

17 “This Is the Final Jump,” I Respond. Why, Why Do I Utter Those Words?

Using Storytelling in Sport Injury Rehabilitation

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Introduction

The filming crew wanted to leave, and it was all down to me. Pete has been sitting bored by the ski lifts for the past two hours, AJ is too tired, and my jumps are almost impossible to get a good shot of. “Is this it,” Pete asks? “Yes, this is it. This is the final jump,” I respond. Why, why do I utter those words? This is the final jump of the shoot. What’s more tragic is that this jump would also be the last of my career. At the top, I radio the others: “Ready?” “Yeah, go!” “3-2-1 DROP.”

I drop in, speed, and approach the jump backwards. This is normal. I was born to do this! I think dying is the reason I was born. But I don’t die. I survive. A fast wind catches me just as I reach the take-off. I am moving fast, so I can’t feel it. I take off, start spinning. 180 degrees, ok. 360 degrees, ok. 540 degrees, ok? No. Not even close. I continue to go higher, even though the landing had already started. This is going far. Too far. Way too far. I continue spinning, and overshoot the landing. I can’t stop. 1080 degrees – check, 1170 degrees – check, 1240 degrees, PAM.

Silence. Darkness. The end.

(Hyysalo, 2016, pp. 36–37)

Pekka Hyysalo was only 19 years old when he encountered a freestyle skiing accident that resulted in a life-threatening traumatic brain injury. As part of his healing, Hyysalo wrote an autobiography (Hyysalo, 2016) of his injury, subsequent rehabilitation, and journey back to life without freestyle skiing. In the book, Hyysalo explains how telling his story has helped him better cope with his injury and transition process: “I nearly drowned, but then came FightBack” (Hyysalo, 2016, p. 7).

Although Hyysalo’s injury was unique in its severity and recovery, his story is one of many stories of sport injury that reflect challenge, triumph, survival, and, in

his case, personal growth. By telling his story in a book, Hyysalo also contributes to the long history of storytelling. Throughout the history of humankind, stories and narratives have been used to communicate knowledge and experience between people in a variety of contexts (Burns, 2001). Dobrin (2013) argues that stories can provide a way of structuring our understanding of events in addition to helping “root us in an on-going stream of history”, consequently enhancing our sense of belonging, personal growth, and identity development. Furthermore, storytelling has been used as a technique to bring about cognitive and behavioral change and to facilitate problem-solving in the therapeutic, business, education, and personal development settings (Berman & Brown, 2000; Watkins, 2001). This chapter will apply the concept of storytelling within applied sport psychology practice; specifically, in the context of sport injury rehabilitation.

Critical Reflections

Sport injuries are a worldwide phenomenon among sport participants of all ages (Conn, Annest, & Gilchrist, 2003; Kontinen et al., 2011; Maffulli et al., 2010; Uitenbroek, 1996). Since the late 1960s, researchers and applied practitioners have focused on understanding how psychological factors may contribute to sport injury occurrence, rehabilitation, and return to participation (e.g., Jackson et al., 1978; Ogilvie, 1966; Valiant, 1981). Typical psychological responses to sport injury include a range of cognitive appraisals, emotional and behavioral responses interacting in a bidirectional, cyclical manner (Wiese-Bjornstal, 2010; Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, & Morrey, 1998). Consistent with the stress and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), these psychological responses are initiated by the athlete’s injury-related cognitive appraisals (e.g., “what does this injury mean to me”). These appraisals arise from a conjoining of personal and situational factors and typically fall under one of three categories. Appraisals related to injury’s impact on one’s life is perceived as: (a) irrelevant (e.g., “this will not impact me in any way”); (b) benign-positive (e.g., “I needed this break from sport”); or (c) stressful (“I cannot believe this happened to me at this moment in time”; Brewer & Redmond, 2017).

Theoretically, much of the psychology of sport injury literature has been dominated by stress and coping theory, and a cognitive-behavioral perspective in general (e.g., Brewer, 1994; Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998; Williams & Andersen, 1998). Thus, it is not surprising that much of intervention research has also focused on testing the efficacy of cognitive-affective-behavioral techniques in sport injury rehabilitation (Hess, Gnacinski, & Meyer, 2019; Ievleva & Orlick, 1991). Interventions such as goal-setting, imagery, and cognitive restructuring have been implemented with a goal of addressing and/or modifying potentially maladaptive and harmful thought patterns, emotional and/or behavioral responses (e.g., Evans & Hardy, 2002; Evans, Hardy, & Fleming, 2000; Evans, Jones, & Mullen, 2004; Flint, 2007).

More recently, researchers have called for adopting an interprofessional and person-centered approach to sport injury rehabilitation (e.g., Arvinen-Barrow

& Clement, 2019; Hess et al., 2019; Wadey, Day, Cavallerio, & Martinelli, 2018). Such an approach calls for a humanistic, person-centered perspective to working with injured athletes, and focuses on the following fundamental factors: establishing a client–practitioner relationship, consultant genuineness, nonjudgmental caring, empathy, and the lived human experience (Hill, 2001). One way to facilitate humanistic, person-centered perspective to sport psychology consultancy is through storytelling. Considered as an established concept in a range of academic disciplines and applied practice (Laurell & Söderman, 2018), storytelling as a strategy has also become popular across different health-care domains. However, storytelling has received limited research attention in applied sport psychology practice. This chapter, therefore, is novel in that it aims to discuss the intricacies of storytelling as applied to the context of sport injury rehabilitation.

It Is All Storytelling: In Life, in Sport, in Injury

In this chapter, storytelling is loosely defined as an interactive act of using written, oral, electronic, or visual means of communication to tell a story in an effort to enable understanding of self or a situation. In life, storytelling has formed a significant part of human history. Since the dawn of time, we as humans have used stories as a form of self-expression and as a strategy to make sense of life (Scaletti & Hocking, 2010; Ward, 2007). Stories, as told by all of us, “are an integral part of our social lives and the way in which we communicate ourselves, and indeed our identity, to the world” (Czarniawska, 2004, cited in Tompkins, 2009, p. 125).

Sport also has a long tradition of incorporating historical events, successful athlete stories, and setbacks into their communities (Davis, 2012). Take Michael Jordan, one of the greatest basketball players of all time, who, as a sophomore in high school was not selected for the varsity basketball team due to being too short (5’11”) and not skilled enough. Jordan’s story of how “he grew 4 inches and worked out constantly” (Poppel, 2015, 17 October), is a popular sport story told worldwide on the value of hard work, determination, and motivation.

One of the most memorable injury stories is that of a British sprinter Derek Redmond. His resilience through last minute withdrawal, due to injury, from the 1988 Olympic Games, subsequent multiple surgeries, and then the infamous hamstring injury during the 1992 Olympic Games semi-final, is a story told to highlight the importance of never stopping in the face of hardship, and even referenced in a presidential speech by President Barack Obama: “Derek Redmond bravely making it through with little help, moments of euphoria after years of hard work. Moments when the human spirit triumphs over injury that should have been impossible to overcome.”

Stories Come in Different Forms, and All Shapes and Sizes

Consistent with the definition of storytelling used in this chapter, storytelling in sport injury rehabilitation can take different forms. *Written* stories can refer

to injured-athlete self-narratives, diaries, journals. They can also take the form of published (auto)biographies and memoirs of athletes (e.g., Hyysalo, 2016; Newman, Howells, & Fletcher, 2016; Roy & Swift, 1998; Sparkes, 2004), educational case-studies and success stories (e.g., Arvinen-Barrow & Clement, 2019; Sachs, Tashman, & Razon, 2020), relevant religious scriptures (Waumsley, 2015), and other written texts such as letters, poems, and/or inspirational quotes.

Oral stories on the other hand can be those told verbally by the injured athlete, the applied sport psychology consultant, the sport medicine professional, teammates, peer-support group members, coaches, and significant others. Oral stories can also be *electronic*, and thus take the form of a podcast, Ted Talk, audiobook, and songs with relevant lyrics, to name a few.

My daily treatments were awful. It was a daily reminder of being injured. Every day. For ninety solid days in a row. On day two, my athletic trainer asked me if I wanted to have music while she did manual massage on my back. I said yes. That day, I randomly chose *Feel no Pain* by Sade. Somehow it made me feel better. The next day, I was not in the mood for rehab so I said I wanted to listen to a song by The Theme Song that described my mood at the time (I can't really say the name of the song here, it is so explicit, lol). Selecting a song of the day became a game – every day I would want to listen to a different song and even educate my AT about music she had never hear of. There were Justin Timberlake days, Pink days, and at times, explicit 2Pac kind of days. And finally, *I'm Outta Here* day.

Electronic stories also overlap with *visual* stories. Sport-related movies, such as *A League of Their Own*, *Million Dollar Baby*, and *Cinderella Man*, each bring a sport injury story to life beyond the written word (e.g., Boyle, Millington, & Vertinsky, 2006). Similarly, documentaries of injury stories (e.g., Andy Murray, *Resurfacing*), and other media formats (e.g., interviews) can all become stories of education, inspiration, support, and hope for injured athletes. It is also important to recognize that visual stories can also take the form of drawings, paintings, pictures, and different forms graphic art in a range of visual platforms. Encouraging injured athletes to create different types of visual stories to make sense of their injury experience can be a powerful way to communicate and make sense of a lived experience (Bartolli, 2019).

One of my clients loves taking pictures and uses his Instagram account to capture his days. While he was injured, we purposefully used this to summarize his injury journey each day, capturing his progress, mood, and thoughts. He named his injury Mr. Blake, the torn shoulder labrum. #MrBlake and #MrBlakeToRecovery were born. The photographic story of the injury process was very inspiring, and each day a new photo would appear on his Instagram feed to represent his injury process. In our meetings, we would then discuss and unpack these photos, and the meanings behind the images.

There Is a Power in Every Story It Provokes Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions

Storytelling serves both a biological and psychosocial function (McCann, Barto, & Goldman, 2019). Experienced and regulated by the amygdala, the part of the brain that plays a central role in social interaction, communication, and emotion recognition, stories are rooted deeply in our neural pathways. The human brain prefers a story over scientific data, and through the process of storytelling, the brain develops a connection between the storyteller and the listener (McCann et al., 2019).

From the storyteller's perspective, creating and telling a story can help organize thoughts, providing the individual with an opportunity to organize and structure the information in a meaningful way. Rutledge (2011, 16 January) argues that stories are how we as humans think and make sense of the meaning of life. Stories can help the injured athlete make sense of their injury experience, and gain an understanding of what happened, and what steps to take next in the process of healing and recovery. Storytelling also engenders a range of emotions associated with the story – ranging from anger, sadness, and anxiety to feelings of joy, excitement, and relief. Depending on how the story is listened to, this emotional process can also result in feelings of validation, understanding, and empathy, for both the storyteller (self-compassion) and the listener. Rutledge (2011, January 16) also argues that stories can provide order. Having structure and familiarity can be comforting and enables the process of systematic exploration of practical behavioral solutions to the problem at hand – in this case – the sport injury rehabilitation and recovery.

I, You, We, They: We All Have a Story to Tell

When it comes to storytelling in sport injury rehabilitation, every member of the rehabilitation team enters the rehabilitation with a myriad of personal stories that have the potential to be relevant to the injury experience. It is therefore important to recognize that the role of storyteller in the injury rehabilitation may vary, and at times the most impactful or relevant stories may come from an unexpected source.

The most obvious one, is of course, the injured athlete. Just like Hyysalo, the injured athlete holds a powerful position as the storyteller of their own narrative. The injury experience is theirs to own, and to recount, should they so choose. At the time when many athletes perceive lack of control over their bodies, knowing that their lived experience of the injury, and the story that emerges from it, is something only they can tell, can be a powerful way to regain control over their situation. Through telling their stories, injured athletes can process what has happened in a personal and meaningful way, hopefully enabling injury acceptance, and ultimately, better recovery outcomes:

I am like, six months post-surgery now. At times I cannot believe this happened to me. I tore my ACL. I TORE my ACL. There was a time, I did not think I would make it to six months post-op. But here I am. Almost ready to go back. So close, but so far. And now I am ready to talk about it.

The applied sport psychology consultant or the sport medicine professional (e.g., athletic trainer, physiotherapist, orthopedic surgeon) working with the injured athlete can also be an impactful storyteller during sport injury rehabilitation. The personalized lived experiences from the field can be compelling (Sachs et al., 2020), particularly as a means to make a connection with the injured athlete. Using metaphors (Lindsay, Thomas, & Douglas, 2010) from other sports and past experiences to demonstrate the significance of an injury to a young patient can go a long way in changing their cognitive appraisals of the injury, and thus impacting patients' emotional and behavioral responses:

“I would be worried if you were an Irish dancer and you had that broken toe” – says the surgeon to an anxious swimmer two weeks before state championships. “But you are not an Irish dancer, so you can train as much as your pain allows. I have seen many of these toes, and each and every one of them, have eventually healed as normal.”

The Art of Storytelling

Effective stories in sport injury rehabilitation do not necessarily need to come from sport, or be injury-related. They can come from personal experiences in life and the lives of others (Gallo, 2019; Waumsley, 2015). What matters is that the story told is constructed and told in a way that allows the listener to take away meaning (Waumsley, 2015). That, in a nutshell is the art of storytelling.

Putnam (2019) outlines three specific steps for effective storytelling: Build Your Storybank, Incorporate Your Stories, and Deliver Your Stories. *Build Your Storybank* refers to the process of finding the content and sources of your stories, and outlining them in terms of the message, the source of the story, and the name of the story. *Incorporate Your Stories* refers to the process of determining whether the story will serve as (a) an illustration to follow a key message or (b) create an experience to precede a key message (Putnam, 2019). This step also asks the storyteller to determine whether the story fits within a didactic or experiential learning framework.

In *Deliver Your Stories*, Putnam (2019) highlights the intricacies of storytelling for maximum impact. Putnam highlights three main components for effective art of storytelling; keep it short, use pauses, and the importance of showing, not telling. When reviewing a masterclass on storytelling, Waumsley (2015) also emphasizes the importance of *how* stories are told – the tone, the pitch, the speed, the emotion:

We were treated to a brief history of storytelling by Brian, who regaled stories from Freud, to modern day hairdressers; from his own youth, to the rich and famous of today, from The Bible and from sport. All were told with warmth, humour, passion, tenderness, emotion and a congruence that allowed us all to take from them whatever felt meaningful to us. This is the art – to tell a story that gets a message across; one within which there holds a powerful

metaphor to which the listener can draw a parallel between the action in it and their own lives.

(Berman & Brown, 2000; cited in Waumsley, 2015, p. 100)

Future Research Implications

In this chapter, we have highlighted the potential for using storytelling in sport injury rehabilitation in myriad ways. In doing so, we have also demonstrated that thus far, much of the evidence in support is anecdotal, or drawn from other health-care domains. Just like other active ingredients (Tod, Hardy, Lavallee, Eubank, & Ronkainen, 2019) of effective sport psychology consulting, the role for, and the use of, storytelling in sport injury rehabilitation needs to be empirically tested. Are stories used in sport injury rehabilitation? If so, what kind of stories are used? How and for what purpose are these stories used? It would also be imperative to establish the *be*, *know*, and *do* (Tod, Hutter, & Eubank, 2017) of effective storytelling practice from the consultants and the injured athlete perspective. What personal characteristics are viewed as effective for storytelling in sport injury rehabilitation? How effective are stories in helping the injured athletes achieve their goals and resolve their psychological concerns related to sport injury rehabilitation? How are stories and storytelling enhancing the applied sport psychology consultant's ability to provide interprofessional and athlete-centered care?

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to apply the concept of storytelling within applied sport psychology practice; specifically, in the context of sport injury rehabilitation. Traditionally used in various cultural contexts throughout history, stories and storytelling are an integral part of life, sport, and sport injury. Stories can come from numerous sources and be told by a range of individuals involved in the sport injury process. Stories can be powerful ingredients for applied sport psychology consultants, as they can connect and unite individuals to shared reality, and they “play an important role in “bringing an understanding presence that assists with the telling of the story” (Brown & de Jong, 2018, p. 41). In short, the purpose of stories, and the storyteller, is “not to tell you how to think, but to give you questions to think upon” (Brandon Sanderson, fantasy and science fiction writer; personal communication).

Critical Discussion Questions

- 1) Stories are inherently personal, cultural, and relational and often consist of individuals close to the storyteller. What, if any, ethical implications are there to consider when using storytelling in sport injury rehabilitation?
- 2) Since stories are predicated on individual experiences, is there a need for the applied sport psychology consultant to evaluate the truthfulness of the

content, particularly if the story relates to the injury in question and the story is used to foster acceptance of injury and its resulting outcome?

- 3) How can stories and storytelling fit into the medical and rehabilitation process? Can stories be used to challenge and change the intended medical and/or rehabilitation protocol?

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