

# Faster, higher, mentally stronger

- by: *Cameron Cooperr*
- From: [The Australian](#)
- April 21, 2012 12:00AM



**Ruth Anderson will be head of psychology services for the Australian team at the London Olympics.** Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen. *Source:* The Australian

**PROUD parents and friends are not the only nervous onlookers when elite athletes line up for their big moment at national titles or the Olympic Games.**

Sport psychologists are increasingly playing an important role as part of a coaching team that helps prepare our sporting stars for their events. The aim is to ensure that their mental preparation complements their physical training.

Ruth Anderson, senior sport psychologist at the Australian Institute of Sport, says the London Olympics in July and August will be a career pinnacle for athletes and their psychologists.

"It's exciting to actually see the development of athletes over time who you've worked with over a four-year period, and to have the opportunity to see them compete at that highest level," says Anderson, who will be head of psychology services for the Australian team in London, a role she also filled at Beijing in 2008.

Based in Queensland and working with the AIS swimming, diving and tennis programs, Anderson has diverse experience gained from management positions in the mental health sector and qualifications including a master's degree in sport psychology from the University of Queensland. She says a sport psychologist's ultimate goal is to help an athlete achieve

strong mental health in day-to-day life and the optimal psychological state required to achieve their best performance in competition.

"One of the most important aspects is to increase the athlete's self-awareness of their psychological functioning: how they respond under pressure, what works best for them, how they're able to elicit their best performance," Anderson says. "Then you look at a range of psychological areas - like emotional regulation, how to deal with performance anxiety and dealing with frustration on the field if things aren't going well."

Sport psychology covers a range of scientific, clinical and applied skills. There are two key areas: one majoring in psychology from an accredited university. There are then two pathways to becoming a registered psychologist: a two-year master's degree or three-year professional doctorate.

Psychologists who want to specialise in an area such as sport have to engage in a supervised practice plan with a registered psychologist for a minimum of two years. Even after such a long period of training, there are limited full-time positions as a sport psychologist. Most of the work is offered on a consulting basis so a lot of new graduates have to consider private practice and pursuing contract employment.

Regardless, there is a growing recognition of the need for sport psychology as athletes seek an edge that can mean the difference between making the national team and missing out, or winning gold rather than the silver or bronze.

"If they can do all those 1 per cent things then the final result hopefully is really good," says Craig Harms, a lecturer in psychology and social science at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia.

A former physical education teacher who started studying psychology about 20 years ago, Harms is one of a band of psychologists who are not registered sport psychologists but nevertheless use their training to assist athletes. He helped prepare swimmers based at the West Australian Institute of Sport when they competed in the Olympic swimming trials in March, and also assists other athletes in football, cricket, surfing, ten-pin bowling and even croquet.

Armed with a master's degree in human movement and a PhD in psychology, Harms says one of his key tasks is to provide performance-enhancement skills for sportspeople that allow them to develop the mental skills to handle nerves at a big event. Long-term preparation is the key to ensuring they can handle any left-field events that could jeopardise their performance.

"In the ideal world you've been working on these for a number of months and you get a chance to trial them," Harms says. "It's about working out how we can tweak athletes' routines to really get us at our maximum psychological energy, ready to perform at our absolute best."

Before the rise of sport psychology, Harms says there was a gap in the preparation of athletes. While they usually had experienced coaches and exercise physiologists to handle their physical preparation, their mental preparation was often overlooked. Psychologists can work

on the mindset of athletes "to get that extra 5 or 10 per cent that can be the difference between being a really good performer and an elite performer".

Two decades since turning to psychology, Harms is pleased with his career switch. What gives him a kick at work? "The objective is to meet the needs of athletes and help them develop the mental techniques to achieve goals when it counts," he says.

"If I can add to that as a psychologist, then I've done my job. There's a lot of satisfaction if you can help the athlete do that."

The AIS's Anderson agrees that top athletes cannot expect to excel without properly rehearsing the strategies that work when they are in the heat of competition.

"The more practice athletes have, the more understanding they're able to gain about how they react to different situations and how they respond under pressure," she says.

Currently working on a PhD investigating the optimal psychological state for peak performance, Anderson says having a background as an elite athlete is not a professional necessity.

"I think the most important thing is to have a solid foundation as a psychologist, and to have the core skills and the core training required to be an effective practitioner," she says. "And then to apply those specialised skills within a sport environment."

Anderson is also happy with her career choice, while recognising that elite sport is often an emotional roller-coaster ride.

"One of the things I really emphasise with my clients is not for athletes to only measure their success by wins or losses, because sometimes wins and losses won't be an accurate measure of skills development," she says.

"The most important things are that athletes are constantly applying themselves to learn, to improve, and consistently try to implement their best performances. The priority is to play well and keep improving, and then the results will come at the right time for the athletes."