

RUTH ANDERSON: BEING THERE

BY GRANT NIHILL



Elite athletes enjoy a lofty status in Australia. We treat them like heroes — and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

However we sometimes forget that they are, after all, just like the rest of us — people with hopes, fears, dreams, aspirations and issues. No one knows this better than Ruth Anderson.

As a sports psychologist and Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) residential athlete counsellor, Ruth's job is to be there for our athletes when the going gets a bit tough not so much on the track, in the pool or wherever they may be training or competing — but away from it all, on their own, when life's ordinary pressures get too much. Ruth sees athletes up, when things are going well and the exhilaration of training and competition has them literally glowing. And she sees them when they are down, missing family, loved ones and friends, and reeling under the incredible demands of their regimen.

'Athletes are people and they still have to manage and deal with the same stresses and pressures that the general population has to,' Ruth says. 'On top of that they are seeking to perform at the elite level, which sometimes means more demands on them.'

'I think there is an increasing recognition that for athletes to perform at their best, they need to be coping with the day-to-day demands of life. Often they will seek counselling support so that they can really concentrate and focus on what is required to perform well. But we also make sure that any athlete can access services that will address all areas of their lives and not just sport.'

Interestingly, athletes do not have to be dragged to counselling. Increasingly, they are what Ruth

calls 'self-presenting.' These are, after all, highly motivated people. They challenge themselves, often. 'They are really open to looking at all the aspects to make change in their lives and function at the highest level,' Ruth says. 'I find, overall, that athletes are very motivated on how they can reach their maximum potential in all areas of their life, not just sports performance. They will come to me and talk about areas in their life that they want to improve. These may be areas where they are already functioning quite well — they just want to maximise things.'

Ruth's primary role is with athletes in residence — the athletes who live in at the AIS. Invariably young, they are away from home, often for the first time. They are missing family and loved ones. They are also teenagers growing up, having to cope with the

demands of life and the demands of sport at the elite level. It is a big ask of these young people. New people, new surroundings, new issues, new skills and multiple demands. Managing and maximising their emotional development is what Ruth is there for.

There are rewards on both sides. 'It has a lot of rewards because of the nature of the client group you are working with,' Ruth says. 'The people who are coming to see me are seeking to be challenged and to implement some change in their life. They are really motivated to try new strategies and improve things to be able to enhance their quality of life and be the best they can be.'

And for the athletes: 'I think athletes can benefit from counselling if they are encountering any particular stresses or have any mental health difficulties that they may be struggling with at the time,' Ruth says. 'There are other skills that athletes can learn that are useful in helping them to perform at their best — basic stress-management skills to enhance the way they manage their lives.'

Ruth is glad that counselling has largely lost the stigma of years gone by. The stereotype of the white-coated psychiatrist taking notes while the patient tells all from the couch is a long, long way from reality. 'We just talk through issues and work on some strategies to try to change what is happening in their life so that they can function more effectively,' she says. 'Really, it is a chance for additional support rather than any complex way of doing things.'

'Counselling provides an opportunity for an athlete to come and talk through any issue that they might be thinking about,' Ruth says. 'People are now increasingly recognising that counselling is an important tool for personal development — for being able to proactively deal with any issues that can occur in life, and find new solutions, implement strategies, and build new skills that not only help athletes focus on performance, but make their life more fulfilling as well.'