

BRINGING WELL-BEING INTO THE PERFORMANCE PICTURE

FEATURE / SARAH MURRAY INTERVIEW BY DR ANDREW SHAFIK

This is a transcript of the FMPA Podcast episode of the same name that was released in March 2021. It has been edited for clarity and to improve readability. It was transcribed by Elle Trezise.

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In this podcast episode host Dr Andrew Shafik, a medical doctor working in professional football and a Senior Editor in the FMPA Education Team, speaks to Sarah Murray, a self-employed Sports Psychologist who at the time of recording was a Senior Psychologist at a Women's Super League (WSL) club.



Sarah Murray



Dr Andrew Shafik

Andrew

I am delighted to be joined by Sarah Murray. Sarah is currently the Women's Senior Psychologist for a WSL team (top tier).

Sarah graduated with a degree in Sports Science and then completed a PGCE in PE Teaching. After eight years as a physical education teacher, she decided to pursue her passion for the mental side of performance and completed a MSc in Sports Psychology at Brunel University, going on to gain BASES accreditation. Before going full-time in football, she ran her own consultancy working with both individual athletes and teams including England Cricket, professional golfers, England Athletics, AASE programmes, England Lacrosse, Football Referees Association and Sports Coach UK. Sarah has many years coaching and playing experience in sport, including having played national league hockey and played at regional level in cricket, tennis and football.

Thank you for joining us today, Sarah.

Sarah

Thanks very much. Nice to be here.

Andrew

Today we're going to discuss a little bit more about your experiences today as well as sports psychology which I know will be of great interest to our listeners. So, following on from the intro, do you mind telling us a little bit about your journey to date?

Sarah

Yeah, sure. So, I guess you came up to the point where I found myself, unplanned, in full time professional football. So as a performance psychologist - we're going back to 2013 - I was fortunate enough to have

been offered a full-time role with my current club. Which at the time was incredibly rare. There were only a couple of other full-time performance psychologists in football anywhere in the country.

It was the first time that the club had a performance psychologist on that sort of level. I think they'd had some workshops here and there, but they were really keen that if they were going to look into the mental side of the game and support players with that, they were going to do it properly with somebody full-time and a full programme. So, I think, to be honest, it probably took the first four or five years to really work out where does this sit within the club? Where will it add the most value? Who will I be working most closely alongside? Between myself and my colleagues in the sports science and medical department, and my colleagues in the coaching and Academy departments, we sort of figured out where it adds value and where the role is best suited. Then I was fortunate enough to be able to build the department and employ other performance psychologists within the club to support the work that we did. As time passed, it was genuinely the most privileged experience that I've had to be able to build that department. Particularly within the Academy. So, under-23s and down is where the focus of the performance psychology was. Alongside a little bit of lecturing, just to keep my hand in with the latest applied research, it's been a great journey so far.

Andrew

That's great. Really, really interesting to hear about your background there, Sarah. Delving a little bit more into the performance psychology side of things, what is it about the narrative of well-being and elite performance that is important? What is it? What isn't it?

What's your take on it?

Sarah

This is something that I've spoken passionately about and sort of worked really hard with over the last few years, particularly since being in football. There's a historic narrative of well-being or performance that we're shifting away from, and we're shifting away from very quickly both within football but culturally within performance sport and actually within society more broadly, I'd say.

After years of almost battling for acknowledgement of how well-being supports performance, I was really keen to shift the narrative and actually have well-being as a key part of performance. Certainly, if we have well-being without performance, then we're not a high performing elite football environment because we have to have the performance piece. But equally if we have performance and we are focused heavily on performance without a well-being underpinning, then we end up in the historical cases of burnout and - worst case scenario - some of the historical mental health problems that athletes have had when well-being hasn't been a part of the conversation, or hasn't been a narrative. So, I think this idea of bringing well-being into the performance environment deliberately as a key part of supporting athletes to perform is absolutely invaluable.

Andrew

That's interesting. Obviously, there's been lots of media attention. We've seen the recent article from Sky Sports about psychology in sport and if it's a missed opportunity in the English game. Why do you think now is really the time for performance psychology in sport as well as football?

Sarah

I think everything comes around in cycles. Performance psychology has been around for decades but there's no question that potentially last to the table in terms of really utilising it as a sport, you could argue has been football. But what I love about the game and about football is that once they do get hold of something they genuinely will go all in and run with it and many football clubs are now running some fantastic performance side programmes and getting some really great professionals in to work into this space. But I think the fluffy stuff, as I've heard it called, the fluffy stuff – "do you wear a white coat and then players come in and cry on your sofa?" And a lot of the cultural assumptions around the word "psychologist" even... it takes a long time to break these down and then for a performance psychologist to work into a sports space and particularly football which is where I've spent the last eight years, as being normal, as being something whereby an athlete will have access to great physios, doctors, sport scientists, nutritionists, and actually to have a performance psychologist as part of that MDT, is just the norm. At my current club certainly. I think now more broadly in football we're seeing less and less news articles - which is really pleasing to see - whereby it becomes an article on BBC Sport or perhaps Sky Sports that X footballer, who's a professional footballer, seeks a psychologist. Whereas if that footballer is struggling with his change of pace, his speed, whatever, it wouldn't be a story that he went to see a sport scientist. Because actually, there's no difference. So, I think it's coming.

As we record this today, we're still in a lockdown and we have been for the best part of a year, and there's no question that it's accelerated the conversation of mental health and well-being just more broadly in society and self-care, and a realisation of how this can then support performance. So, mental recovery and physical recovery for the players that I work with are equally valued in my environment and measured as something that will then support the performance on the Sunday.

Andrew

That's interesting and I think it's definitely an integral part of the whole performance picture. I recently listened myself to the High Performance Podcast and in an episode with Tyrone Mings, he was explaining some of the barriers before COVID to seeking psychology and how he now finds it is an integral piece to his overall performance picture. So, it's partly due to that breaking down of barriers which is great to hear. What are some of the challenges that you found when tackling down some of those barriers, especially now? You mentioned COVID but are other things associated as well?

Sarah

Yeah, certainly. I mean, if I take myself back to



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when I when I first came into a full-time role as a performance psychologist, what I expected and my reality were quite different. So, what I expected to walk into was an environment that was high performance, professional football, male dominated. So as a female, as a psychologist, you know, when we have the -ologist on the end of our job title, it can be quite unhelpful, I have found. So I actually expected that there might be a lot of blocks and barriers to the work that I was doing and to the way I wanted to support athletes and staff alike. The reality was that there wasn't. I'm very fortunate that actually I work in an environment that is incredibly open to supporting not just the players within the club, but the staff as well. So those blocks and barriers I thought I might face, I haven't. That said, I can only speak for my reality, and that's been my reality. I have colleagues that have not been so fortunate and have had far greater struggles with integrating performance psychology into a performance environment, and really breaking down that idea of it being for the weak and breaking down that idea of it being for simply issues-based problems.

I think, on a personal level, coming from a performance background and playing to a fairly good level myself in hockey, and always being performance focused has helped me in terms of my understanding of the performance culture, and actually working with somebody whether they are in a fantastic space, so they're mentally in a great space and there's always work to be done to make that better. Equally, if somebody is struggling and they're not in a great space, is there work to be done to actually bring them

into a better space to be able to perform on a Saturday or on a Sunday? So, I guess, coming in from the angle that I have done, the blocks and barriers weren't necessarily there but culturally to seek help, culturally to go and see a psychologist or a psychiatrist in the UK, is still not something that has happened or been talked about for decades. Whereas if we look at America and other countries where it's the norm, everybody has a psychiatrist, everyone has a psychologist. I appreciate that is a sweeping generalisation. However, it's certainly part of their culture. For us, it's the open conversation around mental health that's happening at the moment and actually the way in which, from an athletic point of view, athletes can be supported by looking after [their mental health] is helping us to break down those barriers, and to make it part of something that can support the human - the man behind the shirt or the girl behind the shirt - which ultimately, then when they step onto a pitch, or a court, is going to support them to perform.

Andrew

That's brilliant. You've mentioned your wealth of experience across a variety of sports there which kind of leads onto the next question: how does psychology look when it's integrated into a high performance environment?

Sarah

Oh my goodness. I think that's something else that as a profession we've probably struggled with because it can look so different, because it is very much dependent on the person, on the psychologist, on their philosophy, their way of working, as to how it looks in the environment. So how it can look is... traditionally it was based in sport science and medicine. Certainly when I joined my current club, I was put into the sports science and medicine department but over the years, just found myself immersing myself in the world of the coaches and spending my time in an amongst the coaching staff to then become actually a member of that department, although working across. So, when sports psychology is integrated into any kind of sport, I think it's dependent on, you know, what are the needs of that organisation, or that particular team, or

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that individual? What is it that they're wanting to get from it? I think it's a case of making sure that the needs of the organisation are met by the sport psychologist because certainly if there's a disconnect or there's not a fit between the philosophies and the values of the sports psychologist coming in and what they see as their role, if it doesn't connect with what the organisation wants, then same with any profession, it's not going to be as effective. So, broadly speaking, it's looking at working across the MDT, supporting staff, supporting coaches.

Certainly for me, one of the other shifts over the last eight years is that I'm far more staff-facing now than I probably would have been ten years ago when I was a little more traditional in terms of working with the athlete, working with the young footballer one-to-one and supporting him and that was it. Working at a systems and organisational level now as a performance psychologist is far more common. If we think about the long-term impact of having performance psychology, mental health and well-being embedded into elite environments, then that's the way forward, to do it from a systems level, to work with the coaches, to support the sport scientists. You've had some great guys on this podcast already that I've worked closely with within my role at my current club even and yeah, so, definitely holistic.

Andrew

That's great. You've kind of mentioned towards the end there that it's been more staff facing. So, looking at an athlete or a coach and trying to get buy in, how've you found that element? Any skills or tips in regard to getting buy in? What do you define as the performance benefits to them?

Sarah

I mean, if I were to anecdotally think about the amount of conversations that I would overhear and many of your listeners would overhear in their sport environment that are coach to coach, player to coach, player to player. So many of the conversations are based in the mentality, the mindset of the player. So many of them. So actually, there's massive value placed on the mindset and the mental side of the game.

However, because it's psychology, because there's an -ologist... it's not as data driven as sport science, so it's harder to say, "this psychologist can come in and this data here will be improved in six months' time" and it's really easy for us all to see and understand. So, there's been this fear of "we really value it but we're not quite sure how it works or what to do with it. So, we're not too sure if we want to bring it in." Although, as I said, all the conversations are driven towards the mentality side of the game. So, to get buy in, it's no more or less than supporting coaches to get the best from themselves and to get the best from the players that are around them.

The more we know and understand about our athletes, and understand their context, their journey, and why they do what they do, why do they behave as they do on a match day? Why does that member of staff perform so well in this environment and do this but then maybe struggle here? The more we understand about people, ultimately the people behind the badge, the more we are going to find those connections and actually be able to support them to get the best out of themselves and understand themselves when they're asked to step up on a Sunday or a Saturday on a match day, in a high-pressure situation and perform and do their role.

So really, I guess it's just about formulating. Formulating on players, formulating on staff. How do we get the best out of them? What are their protective factors in life? What's their context? What's their journey? How do they feel and act and sound in our environment when they're at their best and how do we help them to do that?

Andrew

That's really interesting. I think it's a really strong message. A lot of conversations, even a lot of the podcasts around sport are associated with the mindset of performance. It is a non-negotiable having that psychology element when you're a professional who's experienced in that environment.

Just to finish off, you've worked across age groups, across individual and team sports, the

men's and women's game as well as across plenty of sports generally. What are the things that you've found most useful to transfer across to football? What are the similarities and some of the differences? I know that's quite a difficult question!

Sarah

I'll do my best! I think ultimately, whilst there are contextual differences in terms of what happens for an athlete and their experience, whether they are a real tennis player or they're a lacrosse player or a golfer, their environment might be slightly different. But ultimately, many of the skills needed to be able to be at your best and understand yourself in a performance environment actually remain quite similar across many of the sports and some of the transferable things I've taken from other sports into football would be understanding the culture and actually understanding what's going on for the people in that world. So, for me to come in and think that I know everything about football as a professional... absolutely not, you know. I've learned along the way I don't need to have played elite level football to be able to walk into football and make some impact. So, it's a two-way learning process. I think one of the most influential experiences I had early on would have been as a young practitioner, working across lots and lots of sports. So, whilst I was really lucky, and I worked with the England Women's Cricket pathway and GB Real Tennis and then some elite golfers, I also worked with a lot of grassroots athletes.

If I was to say the absolute top transferable skill, it would be that ultimately, I work with human beings. So, whether it's our conversation today, whether it's an under-9 tennis player playing for their local club, or whether it's a 32-year-old professional male footballer that's in the premiership, the value of working with the human in front of you - as a human first, an athlete second - doesn't change for me. So, that's transferable across all contexts across any performance environment, be it sport, business, cricket or football.

Andrew

That's brilliant, Sarah. Thank you very much for joining us today. I think that's been a really good insight into performance psychology within the men's game as well as across sports. I think it will be applicable to those working in academy football, men's football, women's football as well as other sports as well. Listeners, I'll put up the links to the papers mentioned and if you enjoyed today, please subscribe to the FMPA on our Spotify and SoundCloud accounts where you can reach all of our podcasts. Alternatively, our podcasts are also available for free in the podcast section of the FMPA website. Thanks again, Sarah.



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