

# Providing Sport Psychology in Regional, Rural, and Remote New South Wales

**Steven A. Christensen and Andrea Lamont-Mills, PhD.**

Centre for Rural and Remote Area Health  
University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba QLD 4350 Australia

**Peter Annis-Brown**

Northern Inland Academy of Sport, Tamworth NSW 2340 Australia

## Abstract

This paper describes how we approached the problem of providing sport psychology knowledge and skills to adolescent athletes living in the sparsely populated and geographically large New England and North West Region of New South Wales. We display two approaches that we have used to solve this problem from 2000-2002 and 2003-2006, respectively. We recommend sport innovations be constructed using conceptual, technical, and service delivery system advances, and be built using local and imported materials.

## Introduction

In July 1999, John Crampton, the Manager of Athlete Management Services at the New South Wales Institute of Sport (NSWIS) contacted Steven Christensen to ask him whether he could help provide sport psychology services to adolescent athletes on scholarship with the Northern Inland Academy of Sport (NIAS).

NIAS is one of ten regional sports academies located in New South Wales (NSW). The regional academies are fully incorporated, autonomous, community based organisations that are administered by a Board of (unpaid) Directors and who are members of the local community. Each academy receives an annual operation grant of about \$130K from NSW Department of Sport and Recreation, and supplements this with sponsorship and fundraising activities. NIAS offers between 180-200 scholarships to talented athletes aged between 14-18 years who live in the New England and North West region of NSW each year.

Earlier in 1999, Crampton had been contacted by Peter Annis-Brown, the Executive Officer of NIAS, asking for help from NSWIS sport psychologists. Annis-Brown explained that providing sport psychology to NIAS athletes was complicated by several issues related to the tyranny of distance. Table 1 displays key geographical and demographic characteristics of this region of NSW.

The most limiting factor facing NIAS was that there was no psychologist with specialist training in sport psychology living and working in this region of NSW.

Hence Annis-Brown's request whether NSWIS could help by providing basic sport psychology skills to NIAS athletes in athletics, netball, rugby, swimming, rugby league, soccer, touch and softball squads.

Table 1: Geo-demographic Characteristics of the New England and North West Region of New South Wales<sup>1</sup>.

Characteristics	
Area	98,606 km <sup>2</sup>
Population	180,576
Northern border	Tenterfield
Southern border	Quirindi
Western border	Walgett
Eastern border	Ebor

Unfortunately NSWIS was unable to provide these services to NIAS athletes. In part because supporting athletes with NSWIS scholarships was their mission. Secondly, the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games was being held in less than 18 months and, understandably, this was the dominate focus of NSWIS Athlete Management Services at the time.

Crampton contacted Christensen to explain the situation and to ask whether this might be a meaningful practicum experience for a USQ post-graduate student training to become a sport psychologist. After some discussion between Christensen and Annis-Brown and a presentation to the NIAS Board in January 2000, he and USQ sport psychology postgraduate student, Adrian Schonfeld<sup>2</sup>, began providing sport psychology services to NIAS athletes in 2000. The formal agreement established between NIAS and USQ stated that Schonfeld would deliver a basic sport psychology program for NIAS athletes under Christensen's supervision and as part of his Doctor of Psychology (Sport) practicum requirements.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Census

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Schonfeld is currently a senior lecturer at Leeds Metropolitan University in the UK. He also works with a range of different sports in the Leeds and Yorkshire region.

This paper describes how Christensen and Schonfeld developed a sport psychology program for adolescent athletes living in New England and North West NSW. It also describes how this program has evolved over the past seven years. The program is marked by two different phases that display how we understood the problem and how we approached providing basic sport psychology to adolescent athletes living in regional, rural and remote NSW. Furthermore, this paper describes what we have learnt during the past seven years from providing sport psychology services to NIAS athletes.

### Providing NIAS Sport Psychology

The first phase of the NIAS sport psychology program occurred from 2000-2002 with the second phase from 2003-2006. These two phases are briefly described.

The initial phase of the NIAS sport psychology program was based on two key features. Firstly, the orthodox practices for providing psychological skills training to young athletes that were displayed in the sport psychology literature. For example, in works by Martens (1987), Martens, Christina, Harvey, and Sharkey (1981), Morris and Summers (1995), and Murphy (1995). And secondly, the NSWIS model for disseminating sport psychology knowledge and skills to NSWIS Tier Three Squad-sports. It seemed logical to Christensen and Schonfeld at the time that the NIAS sport psychology program draw on recommendations from the Australian and international sport psychology literature, and the experiences and frameworks that had been successfully used by NSWIS.

This initial phase involved three main components. Firstly, it focused on basic sport psychology topics like goal-setting, stress management and imagery. Secondly, these topics were introduced using orthodox group presentations that focused on psycho-educational methods and practices. Thirdly, the presentations were delivered to athletes during the sport-specific squad training camps that were held on two or three weekends during the year. For example, Schonfeld delivered presentations on goal-setting to rugby players at Lake Keepit<sup>3</sup>, stress management to softball and touch players at Tamworth State High School, and imagery to soccer players at The Armidale School during 2000-2001. These squad camps typically involved morning and afternoon training sessions with the sport psychology presentations sandwiched into the busy program either before or after dinner on Saturday night, or after lunch on Sunday afternoon.

<sup>3</sup> The Lake Keepit Sport and Recreational Centre is located in Lake Keepit State Park between Tamworth and Gunnedah. It is managed by the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation.

However we began to feel uneasy about the nature and direction of the sport psychology program in 2002. This uneasiness and concern was motivated by three events. Firstly, Schonfeld completed his practicum, graduated, and moved to Canberra where he took up the Australian Institute of Sport postgraduate scholarship in sport psychology. Secondly, the formal evaluations of the presentations that were completed by NIAS athletes showed that they were interesting and helpful. But while the formal evaluations from NIAS coaches were positive, our informal discussions with these coaches signalled that time, travel and timetabling issues constrained what could be accomplished at the training camps. Thirdly, Christensen and Annis-Brown began questioning whether the NSWIS model was adequate for the unique issues of delivering sport psychology to adolescent athletes living in New England and North West NSW.

An outcome of this concern and questioning was that Christensen, Lamont-Mills, and Annis-Brown began considering alternative ways for providing sport psychology and the other personal development topics, sport nutrition, physiotherapy and media skills, to NIAS athletes. This discussion and subsequent planning lead to the Regional Athlete Coach Education (RACE) program begin developed in late 2002 and implemented in 2003. Table 2 displays the 2003 RACE Program.

Table 2: 2003 NIAS RACE Program

Date	Town
29 April	Armidale
30 April	Tamworth
19 May	Glen Innes
20 May	Inverell
21 May	Moree
22 May	Narrabri
17 June	Gunnedah
18 June	Tamworth
19 June	Armidale
12 August	Tamworth
13 August	Armidale

The NIAS RACE program was based on three key premises. Firstly, to deliver sport psychology, sport nutrition, sport medicine, and sport media knowledge and skills on a town-by-town basis rather than a squad-by-squad basis. This innovation involved departing from the NSWIS model where sport psychology and other topics were delivered in group presentations on a sport-squad basis.

Secondly, the sport psychology presentations focused on mental equipment. That is, they treated the orthodox sport psychology knowledge and skills that were considered important for young athletes as items of mental equipment. This was contrasted with the physical equipment (i.e., uniform, playing equipment, safety equipment) that NIAS athletes would typically take to their trainings and competitions. A central theme of the RACE sport psychology presentations was the question posed to athletes 'what mental equipment do you take to training and competitions?' This innovation involved departing from the orthodoxy of introducing psychological skills training and elementary sport psychology to young athletes using a skills/skills training metaphor.

Thirdly, the sport psychology presentations were constructed on active learning principles (Pike, 1989). This involved Christensen and Lamont-Mills developing a number of activities that were engaging and immediate to NIAS athletes, coaches and parents and meaningful to treating sport psychology as mental equipment. This innovation involved departing from orthodox approaches that construct sport psychology as an intangible, mentalist and largely abstract body of skills, knowledge and recommended practices (e.g., Smith & Smoll, 1996). Instead it treated it as resources that could be produced or could be withheld. It treated it as actions that were relevant to NIAS athletes, coaches and their families before, during, and after trainings and competitions.

When taken together, these three premises of town-by-town delivery, sport psychology as mental equipment, and actions and active learning meant that NIAS sport psychology could invoke relevance to a wider context of human activity than was possible at the training camp presentations.

These developments had profound consequences for how NIAS delivered sport psychology to athletes living in New England and North West NSW. Let us display three of these consequences given the constraints on time and space imposed by this paper and presentation. Firstly, by adopting a town-based model we could invite the athlete's families, school and club coaches, physical education teachers, and friends to the RACE presentations. This enabled the mental skills equipment and accompanying sport psychology information to penetrate into the family home, classroom, local sport context and community more than was possible in 2000-2002. Christensen and Schonfeld often mulled over how many bits of information the young and tired bodies and minds could catch and hold during the weekend training camps. Similarly, the sport dieticians and sport physiotherapists messages on nutrition and

hydration, and injury prevention and treatment could penetrate directly into an athlete's kitchen, living room, classroom and town via the RACE program.

Secondly, by constructing sport psychology as mental equipment we were able to avoid the complications and the difficulties that are inherent in the largely mentalist, intangible and abstract nature of most sport psychology information, skills and practices. The cognitive paradigm dominates contemporary psychology (Potter & Edwards, 2001) and contemporary sport psychology (e.g., Williams & Leffingwell, 1996). Our treatment of sport psychology as mental equipment allowed the young to mid-adolescent athletes to handle sport psychology as a behavioural rather than cognitive entity. This move has allowed us to manage the observation that 14-16 year old adolescents vary widely in their cognitive development (see Dacey & Kenny, 1997, also). Although there is a trend in adolescence for an increased capacity to process information and a move from concrete to formal operational thinking (Flavell, 1984), this is variable and for many young adolescents, intellectual processes of remain largely at a concrete level (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Thirdly, by involving NIAS athletes and their families, coaches, teachers, friends and communities in sport psychology activities we are able to tacitly oppose the view that sport psychology is relevant only for some people (i.e., athletes, coaches) at particular times (i.e., pre, during, and post performance) and for specific outcomes (i.e., running faster and jumping higher). Instead we have been able to display mental equipment that might be helpful for a variety of people, in a range of settings and contexts, and for a myriad of purposes. That is, sport psychology was able to be enacted at a local community level.

A number of small inexpensive items were chosen and connected to these ideas of sport psychology as mental equipment. In turn, these small items were connected to activities and actions performed during the RACE presentation, and neatly packaged in small transparent sandwich bags. They were given the title *NIAS Mental Equipment Packs* and handed to everyone who attended the RACE presentations. We were able to source local materials for the 2003 mental equipment packs that were produced for a cost of \$1.06 per pack. Table 3 displays some of the small items and objects that were included in the NIAS Mental Equipment packs.

Table 3: The Composition of the NIAS Mental Equipment Packs

Topic	Item of Equipment
Relaxation	Bubbles
Motivation	Balloon
Visualisation	Chupa-Chup
Concentration	Smile-face Sticker
Communication	Soft Foam Ball
Approach Behaviours	Raffle Ticket

### What did we learn?

What have we learnt from this seven year project? Several things, but the major thing that we have learnt is to approach sport problems in regional, rural and remote Australia with a wider community based framework. Initially we approached the request for assistance from NIAS as a service delivery problem. Simply put, we treated the problem of delivering basic sport psychology knowledge and skills to NIAS athletes as a difficulty arising because there was no psychologist with specialist training in sport psychology living in New England and North West NSW. The immediate solution would involve importing this expertise into the region in some way or other. Since the nearest accredited sport psychologist was in Toowoomba and the University of Southern Queensland trained psychologists to become sport psychologists, the immediate solution to the problem was to bring interstate expertise into the region. The issue then became how we could bring sport psychologists and athletes together in a cost-effective manner. So our initial solution focused on service delivery and aimed to marry the NIAS need for sport psychology services with the USQ need to provide practicum opportunities for sport psychologists-in-training. And so Schonfeld made live presentations at NIAS squad camps on orthodox topics using orthodox tools and techniques. Face-to-face presentations were chosen instead of other delivery forms because it provided more training opportunities for Adrian Schonfeld.

However as we began to understand the problem differently, arguably more deeply from our experiences in 2000-2001, we came to understand the any fundamental innovation in providing sport psychology to regional, rural and remote athletes would involve more than simply service delivery system advancements. Instead fundamental innovation in providing sport psychology services to adolescent athletes living in New England and North West NSW would require conceptual, technical, and service delivery system advancements. The second phase of the project involved approaching the problem using a wider framework drawing on principles and practices in

community and health psychology. This was partly modelled on other large-scale behavioural health interventions for adolescents (Burgoyne & Jason, 1991; Winett, King, & Altman, 1991). A central feature was this involved considering conceptual, technical, and service delivery system features of the problem. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe this innovation in greater depth. However Table 4 displays a summary of the advances that shaped the second phase of this project.

Table 4: Conceptual, Technical and Service Delivery Innovations in RACE Sport Psychology.

Innovations	Orthodox From	Alternative To
Conceptual	Abstract Knowledge Skills	Concrete Equipment Actions
Technical	Powerpoint Hi-tech	Packages Lo-tech
Service Delivery	Squads Weekends Athletes	Towns Evenings Families

### Conclusion

So what might this mean for physical education teachers working across Toowoomba and the Darling Downs? We are not so arrogant or presumptuous to suggest what physical education teachers listening to this professional development presentation should take as relevant and meaningful from this paper. Instead we are more comfortable simply disclosing our motives for displaying our involvement in New England and North West NSW over the past seven years.

Our motive is to display that innovation in sport, health and physical activity does not necessarily have to be simply adopting practices that are being used in large institutions based in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. That is, innovation and problem solving are not accomplished by simply implementing practices that have been designed in metropolitan centres with little consideration of how these practices are experienced in regional, rural and remote Australia. Our original NSWIS based model, reinforced with contemporary sport psychology literature and modified by importing interstate sport psychology expertise, was inadequate for the needs of NIAS athletes and their families. This is what we have learnt in the past seven years constructing a cost-effective means for delivering sport psychology services to adolescent athletes living in the north-west corner of NSW.

Our second motive is to display something that is equally controversial. That is, solutions to sport, health and physical activity problems experienced in regional, rural and remote Australia are not immediately found by external experts with little understanding of the local features of the problem. Instead better solutions can be developed by working with local resources. The local resources involved in this project included local people (i.e., athletes, families and coaches), local materials (i.e., bubbles, balloons and other items), and local institutions (i.e., RSL clubs, local businesses) who sponsor, advertise and otherwise support the RACE program. In the second phase of this project we engaged local resources to help plan and implement the strategic elements of the sport psychology project. This helped us see or construct the problem differently, and to help provide opportunities for technical and service delivery advancements that would construct a unique local solution for a unique local problem.

In closing, we hope that our narrative and disclosures have been interesting to physical education teachers during their July 2006 professional development program. And perhaps for some teachers our experiences may encourage them to treat local problems in sport, health and physical activity differently. That is, to resist immediate pre-packaged solutions constructed and imported from east of the Great Dividing Ranges. And instead treat problems as local issues and consider different ways of constructing unique solutions from 'local and imported materials'.

### Acknowledgments

The work in this paper has been supported by a \$5K grant from NSW Sport and Recreation.

This paper should be cited following the APA Style as: Christensen, S., Lamont-Mills, A., & Annis-Brown, P. (2006, July). *Providing sport psychology in regional, rural and remote NSW*. Paper presented at the Toowoomba and Darling Downs Physical Education Teachers Professional Development Workshop, Toowoomba, Australia.

### References

- Dacey, J., & Kenny, M. (1997). *Adolescent development* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston, McGraw-Hill.
- Martens, R. (1987). *Coaches guide to sport psychology*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Martens, R., Christina, R. W., Harvey, J. S., & Sharkey, B. J. (1981). *Coaching young athletes*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Morris, T., & Summers, J. (1995). *Sport psychology: Theory, applications and issues*. Brisbane, Australia: John Wiley.
- Murphy, S. M. (1995) *Sport psychology interventions*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Pike, R. (1989). *Creative training techniques handbook*. Minneapolis, MN: Lakewood Books.
- Smith, R. E., & Smoll, F. L. (1996). Psychosocial interventions for youth sports. In J. L. Van Raalte & B. W. Brewer (Eds.), *Exploring sport and exercise psychology* (pp. 287-316). Washington, DC: APA.
- Winett, R. A., King, A. C., & Altman, D. G. (1991). Extending applications of behavior therapy to large-scale interventions. In P. R. Martin (Ed.), *Handbook of behavior therapy and psychological science* (pp. 473-490). New York: Pergamon.
- Williams, J. M., & Leffingwell, T. R. (1996). Cognitive strategies in sport and exercise psychology. In J. L. Van Raalte & B. W. Brewer (Eds.), *Exploring sport and exercise psychology* (pp. 51-74). Washington, DC: APA.

### Biographies

Steven Christensen is a lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland where he teaches courses in motivation and emotion. He is a registered psychologist who works with athletes and their coaches. His research examines how elite coaches describe decision-making. He has a small private practice at Peak Performance Sports Medicine, Toowoomba. Steve can be contacted at [christen@usq.edu.au](mailto:christen@usq.edu.au)

Dr. Andrea Lamont-Mills is a lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland where she teaches courses in sport psychology and research methods. She is a registered psychologist who works with adolescent athletes and their parents. Her research examines how injured athletes describe their injuries and pain to physiotherapists. She has a small private practice at Peak Performance Sports Medicine, Toowoomba. Andrea can be contacted at [lamontm@usq.edu.au](mailto:lamontm@usq.edu.au)

Peter Annis-Brown is the Executive Officer for the Northern Inland Academy of Sport and is based in Tamworth, NSW. He is a graduate from Southern Cross University with he obtained a Masters degree in International Sport Management. Peter can be contacted at [nias@nias.org.au](mailto:nias@nias.org.au)

(Copyright © Steven Christensen and Andrea Lamont-Mills, 2006)