotionally, so I try to keep my emotions in check. I can't do it every time. This is something I have changed about myself, because in the past I would always react. Then I figured that not saying anything can sometimes be more powerful than talking.” (Yuvraj Singh; former Indian cricketer)

In the sport of cricket players and coaches’ sign up to experience a vast spectrum of feelings from the abundance of joy and happiness gleaned from an important match victory, through the terrorizing anxiety when preparing for a cup final, to disappointment and dejection following a defeat. To optimise performance it is crucial for players to make the most effective use of their emotions. England captain Alastair Cook provides an interesting example of how professional cricketers control their emotions and subsequently are more likely to perform optimally. Cook’s unrelenting levels of concentration and ability to concentrate for long periods of the time are widely recognized. Coupled with incredible focus is the England captains’ impressive consistency and apparent stability of his emotions when he bats. To illustrate, after Cook led England to victory against India in December 2012, teammate Graham Onions commented how Cook is not a man to show a lot of emotion. A consistent emotional state (e.g., remaining relaxed when he plays and misses), is likely to play a large part in Alastair Cook’s consistent performances. It’s important for players to enjoy the highs of cricket (e.g., scoring a century) and draw confidence from these successes but of parallel importance is letting mistakes or adverse situations pass without influencing how players feel (Cotterill & Barker, 2013). Indeed, research has asserted the importance of emotional regulation for sport performance (see Uphill, McCarthy, & Jones, 2009). Being able to regulate expectations, the irrational beliefs and subsequent emotions players experience has been the core of our recent research in sport using Rational Emotive

Behaviour Therapy (REBT; Turner, 2014; Turner & Barker, 2013a; Turner, Slater, & Barker, 2014). For example, we examined the efficacy of REBT (comprising three counselling sessions and two homework assignments) in decreasing irrational beliefs and cognitive-anxiety in four elite youth cricketers using a single-case multiple-baseline across-participants design (Turner & Barker, 2013a). Visual and statistical analyses indicated that the REBT intervention reduced irrational belief and cognitive-anxiety in all four cricketers. Moreover social validation data from the players, parents, and the coach further supported the quantitative data in that players were less anxious, had greater emotional control, and had a more effective perspective about the game of cricket.

The mood and emotions at a team level also affect cricket performance. To illustrate ‘emotional contagion’ in cricket, data were collected from players across 2 professional teams using pocket computers to provide ratings of their moods and performances 3 times a day for 4 days during a competitive match between the teams (Totterdell, 2000). Analysis revealed significant associations between the average of teammates’ happy moods and the players’ own moods and performances. Moreover, mood linkage was greater for players who were older, more committed to the team, and more susceptible to emotional contagion. These data imply that the moods players’ display in the inner sanctum of a cricket pavilion can have a substantial effect on performance. Therefore, coaches, players and sport psychologists may consider developing an open and honest team environment where players are encouraged to share personal stories about success, confidence, and values to foster positive emotional responses prior to and during an Ashes test match and therefore enhance resilience (Barker, Evans, Coffee, Slater, & McCarthy, 2014; Turner & Barker, 2013b).

Leadership: The Cricket Captain

“A captain must make every decision before he knows what its effect will be, and he must carry the full responsibility, not whether his decision will be right or wrong, but whether it brings success”. (Don Bradman, former Australian Cricketer)

The role of the captain in cricket is one which carries many challenges in comparison to other sports. To illustrate, the cricket captain is involved in selection, making decisions on the order of play (e.g., whether to bat first following the toss, the batting order), determining the strategy of the team (the tactics that are employed) and making calls regarding when to change field settings, make bowling changes and generally seeking to influence and control the game. To achieve all of these requirements the captain needs to be an effective leader, able to man-manage all the different characters and personalities that make up their team, handle the media, and managed conflict. The captain also needs to be able to inspire the team to follow them and in many cases look to lead from the front (Brearley, 2001; Cotterill & Barker, 2013). Individuals that emerge as effective leaders may be those that create a strong team identity (see Slater, Coffee, Barker, & Evans, 2014). In other words, the success of both captains (Alastair Cook and Michael Clarke) in the forthcoming Ashes series may be influenced by the creation of a distinct, unique, and connected cricket team with players who rather than thinking “I” and “me”, think “we” and “us”. In addition, both captains are top-order batsman. Therefore, it is common for opposition bowlers to target the captain early on in a series in an attempt to reduce their personal batting confidence but also the confidence of the team. To this end, the captain whilst not only taking care of the many team issues must also look to maintain their own preparation and performance standards. Indeed, anecdotal reports in the media indicate that taking on the cricket captain role can have both positive and negative effects on maintaining personal performance standards, with some thriving under the

pressure whilst others suffer due partly to increasing associated roles and responsibility (Cotterill & Barker, 2013).

Success may come at a price!

“I considered hurting myself just to show people how much pain I was in. If you've got a broken leg you've got a cast on your leg, people can see you've got a problem but when you've got mental problems there is nothing evident to people to show you need help.”

(Marcus Trescothick, former England cricketer)

Along with the typical performance-related psychological factors which are likely to be prevalent during the *Ashes*, more recently a series of high profile individuals have reported a prevalence of mental health issues including depression and burnout within cricket. In the cases of Marcus Trescothick, Michael Yardy, and Jonathan Trott (all of whom represented England) they indicated that playing cricket was having a significant effect on their mental health as well as their ability to be successful on the cricket field. For example, Trescothick and Yardy both suffered severe depression, forcing Trescothick to retire from international cricket and Yardy returning home from the 2011 Cricket World Cup in India. More recently, Jonathan Trott infamously returned from the 2013-2014 *Ashes* series in Australia, allegedly suffering from a ‘stress-related illness’ he later described as burnout. Alarmingly, cricket has also been posited as a sport with one of the highest suicidal rates (Frith, 2011). The possible reasons behind such a high suicidal rate include the long periods of time spent away from home with some players spending as much as half the year away on tour and a lot of regular idle time spent in between games. Further, the numerous extraneous variables (e.g., weather, pitch conditions, umpiring decisions) can render players powerless in determining their own success (Muller, 2013).

Summary

The game of cricket and in particular the *Ashes* offers many mental challenges for players and hence sport psychology is now recognised as an integral part of a players' development to optimise performance along with establishing positive mental health. The 2015 Ashes series will undoubtedly provide an opportunity to reflect on the unfortunate and tragic passing of Australian batsman Phillip Hughes, as well as providing many on the field psychological head-to-head confrontations and turning points. As psychologists we look forward to observing one of sport's greatest experiments and how players and coaches alike respond to the many psychological challenges which the game of cricket and in particular the *Ashes* will provide.

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