

Reflections on an Eminent Mental Training Consultant: A Graduate Student's Perspective

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Abstract

This article is based on a case study done on the consulting work of an eminent mental training consultant – Terry Orlick. The author observed and tape recorded a number of consulting sessions, interviewed the athletes involved in those sessions, as well as the consultant. Reflections on lessons learned from these first hand observations and follow-up interviews are presented.

Introduction

As a first year student in a sport psychology graduate program, I learned about aspects of mental training such as imagery, goal setting, belief in yourself, constructive evaluation but what was missing from the classroom discussions was how these strategies were addressed and applied in free flowing consultant conversations. To address this missing link, I conducted a case study on Terry Orlick, an expert mental training consultant. Orlick's academic achievements included a BA in health, physical education and recreation from Syracuse University, an MEd in counseling from the College of William and Mary, and a PhD in the psychology of sport and physical activity from the University of Alberta. Since 1973, he has been a professor in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. He is the author of 25 applied books related to mental training and excellence, and 50 articles in refereed journals.

Based on Ericsson and Charness's (1994) theory on expertise, Orlick is an eminent consultant. According to these authors, expert performance in any field can

be attained through a minimum of ten years or several thousand hours of deliberate practice; furthermore they contend that the highest level of performance, labeled eminent performance, is attained when an individual offers unique contributions to further the knowledge in their field. Orlick has been continually engaged in applied mental training consulting with Olympic athletes and within a wide variety of high performance disciplines since 1973 (25 years). Some of the national team and world champion athletes he worked with chose to continue interacting with him for their entire athletic careers and maintained contact after their retirement from high performance sport. With regards to furthering the state of knowledge in his field, Orlick was rated by his colleagues as one of the top ten sports psychologists who had made the greatest contributions to sport psychology from 1980-1990 (Straub & Hinman, 1992). Cal Botterill (1998) has referred to Orlick as the world's leader in applied sport psychology.

Sources of Information

Since I had been granted the permission to do this case study, I wanted to learn about this eminent mental training

consultant in as many ways as I could. My analysis incorporated (a) audio recordings of ten mental training sessions, (b) audio recordings of separate interviews with the consultant and with the athletes and (c) publications by the consultant. The original version of the Master's thesis (Lloyd, 1997) contains a rigorous analysis of each information source and showed how one source complemented and supported another. The purpose of this article, however, is not to focus on the analysis of the mental training sessions but rather, to give you my reflections on the mental training sessions I observed while sitting in a corner of Orlick's office with a tape recorder, and a pen and notepad in hand.

Athletes

In order to gain a clearer understanding of how Orlick worked with athletes, five locally based high performance athletes participated in this study. Each of these athletes interacted with the consultant in his office during the period of February 1996 to December 1996. The athletes requested and scheduled each meeting with the consultant and each recorded mental training session lasted approximately one hour. When a date was set between the consultant and the athletes, I was contacted and invited to attend and audio-tape the session.

The Badminton Player (Athlete A)

The first athlete was a female badminton player. She had competed in national and international level tournaments for about ten years and had competed at the previous Olympics. She had first been exposed to sport psychology through Orlick at a high performance training center when she was 18 years old. Later in her career, she enrolled in Orlick's undergraduate sport psychology class at the University of Ottawa. During that time, she asked to meet with him because she was injured and pre-

paring for the 1996 Olympics. Four consulting sessions were recorded in March, April, June and September 1996. The session in June occurred before the Atlanta Olympics and the session in September occurred after the Olympics.

I would like to share some real-life interactions of the consultant interacting with the badminton player. The first example revolves around Orlick helping her overcome her pattern of winning her first game, losing the second game and then having to work hard to win the third. After winning her first game, the athlete said she would often relax too much. He asked what she did between games; she said she would go to her water bottle and towel off. He suggested she put a white arrow on her bottle as a reminder to help her get pumped up to come out with more intensity for the second game. He said that this could avoid the need for the third game. Here is an excerpt from the session after she returned from her tournament. "A" refers to the badminton player and "T" refers to the consultant.

*A-..... everybody asked me what happened there on your water bottle because of the **big white tape**..... I said it was just for me, **to remind me** of something,..but it worked*

T-So tell me about it...

*A- It was very funny because I always had a big smile because I won the first game and then I changed sides and then I went to drink some water and **I saw my big arrow**...I saw it and I **refocused** right away, I knew what it meant and then I did what it **reminded me to do**.*

I would like to share some specific information on how Orlick helped the badminton player to believe in herself again as she was returning to competition after an

injury. During my interview with her, she described how the consultant gave her readings on other athletes who had multiple injuries who returned to perform successfully at a very high level.

He (the consultant) gave me some stuff to read about people who got injured before like Kerrin Lee Gartner. I started to find out what he did with them. I found out that it is possible.. this is my second injury... now it means I will be able to go back or be able to believe.

The brace that she was wearing after her injury, was slowing her down and she was contemplating on removing it for her Olympic competition. Orlick suggested that she talk to her physician to see if her knee was completely ready (which it was). During our interview, she reflected on the importance of the consultant's encouragement with regards to her injury.

He was probably the only person that didn't say don't take it off... He understood that my brace was heavy and that it slowed me down and basically said yes, if you are ready, go for it before the Olympics.

The next interaction illustrates how the consultant discussed transition with the badminton player. She was contemplating how much longer she wanted to compete. The consultant assured the athlete that her transition would be positive because she had strong supportive relationships, family and other interests.

T - You do have other interests. You have your feet on the ground. You have meaningful relationships. You have family. You've got a lot of interests so that makes it a lot easier if you are ready. If you have all those support systems and you decide, yes, I

am ready to move on, then most people have a very positive transition. (This turned out to be true for this athlete).

The final excerpt between the badminton player and the consultant that I would like to share describes how the consultant emphasized joy in life. Simple joys, or taking the time to look for highlights in everyday life was one of Orlick's core philosophies. This approach to positive thinking was one of the biggest and most important lessons I have learned from the consultant.

*T-if you are not practising, when it is nice out, just **enjoy the outside** a little bit....Go for a walk.*

A-Yes you are right.

*T-Just feel the sun or air. Just **enjoy the moment**.*

The Archer (Athlete B)

The second athlete who participated in the study was an archer who had competed in national and international competitions. He was ranked number one nationally and had achieved world record scores in practice. He has also won many competitions among professional archers.

The consultant had been working with this athlete over a period of four years. It had been approximately a year since their last meeting. Orlick commented that, "Once he (the archer) started getting better at figuring out for himself what he had to do, then I would see him less and less." One session was recorded with this athlete in June 1996. This meeting took place during the competitor's off season.

The first quotation from the session with the archer gives an indication of how

much time had passed since their last meeting because in this debriefing outcome, competitions, focus, distraction control and physical elements such as timed breathing were all addressed in a single paragraph.

T - What is the world record?

B- World record for indoors is 298 (out of 300) but I had that at the Canadian Championships this year. You are hitting the size of a dime 60 feet away. You are really focused but if I am in a tournament and things are really going well then I am really tuned out to everything else that is going on. If I had family and friends there they will come up and ask me something and I will walk away. It is almost like it doesn't register, I am so focused on what I am doing. A number of times it has got me working on timed breathing and I am actually trained so I hear my heart beat when I shoot. I just turn everything else off, everybody else is shooting around me and I turn off and listen, and when I get peaceful I can hear my heart rate going. As soon as I can hear my heart rate going, I can get in sync with it for my shooting and then I can only shoot in between heart beats.

The next excerpt describes the focus specific to shooting an arrow. The archer was explaining how he felt relaxed and content when he fully connected to the center of the target. He didn't try too hard and he trusted his body to make the correct movements.

T- When is your focus at its best?

*B- It is almost when the zone is so clear there is almost a micro zone where this is **extremely focused**. Outside of this is not quite **focused** but on the inside there is a state which you could call ultimate contentment with relaxation.*

T- Within the centre...

*B- Yeah it is in the centre of that. When I am in there and I shoot it, I am in the **lock on zone**. There is a part of me there that isn't thinking about shooting.*

T- Um hm

B-There is a part of me that doesn't care about shooting, performing the shot or executing perfectly because I know when I do everything right back here, it is going to go where it is supposed to up here. And if I try too hard to make it go...

T- Yes

B- ...that creates the barrier.

Another part of the debriefing between the consultant and this archer revolved around imagery. Note that the consultant asked specific questions about whether the athlete was simulating the real movements of shooting an arrow in the visualization process (e.g., by actually going through some of the motions). I included this quotation because assuming a correct body position during imagery can be a key element of helping to maintain a connection with the kinesthetic component of the visualized movement.

*T-What are you doing when you are doing your **imagery** of the shooting sequence? Do you go through that whole sequence with **imagery** ...*

B- Yes every single time (before every shot).

*T- (And when you are away from the shooting range) are you doing **it lying down, sitting** or...*

B- Most times I do it when I am sitting because I can also do it when I am on the bike during the day or when I have a half an hour lunch I'll sit and close my eyes and think about it. But I have noticed sometimes when I close my eyes I can't get a good picture on it, I have to open my eyes and focus on something that I can get a picture on

T- And are you moving when you do it?

B- I am sometimes if I don't get a good feel on it. ..I set my shoulder and my back tightens up maybe push my shoulders back together so I can feel it and I pull.

The Judo Competitors (Athletes Ca & Cb)

The judo competitors, one female (Ca) and one male (Cb), had competed in national, and international and Olympic tournaments. They were a married couple who often met with the consultant together. They had been working with the consultant for a duration of two years although the male athlete felt that he knew the consultant for a longer period of time because he had previously read many of his books. One session was recorded with these two athletes in February 1996. This session occurred before the Nationals and after an international competition for the female athlete.

During the session, the male judo competitor discussed the politics of competing after an injury and the female competitor updated the consultant on her last competition. One of the new tactics that the female athlete tried when she was at her last competition was not to check out the draw (who she would fight) until the day of the fight. When she looked at her draw early (in the past) she tended to worry about her competitor.

Female (Ca) - I did something different this time. I didn't look at the draw until the morning of the fight because sometimes you can see who you are going to compete against 3 days in advance. And you just start looking at that person and ... (think) she looks in such good shape and you look at her in the tournament and her training ...laughs.. so this time I didn't look until the last (day). The morning of the tournament I didn't look. I just asked the coach who I had first and I didn't want to look and it was much better.

The interview with the judo athletes was very informative and interesting because they shared a friendship with the consultant. The couple often met with the consultant outside of his office and enjoyed walks with him in the forest near his house. The following quotation describes their perception of Orlick's listening ability.

Female (Ca) - He is a great listener. He listens so well. I would be bored to just sit there and listen to people's stories. You feel like with him, he is "there" and he just listens and listens and listens. I can't believe how he is good at this.

Male (Cb) - I think he is very patient... He is like a deer. He just kind of looks at you, and his ears are kind of turning and tuning in. He kind of looks like a deer too.

Female (Ca) - That is true. He is so good to us. It is like the whole world just stops... You just spend an hour, hour and a half with him, and it is so good.

The Figure Skater (Athlete D)

The figure skater, a previous junior national champion, had competed in national and international competitions. Four sessions were recorded with the figure skater. The first two sessions took place in

September 1996. Another took place in November 1996 before a sectional competition and the final session was in December 1996 before a divisional competition. She subsequently placed second in the senior ladies category and in her next competitive year, she won the Canadian national championship.

The figure skater discussed many issues with the consultant, such as, believing in herself, being positive, skating near the end of a flight because she didn't like to take her skates off between her warm up and competition, and visualizing jumps.

The following quotation is from the skater's second session with the consultant. She discusses how her belief in herself would waiver during her training but be strong off the ice and in competition.

D - ..I know off the ice I can be the Canadian Champion but when I go on the ice I think of what I have to achieve before I go to Canadians and it seems so far away and yet Nationals is only in 5 months. And so then, I stopped believing in myself...I mean I still push myself to achieve that goal but I don't trust myself with it...I know off the ice I can do all those jumps because I have done them before but once I go on the ice I just erase it, ... trying and believing are two different things and if I believe then I could probably land them.

T - So if there is a shift in belief, it is when you step on the ice to perform in a competition or practice?

D - In a competition I believe in myself.

Orlick asked the figure skater to reflect on her jumps in competition because that was when they were best. The following quotation describes how the consultant

wanted her to approach her jumps in practice.

T - In a competition you are more pumped... how does that triple feel?

D - It is really easy, it feels like a double.

T - Yes and that is what it should feel like. It (a triple) should feel like a double.

D - But it doesn't happen everyday (in practice)...I know I am capable of doing things like that but to get the same feeling to do it all the time..

T - What I would suggest you try is just turn up your intensity a little bit before you go. Make it good rather than doing so many. So however you get pumped, imagine that this is in a competition or there is a dial inside you and maybe you are at about a 7 on your intensity and you just turn it up. Go after it, say I am going after this thing. It is going up and I am landing it, period. Then don't think, just do it. But you have to have somewhere in your brain that you are going to land the thing.

Personal Reflections

There are many lessons that I have learned from this eminent mental training consultant through the course of this case study and the group discussions that took place in his graduate applied sport psychology classes. The themes that I would like to address are (a) athletes setting the agenda, (b) knowing when to listen and when to share information, (c) continuous learning, (d) passion for consulting, and (e) time for rejuvenating.

Athletes Setting the Agenda

Most of the mental training sessions would start with the consultant asking for an

update of what was happening in the athlete's life. Here are some examples of the consultant's opening sentences. "T" refers to the consultant's text.

Badminton Player - Session 1: *T- So a little update would be nice.*

Badminton Player - Session 4: *T- Maybe we can start with your Olympic experience and move on to where you are going and what is going on.*

Archer - Session 1: *T- It has been a while since we have talked so maybe you can give me a little update and see where we are going from there.*

Judo Competitors - Session 1: *T- I talked to (male judo athlete) briefly but I haven't seen you (female) for awhile. How did it go over there?*

Figure Skater - Session 2: *T- Okay, well first, how did the week go?*

By starting the sessions with updates, many relevant issues were brought up in each mental training session. I asked the consultant before a session began, if he had a plan and he simply said that he would see what the athlete wanted to discuss on that day. I realized that the topics addressed in the sessions were never limited to a pre-determined agenda from the consultant. Rather, a multitude of issues might be addressed, in one session, based on the input provided by the athlete, e.g., the athletes were free to share, unload or raise different issues. For example, the content for the update session with the archer, which occurred one year after his last session with the consultant, contained all the seven elements of Orlick's (1995) Wheel of Excellence (commitment, belief, full focus, positive images, mental readiness, distraction control, con-

structive evaluation) plus other relevant issues.

As an aside, while I was presenting some preliminary findings from this study, I was asked if I could forward detailed descriptions of the mental training sessions' content. The requester stated that she would often run out of themes for her mental training sessions and was looking for new ideas. This person, and others I'm sure, believe that it is up to the consultant to direct the theme of the session, e.g., discuss goal setting one day and imagery another day. Orlick, on the other hand, lets the athletes set the agenda and he follows their lead.

Knowing When to Listen and When to Share Information

I noticed that in a mental training session, where many issues were addressed, Orlick was highly skilled at honing in on the most relevant areas and sharing his expertise on those specific topics. I believe that this ability is a result of the combination of (a) his acute listening skills, (b) his willingness to share something of himself, e.g., a creative idea or a plan, and (c) his intuitive ability to read an athlete's level of receptivity.

Orlick was exceptional at gathering information from the athletes and listening intently to what they had to say. Watching the consultant ask so many relevant questions and pull so much information from the athletes was an eye-opener for me. He was good at getting them to talk, he would never cut them off and you would see their key issues surface. While I was observing the session, even though athletes may have addressed a number of issues, I could see within two or three minutes that he was able to draw out what was important for the athletes to work on. However, he did not address those issues as they were presented, he let them slowly unfold and he just continued

to listen. My gut reaction, out of sheer keenness, would have been to address those issues right away while Orlick was very patient.

Prior to this study, I learned that to be an effective consultant you really had to listen, make eye contact and get fully absorbed with what the athletes were telling you. One of the biggest lessons I learned from observing Orlick was that you also have to be active in giving something of yourself back. Some people believe that athletes or hold all of the answers to their own questions and the sole function of a consultant is to facilitate the process of helping them find their own solution. Orlick does not consult in this fashion. He was an exceptional listener, but what he didn't fully reveal in the context of the classroom, was what he gave back after he fully heard what the athletes wanted to discuss. He was not passive in the problem solving role. He was very creative and offered many suggestions and plans for the athletes to try. He tailored the plans for their specific situations and the design of the plan came from the information he intently listened to and processed.

Orlick was very intuitive with respect to the timing for making suggestions or sharing his applied sport psychology knowledge. His own reflections on his interactions with the figure skater shed some light on his ability to wait for an opportune teachable moment.

You have to pick your spots...You have to let the person talk and say what she wants to say so she is on her track, so she can go anywhere...then there will be openings where you can just kind of get something in, or at the end, kind of bottom line it for her...these will be the times where I feel she will be really connected.

Orlick's interpersonal skills were exceptional. The athletes felt very comfortable in his presence and most of them thought of him as a wise friend. Nobody referred to him as Dr. Orlick, first names were always used. With regard to the language the consultant used, it was always simple and expressive. The ability to turn complex situations or difficult concepts into something simple and tangible is an art that this consultant has perfected.

Another reason why athletes felt at ease in expressing their athletic experiences with him was they felt he really understood them and their situation. The badminton player stated, "He is not just somebody in sport psychology that hasn't really worked with athletes, he knew what I was talking about."

In my Masters thesis (Lloyd, 1997), the consultant's behaviours were categorized as being indirect or direct. Indirect behaviours involved the consultant acquiring information from the athletes. Direct behaviour revolved around the consultant sharing his applied sport psychology knowledge and giving suggestions or directions. Times where Orlick was indirect or direct were measured with a systematic coding of the mental training transcripts. The extent to which the consultant was indirect or direct was grounded in what he felt was most appropriate or relevant for that athlete at that time, as indicated in the following examples.

With the badminton player, the consultant was more direct in the two sessions prior to the Olympics and more indirect in the session following the Olympics. This result illustrates how the consultant gave more information or reminders to the athletes prior to going to a major competitive event and recruited more information from the athlete when it was over.

The consultant's interaction with the world class archer was mostly indirect. Since the session took place at the end of the archer's competitive season, the consultant was seeking specific information on the athlete's experiences and mental performance. The athlete was not seeking specific help from the consultant, rather, he wanted to share his successful experiences with someone who understood the intricacies of what he accomplished.

During the session with the judo competitors, the consultant was slightly more direct. The direct behaviour was related to helping the male create a plan to deal with the personal and political challenge of recovering from an injury sustained in the Olympic year. The indirect behaviour was in response to the update of the female competitor's most recent competition.

The consultant was more indirect during the first session with the figure skater since this was the first time the athlete met with the consultant. Orlick sought detailed information from the athlete during this session to get a feeling for what the athlete needed to work on to improve her performance. The consultant was mostly direct in a subsequent session which took place the day before the athlete left for a divisional competition. The athlete clearly wanted a plan to deal with the order in which she was to skate because the competitor did not like to skate last.

Continuous Learning

An overriding phenomenon that surfaced from observing this consultant, was the way he combined the lessons that he learned from each aspect of his life. Everything seemed to be retained and put to good use. Ideas that surfaced during mental training sessions or conversations with performers and students such as myself were

often the seeds for new interventions, reflection or writings. For example, while he was consulting with one athlete, he used the two tone colour of a coffee table in front of him to describe two zones, a gold zone of performance and a green zone of life. This idea was further expanded later and used in the conceptual structuring of the book he was writing at the time (*Embracing Your Potential, 1998*).

Orlick's philosophy of ongoing learning was reflected in the approach adopted by the athletes. The archer was kept a detailed journal of his training and competitions to ensure that he learned from each experience. He was always looking for the perfect combination of rest, nutrition, physical and mental training. His approach to learning was meticulous and humble. Notice in the following excerpt from the session with the archer how the consultant reinforces the perspective of continually learning from every experience.

*T- I think you are right on track as long as you can keep respecting what works for you and try to keep **learning** and try to keep pulling out the tiny things you **discover**.*

*B- Well that is how I feel deep down inside. I feel that there is so much there, so much to learn,... if there was a scale from 1 to 10 and 1 was beginner and 10 was absolute perfection, right now I'd feel like I was about 6, that is how much I have to **learn** about the sport before I kid myself. And 6 for me is very very successful.*

Passion for Consulting

It was inspirational to be with someone who loved his work so much. Orlick always looked forward to meeting with the athletes and sincerely wanted to be updated on their experiences. He often took time out of his busy work and personal schedule to

watch athletes practice. He enjoyed watching them and would always comment to them and myself on their performance in a positive way. No matter what, he could always find something good or positive to say.

He once said that after meeting with an athlete he felt that a little part of himself was out there with them. Orlick also commented that once he invested in a person or a team (over a period of time) he felt like they were extended family because he felt connected to their growth. The passion that Orlick felt for his work was one of his qualities that made him effective.

Time for Rejuvenating

Orlick is a man in demand. He is often bombarded with people trying to get something from him because he is so good at what he does. I sometimes wonder if he has ever had a peaceful walk down the hallway at the University of Ottawa because every time I see him, there is always an eager, chatty student in his presence. In the first chapter of his book, *Nice on My Feelings* (1995) he states that,

There are times that I feel I spend my whole day or my whole life giving - and getting very little in return. I may listen to 50 or 100 calls, and everybody seems to want something. It's an extremely rare pleasure when someone calls and offers to help me with something, or to give rather than to want. These experiences are reminders that I have to take care of my own needs, as well as others' needs. I have to become responsible for finding a sense of joy and balance in my day and my life. No one is going to do that for me (p.13).

Orlick's love for nature helps create balance and joy in his life. He often speaks and writes about special things that happen to him in nature - his morning run, the

sounds of a stream or a deer that crossed his path. I believe the combination of exercise, fresh air and the spiritual sensations from absorbing himself with nature were the key factors in rejuvenating himself.

Orlick is also selective in where he spends his energy. He is a hard man to get in touch with (remember he can get up to 100 requests per day) but if you really want to see him, you will always find a way to meet with him in person. Recall that the judo competitors said that an hour or an hour and a half with Orlick is so good. The reason it is so good is because he rests when he needs to rest and is completely focused when it is time for him to focus.

I am very grateful for having so much of Orlick's time to conduct a case study on him. I feel that I had the richest experience that any graduate student could have asked for because I got to see Orlick do what he does best - listen, share wisdom, and care about athletes.

Conclusion

I realise that only a glimpse of this consultant has been captured in this reflection article but it is my hope that you have gained a deeper insight as to how one of the top mental training consultant approaches and conducts mental training sessions. Lett (1987) suggested that much can be gained from counselors of long experience, particularly with respect to the extent of the creative adaptation of the counseling process that develops over time. I feel that learning from expert consultants is the missing link in applied sport psychology training. Following this consultant around during his working day not only provided me with a concept of how mental training skills are applied to specific individuals but more importantly, it gave me the confidence to start working with athletes. It is my hope

that you, the reader, do not generalize that this mental training consultant's approach is representative of all effective consultants. Rather, my goal was to inspire you to reflect

on your approach to mental training and take one step closer to being the best consultant you can be.

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