

Sport psychology – the key to success?

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The margin between success and defeat can be so little



Leo Powell caught up with Lewis King to find out more about sport psychology

What do most of the world's best athletes all have in common? Other than being exceptional athletes, they all use sport psychology techniques during their career to enhance their performance. Sport psychology is a term used to describe how psychological factors impact upon performance, and it uses tools such as imagery and self-talk to reinforce thoughts, emotions and behaviours either before, during and/or after a sporting event.

The role of the jockey can often be underplayed in horse racing, as it can be with a driver in Formula 1 where the notion is that those with the fastest cars always win the race. However, it's those split second decisions in a race that can make the difference between winning and losing.

Dr Ciara Losty, sport psychology service provider, works with jockeys on the Jockey Pathway programme in Ireland and believes the world of horse racing has many misconceptions about what sport psychology actually is, and what it may mean for a rider to engage in sport psychology practices.

She said: "Most jockeys don't know what sport psychology is and how it can improve their performance. There can be a stigma and misunderstanding around sport psychology; jockeys and athletes often think they must have some sort of 'issue' to seek out sport psychology support.

"However, my role is to help athletes perform as optimally as possible, so I can work with a jockey who is happy with their performance but who just wants to get better".

Examples of the work Ciara carries out with jockeys ranges from keeping

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them cool under pressure, maintaining focus during races, returning to racing after injury, support for managing a jockey's lifestyle, and education in the area of key mental health issues.

As with strength and conditioning and nutrition practices, becoming good at using sport psychology tools takes time. Most jockeys will use them without realising they are, therefore it's important they utilise those skills to their maximum and make them as effective as possible. It's about being a lot more proactive and less reactive.

For instance, let's take the example of Jockey A who believes he is sitting behind the strongest horse in the race. As they pass the two-furlong pole Jockey A's own horse is still travelling much the best, but he fails to realise that the horse he believed was the strongest is tiring. This results in another horse and jockey having a clear run and Jockey A ends up finishing second.

This is a clear example where engaging in sport psychology services may have had an impact on the result. If Jockey A was in a position to be more mindful of the situation, more aware and more engaged with the race, the result could have been different.

Lewis King (right), a PhD Researcher from Waterford Institute of Technology and



funded by the Irish Horse Racing Board (IHRB), believes jockeys need to harness the energy they have for the sport in the most positive way possible. He says "being a jockey is all consuming. They work very long hours which includes riding out, spend countless hours driving and then compete at the races.

"The lifestyle of a jockey is very unusual among elite sports, whereby the role of being a jockey occurs 24 hours a day, almost 365 days a year. The passion jockeys have for the sport is unquestioned. For me, sport psychology can play a pivotal role in harnessing that energy and passion in a very positive way, not only to improve performance but also the jockey's wellbeing. Engaging in sport sciences is a strength, not a weakness".

Lewis is part of a wider Horse Racing Research Group, led by Dr Adrian McGoldrick, Dr Sarah Jane Cullen and Dr Giles Warrington, which is conducting studies over the next four years to help improve our understanding about the physiological demands of racing, bone health, mental health and wellbeing. Lewis is calling for more jockeys to participate in a research project exploring the challenges that riders face during their careers.

Several jockeys have already come forward to undertake a completely confidential interview and this has resulted in some very interesting discussions taking place. If you are a professional or licensed jockey and would like to take part in an interview then text Lewis on 00447584574266, email lewis.king@postgrad.wit.ie or follow him on Twitter at @LewisKing17

The Jockey Pathway pro-

gramme provides free sport science support to professional and amateur jockeys and is based at RACE in Kildare. Services offered by the Jockey Pathway programme include sport psychology, nutrition, physio and strength and conditioning advice.

Follow @jockeyfit on Twitter for regular updates about sessions that are running.

HELPFUL CONTACTS

AWARE 1890 303 302
SAMARITANS Freephone 116 123
SOSADIRELAND 041 984 8754
PIETA HOUSE 01 601 0000
SAMARITANS BELFAST 028 90664422
SAMARITANS NEWRY 028 030266366
LIFELINE (NI) 0808808800
PIPS SUICIDE SUPPORT 028 30266195
PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY (NI) publichealth@hscni.net

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