

Being an Elite Sports Scientist: A Balancing Act?

Institutes and governing bodies of sport aspire to employ sports scientists as an integral part of a professional support structure. But what is the reality? How well are sports scientists developed and managed? According to Gilmore and Gilson (2007), the world of elite sport is an underrepresented sector in the management literature but one that offers a fascinating view of change. The lack of published data evaluating and assessing the work and role of sport scientists is probably due to the relatively new career pathways. Although there is a plethora of sports science research to assimilate and apply to elite sport, those who are tasked with doing so may not be being supported, developed, and directed by experienced line managers or management systems. Given that success in elite sport is judged on results, then the sports science program has to operate in a dynamic and (often) volatile environment of accountability. Fundamental changes made to a sport program (eg, a new coach, funding, or selection policy) can markedly affect the athlete and the direction of the sports science support. If something as simple as a clearly defined training and competition program is not in place, then scientific intervention is unlikely to be effectively implemented, evaluated, and understood in terms of its impact on performance. Another common scenario facing sports scientists is an ever-shortening timescale for a scientific intervention, perhaps owing to delays caused by organizational changes within the program, or because trust has to be rekindled with a new coach or athlete coming in. The sports scientist clearly works in a difficult and often uncertain environment, and must be clearly visible to coaches and athletes: known in the UK as “putting in the face time.” This is an essential step to introduce and then keep the momentum going behind a scientific intervention, and a long-term involvement in the program.

A technical support system can only get stronger if the practitioners within it undertake continuing professional development. In elite sport it is critical that scientists are active in terms of training, research, and innovation in order to deliver expert scientific support. However, a balance has to be struck with fitting in the “face time,” especially as the sport scientist also has to undertake elements of project development, audit and data management, all of which take time away from the coach and athlete. Spending time on data management, for example, is critical for effective knowledge transfer; however, coaches and athletes often do not perceive a direct benefit in it. Balancing these workload priorities, in order to incorporate continuing professional development, around training and competitions is a real challenge for the sports scientist and the line manager. In an institute or academy of sport, managers also have to be mindful of delivering on service-level agreements negotiated with the sport. The sport’s management may not necessarily see the benefit of scientific staff spending time on what they can perceive as “non-delivery activities,” such as professional training and research. Sports scientists employed within professional sports teams arguably have an even shorter-term culture than their institutional colleagues to contend with. A short-term timeline makes for a

challenging environment when it comes to balancing core responsibilities with professional development.

So how do sports scientists achieve an appropriate mix of face time, professional development, and administration? Given the dearth of management information to answer such a question, I can draw on some personal experiences to frame part of the answer from a UK perspective. While managing sport scientists for over a decade in two Institutes of Sport, I observed that sport physiologists typically worked between 40 and 80 additional days per annum beyond their contracted days. Staff did take time off *in lieu* (average 8–10 d per annum); however, line managers often had to remind and prompt staff to do so! On average, physiologists took 5 d less annual holiday than they were entitled to, so time off *in lieu* was never really recovered. Some of the extra hours were attributable to training camps, at which they spent 4–5 wk per annum (this would likely double in an Olympic year). When training camps occurred, then hours worked monthly often went beyond 300 h. Despite working long hours, sick leave was always well below the industrial average (~4 d per annum vs 10 d per annum for UK public sector employees; *CIPD National Survey, 2006*), which gives an insight into the level of motivation, enthusiasm, and commitment of the people involved. To conclude, face time was approximately equivalent to that of a full-time job, and so professional development required working additional hours, which begs the question as to whether the work/life balance was appropriate. Working hours were also high across other scientific disciplines and, interestingly, managers worked on average 200 to 220 h per month. I am not sure who was tasked with looking after their work/life balance!

Gilmore S, Gilson C. Finding form: elite sports and the business of change. *J Organ Behav Manage.* 2007; 20: 409–428.

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