

GREAT BRITAIN CYCLING TEAM LEAD PSYCHOLOGIST RUTH ANDERSON TALKS ABOUT THRIVING UNDER PRESSURE AND HOW THE RIGHT MINDSET IS KEY TO DELIVERING THE ULTIMATE PERFORMANCE

MIND GAMES

Great Britain's dominance at the 2008 Beijing and 2012 London Olympic Games placed a huge amount of pressure on a relatively young team in the run-up to the Rio Olympic Games. The burden was immense: a nation that expected, a target of eight medals from UK Sport, and facing opposition that was desperate to end Team GB's cycling dynasty.

Ruth Anderson's appointment as Great Britain Cycling Team lead psychologist in June 2015 was a timely one. Just 18 months out from the Games the team was in unfamiliar and worrying territory, having returned home from February's UCI Track Cycling World Championships in Paris without a gold medal for the first time since 2001. Were Britain's athletes about to crack under the weight of expectation?

A native Australian with vast clinical and elite sport expertise, Anderson came with eight years of experience as a senior psychologist at the Australian Institute of Sport and was head of psychological services for the Australia Olympic team for the Beijing and London Olympic Games.

Arriving at the team's headquarters in Manchester, Anderson's task was clear: equip Great Britain's athletes with the psychological skills to perform at their best under the intense pressure they would face.

"I provided the athletes with a range of strategies and psychological skills to enable them to operate independently within the competition environment," Anderson explains, "Including how to manage competing under pressure, how to manage that little voice of self-doubt, performance anxiety, developing confidence in their ability to execute their races under pressure, psychological recovery following a performance and even getting a good night's sleep."

One-to-one sessions with athletes were a key part of Anderson's day-to-day work with the team as she endeavoured to develop the techniques needed to be able to manage the psychological element of competition preparation and execution.

"I'll have some individual consultations with athletes who will talk to me about an upcoming competition or a particular skill they want to develop and we'll discuss some potential strategies for being able to develop that skill and formulate a bit of a plan for how they'll implement that within the competition environment."

With such a fine margin between winning and losing, being able to identify areas for just the slightest improvements to performance is crucial so Anderson is always on hand at major competitions to observe how athletes are implementing their psychological strategies and step in when adjustments need to be made.

"During competition I observe the athletes to make sure they are implementing what we've spoken about and provide feedback on any of those areas to reinforce the right points for the athletes," she explains. "It's very much about the athlete functioning on their own independently and me facilitating any learning and development within that environment, in collaboration with the coaches."

Twelve months after Paris, the Great Britain Cycling Team were back on track, topping the medal table at the 2016 world championships in London with an impressive nine medals and ready to take on the Rio pressure cooker. In Rio, Great Britain dominated the boards once again, amassing six gold, four silver and one bronze medals. A job well done for Anderson and the performance support team. ▶



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GREAT BRITAIN CYCLING TEAM



RUTH'S TIPS FOR PERFORMING UNDER PRESSURE

The ability to perform under pressure is a skill required for every competitive athlete. Pressure can either help or hinder your performance, depending on how you perceive pressure and what you do to respond.

PREPARING TO COMPETE

Manage your expectations

Define your expectations by actions and processes that are within your control rather than focusing on times or places. You won't know what your best is until you achieve it.

Take control of your thinking

You have a choice about the way you think. Adopting a positive and constructive way of thinking will directly influence the way you feel and respond under pressure.

Stay relaxed

If you are relaxed in the lead-up to a competition it will assist in managing your anxiety on race day.

Be confident in your ability

Focus on your strengths and what you need to do to execute your skills on race day to main confidence in your ability to compete.

COMPETITION STRATEGIES

Compete with a plan

Develop a plan detailing what you need to do to execute your race.

Deal with anxiety

View your nerves as a sign you are activated and ready to compete. Find ways of relaxing your body and clearing your mind when anxious.

Trust in your ability

Athletes perform more effectively and automatically when they are able to let go of the fear of making a mistake and are able to trust their ability.

Pressure can lead you to gaining a higher performance outcome than you may have thought possible. Embrace it and see what you can achieve on race day.



Sports psychology is not a new concept for the Great Britain Cycling Team and the discipline has underpinned much of Great Britain's success over the past twelve years. Psychiatrist Steve Peters worked alongside the team throughout the Beijing and London Olympic cycles and has been widely credited with impacting on the careers of some of the sport's most successful athletes, described by multiple Olympic and world champion Victoria Pendleton as "the most important man in my career."

For Anderson, the willingness of the Great Britain coaches and riders to embrace psychology is crucial to the success of her work. "If athletes aren't open to practising the skills or strategies then they won't hold up under pressure," she says. "I'm very fortunate in this environment that the coaches are very collaborative and support that approach because unless it's integrated within the training and competition environment the skills won't develop. The athletes are very proactive across all areas of their development and that includes psychology. They're very open to suggestions ... and really hard-working so it means anything I suggest I know they'll implement and it's much easier to get a significant outcome.

"I really like the hard-working culture that the athletes have; they're constantly striving to be the best they can be."

As sport psychology continues to grow as a sports science discipline, more focus is being placed on proactively including psychological skills and

techniques in athletes' development, rather than just using them reactively to solve problems as they occur, progression that Anderson welcomes.

"There is now more recognition that psychology is as important as every other sports science discipline, rather than it just being used when something needs to be fixed. This increase in recognition means people are much more open to using it consistently and therefore it's far more effective."

As the team moves into the next Olympic cycle Anderson will turn her focus to establishing a sports psychology system throughout the Performance Pathway at British Cycling, allowing the next generation of Olympians to develop essential psychological skills much earlier in their careers.

"Over time we will build that into the development programmes so the athletes gain core skills for coping with general stress and pressure. By the time they enter the Olympic Podium Programme they will have the core psychological skills to be able to function under pressure and cope with stress effectively, so then they can just focus on the skills needed to enhance performance.

"Over the next six months we'll be doing a lot of planning to look at how we'll develop the current athletes for this next Olympic cycle and start to prioritise the sort of skill areas we think are the most important to develop leading into Tokyo."

RUTH ANDERSON WAS TALKING TO ANNA FLANDERS