

Sport after the Covid crisis: a psychological view.

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I intend to address the question about what, if anything, will change after the pandemic, by drawing on my experiences and academic knowledge as a sports psychologist. Whilst I have always carried out psychological work with coaches and athletes alongside my university teaching and research, the last year and a half has been devoted exclusively to doing applied sports psychology. My clients are usually at elite standard and professional levels, and I currently work at an English Premiership football club and at one of the most famous cricket clubs in the world. My theoretical and practical approach is grounded in a psychological perspective which sees sports performance and wellbeing as being completely inter related. This holistic approach is guided in part by existential phenomenological psychology, especially the type which is open to the idea of human persons as being created by God. One of the things that flows from this conception is that it reminds me to work with the whole person: body, mind and spirit. Most usually I carry out completely confidential one to one sessions with my clients, something that allows them to speak freely about all the challenges, sacrifices and joys they encounter in their sport. During this pandemic I have come across some important themes. I have heard athletes and coaches telling me about how this difficult time has made them reflect more deeply on what is important to them. Because of the way I approach my athletes, where the emphasis is on remembering that they are human persons first, and athletes second, it is not uncommon to hear them talk about the importance of their faith, family and loved ones in terms of dealing with moments of adversity. For some, this crisis has helped them to develop a different view point, and to ask themselves why their sport participation is so important to them, and what could it mean beyond material success. Others have been able to grow by acquiring a greater sense of perspective by understanding that as elite professional athletes, their lives are often more comfortable and secure than people living with the threat of job losses, poverty and health issues. The pandemic has also led me to reflect more deeply on why it is still important to work in an area that is not about the most essential and fundamental parts of life such as health, food and commerce. In relation to this, I see some parallels with our life in the faith, in that it reminds me that the world of the spirit is as important, if not more so, during times of existential crisis. Despite the restrictions around receiving the sacraments at various points during this crisis, this has been a period where growth in other areas of faith life may have increased. I think a stimulus for

this is a recognition in some about how fragile human society and our life on earth really is. I also think that this has been a moment to understand more deeply how vital our belief and faith is, since human beings unfortunately often learn these lessons when something they have possibly taken for granted is no longer available.

For some of my less materially successful clients, they have shared much of the pain afflicting many other workers and the general population. Dialogue has been less on the importance of results and performance, and more about fear of losing contracts and jobs. This has touched not only players but other support staff, officials and administrators. I have noticed how being deprived of the personal dimension involved in face to face encounters which has happened with the increased use of remote working, that my work has been much less effective. Once again, this has served to remind me that person to person dialogue is the best way to build authentic community, and allows for a psychological and spiritual connection which technology is unable to fulfil. On the other hand, and somewhat like the experience of confession, some clients have enjoyed having to focus purely on vocal communication. I have seen that some sessions have been much improved by using old fashioned technology such as a phone call, where each party engages in active listening, and attends fully to what the other is saying in the absence of visual or physical distraction.

Moving beyond my own immediate practice, this pandemic has made me reflect on what appears to be a dangerous and grave oversight, especially found in the more advanced countries of the world. The pandemic has reminded people of the fact that illness and death are facts of human existence, even though many modern societies seem to be doing all they can to ignore or avoid any thoughts on our mortality. One of the reasons for this I believe, is that questions about the purpose of life and the meaning of death are not felt to be important enough to consider, since the possible answers will be unable to satisfy the demands of science. This materialist philosophical view dominates much modern thought in general and psychology specifically, and is one of the reasons I draw on some aspects of Jungian and existential phenomenological psychology to guide my work. These approaches, at least, take seriously ideas around the importance of meaning, and acknowledge that human life includes a spiritual dimension. This was always important to me, both academically and practically, to ensure the psychological approaches I relied upon most would have some level of compatibility with my Catholic faith. Unfortunately, with the exception of existential phenomenological psychology, most universities and academic courses are biased towards

psychological perspectives which deny ideas of human free will, and reject scientifically unverifiable concepts like spirituality and religious belief. But if anything, the pandemic has highlighted that authentic human community and individual flourishing cannot rest exclusively on material achievements and physical health, but must also be grounded in spiritual sustenance such as that provided by faith, the sacraments, and the Church.

Two very striking psychological concepts have also been very prevalent in my work during this crisis. Many of my clients have experienced greater levels of anxiety than usual. Often anxiety in sport is experienced as a result of concerns about performance and results. During this time however, I have noticed greater levels of anxiety relating to the broader situation we are facing as a society. Questions abound around what is the best strategy for governments to adopt, the use of vaccinations, disagreements about the pronouncements of scientists, and worries about structural changes to patterns of employment and general living. For some, what may be happening, is that they are growing in the virtues, especially patience, fortitude, prudence and humility. On this last point those who previously imagined that science would always have the answers, are now having to confront the fact that in many ways we are in much less control of events than we had thought. I have noticed an increase in reflection, self-awareness, and even self-knowledge. My encounters and dialogue reveal that for some people in sport, this has actually been a period of spiritual growth, and for those of faith, a chance to recommit their lives to God.

How many and in which way will people build on these ideas and opportunities, is a difficult question to answer. A number of psychological studies across a range of domains suggest that even after intense and severe experiences, only 5% of individuals learn the lessons and make permanent changes. Although this may sound a depressingly small figure, the Catholic Church has a long history of examples where one or two people, or small communities, have helped the population at large to reawaken their spiritual lives, and pursue the things of God. Finally, from a personal perspective, my applied experiences and reflections have helped me to see more clearly that sport has the potential to be a vehicle that can lead us to think more deeply on the most profound and important of things; life, love, death and our eternal destiny. When the pandemic and everything that surrounds it is over, I believe there will be an opportunity to look back at the lessons from this experience, and see more clearly that sport contains within its structure many elements that can help build up the life of the spirit. Sometimes a rupture can be a

beneficial moment if it helps us to stop and take greater notice of what is most important, and to recognise that individual people and communities only truly flourish when founded on the idea that we are persons, created by God out of love, to serve one another and worship the Lord.

About the author

I worked full time as an Associate Professor in the UK for many years, and have recently left Liverpool JM University to dedicate myself more fully to applied sport psychology work, and to write on sport and psychology from a Catholic perspective.

I would be especially pleased to make contact with other like-minded colleagues from any academic discipline or applied practice setting in sport, and especially those at Catholic Universities and institutions, who may wish to collaborate with me in this area of work.

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