Adaptation in Action: The Transition From Research to Intervention

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Adaptation is defined here as the end point in a process, when people respond in a positive manner to hardship, threat, and challenge, including monumental sport tests, such as international tournaments. Recently, there have been formal research investigations where adaptation has been considered as a provisional framework, with a more formal structure of pathways. Sport scholars have studied Olympic and professional athletes, provided support for a theoretical framework, and identified provisional substrategies for each pathway. In this article the authors situate adaptation within a larger discourse of related interventions, including coping and self-regulation. Subsequently, adaptation is proposed as a comprehensive intervention strategy for elite athletes during monumental sport environments.

There has been a growing interest in athletes’ adaptation processes among sport psychologists (see Thompson & Sonn, 2009). The reason for such interest is that athletes and those who work with them need to build tangible skills that can manifest in effective functioning in highly complex, dynamic sport environments, especially during monumental competitions. At the Olympics, the organizational stressors (see Hanton & Fletcher, 2005, Hanton, Fletcher & Coughlan, 2005) encountered within context include increased media requests, transportation logistics to and from the venue, a high level of security at the venue and also in the village, a larger than usual audience, and variable officiating given the selections of a wider pool...
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of international officials (see Botterill, 2005, 1996; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999). Further, such challenges are encountered within a sport environment regarded by the athlete as a major life event (i.e., a highlight in her / his amateur sport career). Similarly, in professional sports, especially within late season playoffs, or within world championships, many of the aforementioned contextual demands are encountered. Confirmation of the previous organizational stressors (i.e., increased media and fan expectations), and in addition, hostile fans, have been identified within the National Hockey League (NHL; e.g., Battochio, Schinke, Battochio, Eys, Halliwell & Tenenbaum, 2009; Halliwell, 2010; White & McTeer, 1991) and also within professional boxing (e.g., Schinke & Ramsay, 2009). As the elite athlete reaches the pinnacle of her / his sport career, in that very context, the athlete’s objective is to respond effectively, and so to achieve adaptation.

Built from provisional theoretical tenets proposed by Fiske (2004), researchers have sought to delineate how adaptation, reflected by the capacity to act and react functionally in one’s environment, can be achieved through deliberate actions on the part of those about to or in the midst of performance. To the above definition, others have explained that adaptation is the end objective of a process, with optimal responses during important events returning the individual to a level of familiarity and comfort (i.e., balance) in what could have been an overly uncomfortable, unmanageable circumstance / setting (see Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). In contrast, unfavorable responses in such events, or mal-adaptation, would prevent positive responses in the immediate, and also, longer-term actions within parallel contexts, thereafter. In essence, the athlete who responds mal-adaptively could impede future success in competitions regarded as equivalent in importance. Adaptation is a discourse in its infancy, and yet the promise of what can be gained in terms of competitive advantage in the short- and long-term through strategies that facilitate adaptation is encouraging. For elite athletes and those who work with them during their most important performances, the deliberate move toward adaptation manifests in ease within challenging / complex tournaments events. The aim here is to push discussions of adaptation forward from their provisional theoretical tenets, and what has been learned to this point through formative research with elite sport populations, into practice. Interventions are proposed for applied sport psychology consultants, coaches, and athletes who work together in preparation for, and also after the major life event (see Holt, 2003) such as an Olympics, a world championship or the successful completion of a play-off run in professional team sport. At present, the majority of research about sport adaptation pertains to how the performer adapts, and not how environments might also adapt to meet the performer’s needs. Consequently, within the present article we focus on the athlete’s adaptation strategies. First though, we consider where adaptation is situated in relation to coping and self-regulation before describing it in detail and ending with a case study.

Coping, Self-Regulation, and Adaptation

In an international sporting event, the athlete is required to anticipate what is required during an action, when and how to perform, and how to overcome unexpected situations. More specifically, in both individual and team sports the athlete
should (a) appraise and subsequently cope effectively with the specific demands of the sporting task and the challenging situation, (b) self-regulate his or her behaviors, feelings, and thoughts before and during the sporting act, and (c) adapt him- or herself to new situations that might not arise during practice or in conventional tournaments / performances. In essence, the ability of the athlete to cope, self-regulate, and finally, to adapt during a monumental performance is crucial in determining success. Adaptation then is the level of fit between the individual and her or his environment at the end of a larger process, catalyzed through psychological and emotional appraisal and attempts at self-control / self-regulation (Sümer, 2009).

The meaning behind the terms coping, self-regulation, and adaptation are interrelated. The relationship among these terms has been discussed in the sport psychology literature (e.g., Crocker, Mosewich, Kowalski, & Besenski, in press; Hoar, Kowalski, Gaudreau, & Crocker, 2006; Lidor, Crocker, & Mosewich, in press). It is our contention that coping and self-regulation are essential constructs and foundations of the psychological adaptation process required by the athlete to achieve balance, manifesting in optimal performance. That is, in order for athletes to adjust appropriately to what is required from them during the sporting act, they should be able to cope effectively as well as to self-regulate.

Coping has been defined as the conscious process involving cognitive and behavioral efforts needed to manage the specific external and/or internal demands of a stressful situation (Hoar et al., 2006). Coping mediates the relationship between the appraisal of stressors (see Lazarus, 1999) and the subsequent emotions and performance. Related to the term coping, but slightly different, is the term self-regulation, which has been used to describe the organizational framework that enables the individual (i.e., the athlete) to adjust his or her behaviors and goals to perform (Zeidner, Boekaerts, & Pintrich, 2000). Within this framework of achievement, three motivational components should be coordinated and monitored by the individual—thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. From empirical and anecdotal evidence it has been suggested that athletes can improve their performance by the use of task-pertinent coping and self-regulation strategies (see for example, Gaudreau & Blondin, 2004; Lidor et al., in press; Sabiston, Sedgwick, Crocker, Kowalski, & Stevens, 2007). Among the strategies investigated were arousal control, attentional instructions, imagery, planning, preperformance coping strategies incorporating biofeedback, preperformance routines, and relaxation. It was found that athletes in various sports (e.g., basketball, golf, and volleyball) who were taught how to use the principles of the learned strategy performed better than those who were not given any strategy instructions. When reviewing studies examining the effectiveness of coping and self-regulation strategies in athletes, one critical question can be asked: can the athlete really enhance his or her psychological adaptation process through the use of imposed specific strategies (e.g., imagery and relaxation), or does he or she improve only some specific and selected actions which he or she is asked to perform? In a typical strategy study, the participant (i.e., the athlete) is given a set of strategy instructions, and is then asked to apply the strategy guidelines while performing a given sporting task in a sterile and almost optimally controlled setting. Taking into account that the practice of the specific strategy is performed under stable and sterile conditions, the desired psychological adaptation process—namely adjusting the principles of the strategies to real, and in the present case, high profile sport events—is questionable.
In fact, when performing actions in real-world sporting environments, such as high profile international competitions, major games and professional sport late season playoffs, athletes may face a number of challenges / stressors. Among these challenges are (a) adjusting to a new environment, such as playing an away game or playing in front of hostile fans; (b) competing in major sporting events such as the Olympic Games or World Championships; (c) facing a psychological (e.g., losing self-control, fearing of failure, panic) or physical (e.g., fatigue, injury) crisis during competitions and games; and (d) competing against higher-level athletes (e.g., playing against the best team in the league). All of these challenges are also magnified by the performer’s emotional investment in the competition / event, given its extraordinary value as a context above the athlete’s typical competitions / games. These challenges should be considered in any psychological adaptation process. The athlete should be prepared to adjust him or herself to the needs of the real-world high stake sport environment, and then respond adaptively, ending in optimal / peak performance. He or she should be provided with the appropriate cognitive and emotional instructional tools (e.g., strategies) that can assist him or her to meet the significant challenges, so that a high level of performance can be achieved during the important tournament or event. In this respect, the coping and self-regulation strategies, which are already being practiced by the athlete, should be modified to provide the athlete with the tools for performing in changing environmental conditions. It is proposed that the psychological adaptation process will enable the athlete to acquire a number of basic adaptation strategies that can be applied not only in anticipated settings, but also under new and unfamiliar conditions, while seeking excellence during a monumental performance. In essence, the strategy principles should be flexible in nature and also strongly reflect the needs of the athlete who must apply them under different, highly challenging conditions.

**Adaptation Outside of Sport**

Psychologists have written about “adaptation” for at least three decades, sometimes interchanging it with human adjustment (Sümer, 2009). Based upon early work, often stemming from Taylor (1983), the dimensions of adaptation originally included meaning, mastery and self-enhancement. From the early discourse, adaptation has been reconceptualized by Fiske (2004) into a more comprehensive framework. Included within the framework are five available pathways (i.e., core motives) that explain why performers achieve or fail at adaptation in context: understanding, control, self-enhancement, trust, and belonging. Understanding depicts ongoing effort to comprehend how personal and social support skills might be employed to overcome contextual challenges, and of equal importance, what are the reasons for one’s attempts falling short. Control reflects the responsive attempts that one might exert to varying success dependent on what has been understood or anticipated about oneself in a context. Clearly, effective control stems from comprehensive and well-informed understanding, whereas misdirected control results from limited and inaccurate understanding. Self-enhancement encapsulates all attempts at self-promotion, such as when one attempts to bolster oneself introspectively through persistence or externally by advocating or canvassing support. Through attempts at belonging, the individual seeks to establish stable relationships
with others. The utility of belonging is in terms of garnered belief that when one cannot personally establish understanding or control within the context, a stable network of responsive social support resources will assist with effective decisions, leading to optimal outcomes. Hence, for social support resources to be regarded as potent, a trusting relationship must be evident. Any single pathway clearly can be the catalyst toward adaptation. However, adaptation is a challenging objective in relation to a challenging circumstance, including the achievement of excellence in an important sport event.

The proposal herein is that the aforementioned pathways contribute to and manifest in effective responsiveness within complex life events, including highly valued sporting events to the performer such as Olympics and postseason professional performances. Arguably, the within pathway opportunities for intervention, resemble parallel discussions about coping and self-regulation. For example, “understanding” can be linked with problem and emotional focused coping and “control” intersects with self-regulation through arousal control when the focus is inward and planning when the focus is placed upon responsiveness to the context. Though the coping and self-regulation literatures provide parallel information in terms of human responsiveness, we propose that adaptation invites a more comprehensive—contextually informed series of interventions, with any pathway serving as a positive catalyst to the end objective of adaptation and peak performance.

Adaptation in Elite Sport: A-Theoretical Literature

Formal sport adaptation research began with the work of Tenenbaum, Jones, Kitsantas, Sachs, and Berwick (2003), and Schinke, Michel, Gauthier, Danielson, Peltier, Enosse, et al. (2006). Tenenbaum et al. focused on elite cyclists, with the athletes’ responses viewed as attempts to understand stressors in the sport environment before responding adaptively or mal-adaptively. For the elite cyclists, effective adaptation to daily challenges was comprised of maintaining low levels of state anxiety, strong feelings of vigor, focus, hope, flexibility in relation to their sport context, and a positive view of social support. Despite being analyzed independently, the adaptation process described by Tenenbaum and colleagues resembled Fiske’s pathways of understanding and controlling. In addition, the cyclists sought to improve their performances, and so to self-enhance, and also to fit within their team, and so to belong. Though trust was not identified as part of the adaptation process among the cyclists, one might posit that without a formal theoretical investigation where each tenet is pursued, it becomes possible that any one facet can be overlooked. Schinke, Michel, et al. (2006) also considered adaptation. The term “adaptation” was introduced during an exploratory project into the sport experiences of Canadian Aboriginal elite athletes. Adaptation, though not initially part of the project, was pursued, spurred by its mention during an interview with the project’s first participant. The authors found that the Canadian Aboriginal athletes used overt strategies in their pursuit of adaptation while learning about the structure of mainstream sport organizations. The athletes also attempted to self-manage, and when they felt misunderstood or disrespected, exerted control by resisting the environment. Similarly, the strategies of gaining acceptance from peers and committing to a team resembled the adaptation pathways of belonging and trusting. Finally, the
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athletes spoke of persisting in their sport careers, the end objective of the adapta-
tion process. Since the immediate a-theoretical work, researchers have advanced
the topic of adaptation through a more formal conceptual structure.

**Adaptation in Elite Sport: Theoretical Literature**

Spurred from what was initially known of adaptation in elite sport a-theoretically,
several studies were carried out on successive research projects about athletes from
the National Hockey League and Canada’s Olympic teams, each time employing
Fiske’s (2004) adaptation pathways, while at the same time identifying within-path-
way substrategies. Theoretical adaptation research began with Schinke, Gauthier,
Dubuc, and Crowder (2007) and Schinke, Battochio, Dubuc, Swords, Apolloni
and Tenenbaum (2008) gathering archival data about NHL players and Canadian
Olympians, respectively. The goal was to understand through a second-hand data
source the strategies the aforementioned elite athletes employed as rookies and
veterans. From the first project (Schinke et al., 2007), with the assistance of a
former NHL veteran, it was revealed that each of Fiske’s adaptation pathways was
relevant among NHL players. Further, discussions were opened for the first time
about the within pathway substrategies that inform the applied discussion found in
the next section (see Table 1). For example, in relation to understanding, the NHL
players sought to understand their own personal needs and team structure during
formative experiences with each new team. From what was gleaned, there is a need
for NHL athletes to understand themselves and also the teammates and coaches
they work with as early as possible postselection. Since then, Schinke et al. (2008)
have identified the importance of understanding forthcoming opponents, and also
the performance context when performing away from home in opponents’ cities.
From a comprehensive understanding of internal and external factors, a substan-
tive appraisal of anticipatory challenges can be undertaken, leading to effective
responses and then, optimal performance. **Control** was divided initially into the
facets of self-confidence and assertiveness: self-confidence relating to personal
beliefs, and assertiveness pertaining to the means through which the athlete’s needs
are conveyed to others. Schinke, Battochio et al. (see also Battochio, Schinke, Bat-
tochio, Halliwell, & Tenenbaum, in press) have broadened control to include also,
preparation and distraction control. Preparation is the shift from understanding
into tangible strategies to self-manage, liaise with teammates and social support
and respond optimally against opponents. Distraction control encompasses con-
tingency planning and effective responsiveness to unique circumstances within
the performance environments. For example, there will be dynamic aspects such as
poor officiating calls, potential injury and contextual mishaps such as temporary
technical difficulties pertaining to the site (e.g., lighting problems, temperature,
etc.). **Self-enhancement** encompasses all matters pertaining to effort and learn-
ing, with each informing the other, and both contributing to the athlete’s eventual
manifestation of optimal performance and success. Directed efforts result from
previous experiences with success in comparable settings and also from earlier
misdirected efforts during previous critical performances. The pathway of *belong-
ing* is comprised of belonging within one’s team / support system, comprised of
coaching staff and also teammates. Belonging to team is defined further as support
garnered from the team and also acquiring the necessary behavioral norms to fit in.
Table 1 Description of Adaptation Substrategies

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Adaptation Pathways</th>
<th>Substrategies</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>The athlete identifies the strengths and weaknesses of her/his athletic abilities. Used as a motivational tool, the athlete sets personal goals to attain in competition, which are largely founded on the athlete’s perceived strengths and weaknesses. For example, an athlete may aspire to achieve a personal best outcome.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Team Structure</td>
<td>The athlete assumes a role within the team’s structure. This role is founded on the athlete’s strengths and weaknesses as identified by the coaching staff.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Opponent</td>
<td>The athlete identifies the strengths and weaknesses of their opponent before formulating a plan to overcome the opposition.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>The athlete gains insight into the contextual challenges pertaining to their competitive context such as varying weather conditions, novel sporting, residential facilities, and/or media demands.</td>
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<td>Controlling</td>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>The athlete makes adjustments such as planning for multiple scenarios, while also paying attention to task relevant information while avoiding distractions such as increased attention from the media.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>The athlete attempts to gain control over the opponent, the environment and/or the self by employing a seemingly aggressive approach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-enhancement</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>The athlete gathers new information for the purpose of improving their mental, physical, tactical, and/or technical abilities.</td>
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<td>Effort</td>
<td>The athlete practices or trains with hopes of developing each of their athletic abilities.</td>
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<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Team</td>
<td>Team support involves words or gestures of support that are exchanged among teammates.</td>
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<td>Family</td>
<td>Family members make personal sacrifices by spending time and financial resources on the athlete throughout their formative years. When athletes compete in the professional ranks, family members provide verbal support by constantly contacting the athlete or even being in attendance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trusting</td>
<td>Coaches and Staff</td>
<td>Described as the athlete’s degree of confidence in staff decisions. Trusting relationships are ideal when the athlete and coaching staff (SPC within) have successfully worked together or when the staff has experience at higher competitive levels.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teammates</td>
<td>The athlete’s degree of confidence in her/his teammates’ ability to effectively perform their role on the team in competition and/or in relation to daily tasks such as meeting curfews.</td>
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Finally, trusting is comprised of trusting teammates and trusting coaches. Teammate trust was found to be of importance in all three studies, as with trust the athletes are able to resource their peers for feedback, honest opinions, and guidance while overcoming unfamiliar or personally uncontrollable questions. Coach trust is also a potent contributor to adaptation at the elite level. Coach trust is considered in terms of knowledge base, and also whether the coach holds the athletes’ best interests as central when making decisions. Trust underpins each of the preceding pathways as those trusted can assist with constructive understanding, relevant control, moves toward self-enhancement, and a sense of intrapersonal ease that enhances belonging.

Within these five adaptation pathways of Fiske (2004), a number of coping and self-regulation strategies can be integrated to facilitate the athlete’s psychological adaptation process. These strategies can help the athlete to adjust to a specific challenging situation that may be faced during the sporting act. For example, for the pathway of self-enhancement, self-regulation strategies incorporating biofeedback (see Lidor et al., in press) can be practiced to help a gymnast reach an appropriate psychological state when performing the floor routine in the final stage of a national championship. For the pathway of control, physical and psychological preperformance routines (see Lidor, 2009) can be used by a basketball player to prepare him or herself for shooting free-throw shots in an away game played in front of a noisy crowd.

**Personal Disclosure Mutual Sharing: A Parallel Intervention**

Recently, Dunn and Holt (2004), and Holt and Dunn (2006) proposed a process of intervention within team sport that shares many similarities with the aforementioned work in adaptation. The authors built their intervention based on earlier work from Hardy and Crace (1997) and Yukelson (1997) where it was posited that athletes require an understanding of themselves, and also an advanced understanding of their teammates to achieve optimal performance. Within the overarching intervention it was proposed that intrateam communication facilitated through mutual sharing of personal aspects fosters a sense of shared cognition within the group and an enhanced appreciation of each team member’s values, beliefs, attitudes and motives (see also Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 2001). As such, for a meeting in the latter part of the competitive year, just before the athletes began their final postseason games at a national championship, each member was asked to share a story with their teammates during a group session. Those invited to the mutual sharing exercise were restricted to team members and the sport psychologist. Consequently, the athletes were asked to share a defining moment that helped shape their sporting personality with their teammates—moments that were for some highly personal experiences, requiring introspection. Implicit within the intervention, given the emotional nature of the exercise, was that the athletes required trust of the sport psychologist in advance of the intervention process to facilitate disclosure. The athletes subsequently underwent individual interviews postseason where each member was asked to reflect upon the intervention process.

From the results, several of the emergent themes were remarkably similar to the aforementioned adaptation model, initially proposed by Fiske (2004) and car-
ried forward by Schinke and colleagues (2007, 2008). For example, several of the perceived benefits included understanding oneself and understanding teammates, aspects that are identical to the adaptation pathway of understanding, though without the facets of understanding the team’s structure and the performance context. The themes of developing closeness, playing for each other, and the development of confidence and trust in teammates align with the social oriented pathways of belonging in the former two instances and trusting in the latter instance. Arguably, the tenets of adaptation could be structured within a personal disclosure mutual sharing intervention, with a discussion about understanding broadened to include structural issues within the team and also stories of how more experienced successful athletes acted effectively in previous unfamiliar contexts. As an aside, others have also considered the contextual aspects we consider within the parameter of understanding, including Eccles, Ward, and Woodman (2009). Aspects pertaining to trusting could also be widened to include shared stories among athletes and coaching staff framed as mutual stories of trust. However, one could propose that personal disclosure mutual sharing exercises can become part of a larger adaptation intervention where communication among key members of the group is shared through group exercises, with individual tasks outside the current parameters of Dunn and Holt’s work broadening the intervention.

Adaptation in Practice

What follows is a practical case example to delineate the pathways and the within pathway substrategies (Table 1) employed by the first author with a professional boxer in advance of a world-title bout. The case below is authored in the first person as a vignette. Vignettes have recently been employed within the sport psychology literature to encapsulate clinical case studies for the reader (e.g., Dubuc, Schinke, Eys, Battochio, & Zaichkowsky, 2010).

The Athlete

I was approached by the head coach of a professional boxing management group to assist an athlete with his performance preparation six weeks in advance of a world title bout, scheduled within the athlete’s home city. The management’s concern was that the athlete was becoming progressively nervous before and during bouts as his opponents increased in quality, especially during his most recent bout. The feedback from the coach was that the athlete would not listen to feedback in the corner. The athlete voiced an additional concern to his coach in advance of the consultation: he was concerned of panicking during the world title bout, and as a result, losing the important performance.

The intervention began with an initial meeting between the athlete, a translator and me. During the meeting the athlete was remarkably open—he was aware that he needed some additional support to achieve his best ever performance during the upcoming bout. The discussion began with Yuri (pseudonym) sharing his athletic history, first as an amateur and then as a professional boxer. During Yuri’s amateur career, he was among the leading boxers in the world. His successes included medals at continental and world championships. Despite Yuri’s amateur success he viewed himself as someone who underachieved during important bouts. When asked to
provide examples, the athlete identified two bouts in highly visible international tournaments where he was defeated. When asked for more details on the events that led up to each bout, the athlete described himself as panicking in advance of each loss. Discussions then turned to Yuri’s professional sport experiences. Yuri was undefeated with a high knockout percentage. He had more than 20 bouts as a professional athlete, and there was considerable attention bestowed on Yuri as an emerging superstar by the press and also by two highly visible television networks. Though Yuri’s future was promising he anticipated at a critical moment in time, especially under the spotlight of the media, likely in the next bout, that he would relive his amateur pattern of underachievement.

Understanding

One objective in that first meeting was for Yuri to explore the root negative experiences from his amateur career and within, the reasons why he under-achieved. Yuri recalled being nervous the morning of both important amateur bouts. Hence, we began our work together through an exploration into understanding by identifying where mistakes were made during the performances, such as with his preperformance routine the day of competition. From the discussion, Yuri considered when and how his efforts were misdirected during his subpar amateur bouts. From the discussion there was the recognition that if Yuri felt any anxiety or concerns leading up to the next bout, that this time, he could share his concerns with the head coach and me. From open communication and shared understanding of past missteps, the team would be able to work collaboratively with Yuri and increase the likelihood that his efforts were correctly directed to showcase his abilities.

I met with Yuri each week before the bout and during ensuing discussions we focused part of our effort on competition planning. Yuri and I sometimes worked alone when we continued to debrief past performances and search for patterns where personal strategies contributed to optimal performance. There were also times when Yuri and I worked with the head coach, especially during formal sessions when we studied the upcoming opponent. Together, we studied the opponent’s overall record, style, intensity during different stages of the bout, and responses during press conferences and media releases. From an exploration into the opponent we learned that the opponent relied on his dangerous punching power and that the opponent was comfortable performing outside his home country. The opponent also had fundamental weaknesses. During each of the opponent’s few losses he was stopped in the final three rounds, leading us to believe that his conditioning and also his chin were suspect. There was also a third type of session where we worked on the plan for fight night, including what the venue would be like, who would be in the dressing room, and how the walk to the ring would be structured, among a number of other contextual considerations. From an elaborate approach to understanding, Yuri was very much at ease the evening of the fight and comfortable as he proceeded through his warm-up onward to the fight.

Control

Yuri developed a performance plan in collaboration with his coaching staff. Yuri had a thorough understanding of what he needed to do personally to reach his potential during the upcoming bout. There were also aspects in Yuri’s plan pertaining to his
opponent. The week of the bout within training, aspects of the battle plan were simulated as the team predicted they would unfold during the bout. For example, Yuri worked in the earlier rounds of each day’s training moving around and having his opponent chase him around the ring. When the sparring partner would step within physical range to land a dangerous punch, Yuri would move to the side out of distance and then counter all the while trying to provoke the opponent to chase him around the ring. He employed the countering strategy for the first four or so rounds of each day’s training. From there, Yuri slowly advanced on his opponent and closed the distance during the later rounds within training. The plan was to take away the power and danger of the opponent and then to slowly exert control and dominance. After each round of sparring, Yuri returned to the corner and the coach reinforced the battle strategy and provided suggestions for the following round. Yuri also limited access by the media within the final three days of bout preparation. During the day before the bout for example, when Yuri did his public weigh-in, arrival was scheduled almost immediately before the weigh-in and departure from the weigh-in venue followed immediately after. Consequently, the media could not gain access to Yuri. Further, Yuri and his staff turned off our cellular phones to limit distractions. When bout night arrived Yuri was entirely comfortable, and so he followed the plan and slowly took control of the ring and the opponent. The late round stoppage and world title bout was the end outcome.

Self-Enhancement

Yuri was an extremely hard worker in training. He listened well to his coaching staff and also his strength and conditioning coach, so much so that all commented that in their extensive professional sport experiences, they never met as committed an athlete as Yuri. Though Yuri was highly conditioned and technically well prepared for his world title bout, there was also a concern that he would expend energy focusing on the possibility of under-achievement. Consequently, Yuri and I worked closely and he placed his focus on his amateur and professional sport successes, especially his brilliant record as a professional boxer. In addition, there was considerable recognition of Yuri’s high level of fitness, which was contrasted with the history of lesser stamina by his opponent. From discussions pertaining to understanding where Yuri identified his performance plan, including a late round stoppage of the opponent, the focus was to continue training diligently. Effort then was expended preparing technically, tactically, and psychologically for success. With constructive thinking, Yuri showcased his abilities during the monumental event and stopped his opponent late in the fight. Yuri’s level of fitness reflected his extensive commitment to conditioning and his adaptive focus reflected in composure throughout the warm-up and subsequent performance.

Belonging

The management group Yuri worked for is a highly cohesive group of people. The group works well together during training and performance, and their quality has been affirmed through several world titlists. The group is also a friendly group of people where the athletes and their coaching staff are colleagues. When I would
work with athletes from the group, in the evenings the coaches and athletes would often go for dinner together. When I started working with Yuri, we went for dinner with him after most every day’s training. A sense of belonging was also carefully crafted in the weeks leading up to Yuri’s bout. One example was the organizing of an extensive group of supporters during Yuri’s weigh-in the day before the bout and also during the morning of the bout. In both cases, Yuri was surrounded by a large number of friends who cheered for him. After the weigh-in the day before the bout, Yuri and his coaching staff, along with a few of his closest teammates went to dinner together. In the early evening, Yuri’s team met and the dressing room and organized it so that Yuri had sufficient space to stretch out before he began his warm-up. The security guard was then provided with two lists of guests, one allowed access until the final hour of warm-up, and also a shorter list of people who would support Yuri during his final warm-up. Then, the entire team and group of supporters comprised of more than 30 people, including old friends from Yuri’s country of origin wished Yuri well and walked with him to the ring. With positive emotions Yuri was relaxed as the bout began, and so he was able to showcase his athletic qualities.

**Trust**

During our second meeting together, Yuri shared that an important person on his support staff during his amateur career trivialized Yuri’s concerns during his first year on the amateur team. Consequently, when Yuri under-achieved during an important amateur competition early on, he felt that he lacked the support and guidance he needed. Yuri remained a member of his national team during a four-year quadrennial, though after his first year with the team, Yuri kept all of his concerns to himself. With a pattern of keeping concerns to himself and not resourcing staff to make sense of previous performances, Yuri became entirely self-reliant. When Yuri became a professional athlete, he was reluctant to share his concerns with his coaching staff, even within important bouts between rounds. The head coach hoped that I could help with the athlete’s trust of his new support team, especially in relation to the coaching staff who worked Yuri’s corner. Though Yuri initially did not trust his support staff, he was open enough to share his formative experiences and subsequent staff-related concerns. In relation to his coaching staff, Yuri also contracted to be more expressive in the corner between rounds. Earlier bouts were revisited where communication had broken down during important moments and better two-way strategies were agreed upon, including full disclosure by Yuri of any concerns and reflections. During the performance, candid two-way discussions ensued for the first time between the coaching staff and Yuri. After Yuri excelled in his performance and won his world title, in the bout that followed he disclosed more openly about an immediate concern the day of the fight. When again he performed to his potential, trust was further enhanced. You will note in Yuri’s case that there was no discussion about trusting teammates. Though Yuri trusted his teammates, especially those from his country of origin, the athletes were not yet at Yuri’s performance level and as such Yuri did not resource them in relation to his sport adaptation. Yuri’s concerns were critical and requiring of others who understood Yuri’s moment first-hand.
Brief Commentary

It should be noted that the case above reflected work only in an initial bout (there were several bouts / defenses of the title thereafter). Consequently, several of the pathways were under-developed given the tight time constraint for the initial intervention. Over time the social pathways were developed with more detail and depth, though social aspects required more time, given the athlete’s distrust of coaching staff due to his formative amateur experiences. The case above provides an example where one or a few pathways can serve as the entry point to the larger adaptation intervention, though additional pathways should be developed in-depth over a longer course of time when permitted. The objective is to begin work with the athlete as early as possible before the monumental sport event to allow for a more comprehensive approach. However, even when there is a relatively short time frame from intervention to performance, adaptation pathways can be employed systematically.

Concluding Remarks

The development of research about sport adaptation is only beginning and there seems to be considerable relevance for researchers and practitioners through a comprehensive framework. Initial steps have been taken here, and also by others, to push forward adaptation research with preelite and elite athletes. The present approach has been framed in relation to elite amateur and professional sport given that most of what scholars have investigated to this point, apart from founding research in psychology, has been with elite athletes.

Discussions about adaptation as a framework for sport research and intervention are in their infancy. Those intrigued by research about coping, self-regulation, and transactional stress theory might argue that “adaptation” is remarkably similar to their interest area and thus not innovative. Perhaps such critics are correct; adaptation does bind with coping and self-regulation. However, we propose that within the adaptation literature, the researcher and practitioner alike are offered a more distinctive series of parameters to consider in their work. That is to say, the current coping and self-regulation strategies used by elite athletes during their preparation phase for upcoming real-sport events—practices, competitions, and games—are mostly related to specific and unique situations that may occur during the sporting event. The elite athlete is typically prepared to self-regulate his or her thoughts, emotions, and behaviors using strategy / strategies (e.g., focusing attention, imagery, or relaxation) developed for the execution of a clearly defined act (e.g., imaging oneself performing a specific event in gymnastics, focusing attention when aiming at the goal, or becoming relaxed before hitting the ball in golf). The specific self-regulation and coping strategies practiced by the elite athlete during the psychological preparation phase can help him or her effectively cope with the specific demands of the given act. However, in order for the athlete to adjust the principles of the strategy / strategies when performing under different and challenging conditions (e.g., performing a gymnastics routine in an international competition knowing that this is the last attempt to qualify for the Olympics, or shooting a free-throw shot in the last few seconds of a basketball game knowing that a successful shot will determine the final score of the game and the postseason), he or she should be provided with additional psychological guidance and practical knowledge on how to appropriately transfer the
principles of the learned strategies from practice to real-world challenging sporting conditions. In this respect, a broad adaptation strategy is needed.

When elite athletes are blocked by a lack of understanding of their own optimal strategies, or by a lack of understanding of the opponent, or the performance context, discussions can be systematically developed to either circumvent or overcome the complexity in relation to the high-performance context. Similar targeted pathways and within pathway substrategies exist for control, self-enhancement, belonging and trust. Others might argue the proposed substrategies we have considered are again, existing strategies rebranded. Rather, the objective is to take what is known about effective actions and reactions and consider systematically through a comprehensive list of distinctive pathways, what might be the most useful existent or contextually derived substrategy by case. Further, it should not be forgotten that the goal through the aforementioned pathways is to help the elite athlete achieve “adaptation” in a critical moment of her / his sport career, and not just to cope / manage oneself or the context. In contrast, adaptation pertains to a process where the end outcome is a level of balance and comfort on the part of the elite athlete so that energy within performance is directed toward excellence.

Concluding where we began, the goal here was to consider the extent literature on adaptation, and how such work has been developed provisionally into a framework with theoretical tenets relevant in elite sport performance. From what is known to date, there are five pathways to adaptation, each opening an entry point to a larger adaptation process. Though each pathway in itself offers substrategies through which the pathway can be pressed into application, adaptation is a comprehensive framework with the integration of several pathways allowing for an increasingly comprehensive approach to service. The salience of adaptation is in anticipation of, though also in response to dynamic contextual (i.e., real life) demands during highly valued performances. At the elite level, monumental competition is a complex endeavor, where athletes and those who work with them, can act and react in a constructive or a destructive manner. When decisions are constructive, elite athletes and those who work with them move forward systematically onward to peak performance when that performance is most needed. Conversely, when important events are evaluated inaccurately and efforts are misdirected, evolution is impeded. The intent through adaptation is to provide practitioners with a coherent framework through which high-performance athletes can perform seamlessly following a trajectory that is more linear than otherwise might be experienced. From what is known provisionally about adaptation, it is believed that the effective delivery of adaptation interventions can foster progression (as opposed to regression) in high-performance athletes through direct and indirect means, in a manner that hopefully invites reflection on the part of sport psychology consultants.

References


