

Neuro Linguistic Programming: What can it offer Elite Sport?

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I've been delivering NLP training for the Elite Sport Arena for over 8 years now, predominantly for UK Sport as part of their '*Commitment to Excellence*' programme, and also for the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), whom I originally wrote this article for. It's interesting how people's perception and awareness of NLP has changed. When I first set my goal of bringing NLP to Sport, back in 2000, practically no-one had heard of it, and if they had, the only thing people used to say was 'isn't that something about checking out where people's eyes move!'



Now when I say what I do, 10 years later, there are many people who have not only heard of it, but have possibly done some training themselves, or know people who have.

Maybe they've been part of a coaching system that uses it, or have heard someone talking about how they have used NLP to help with their own or with others' performance.

Whatever the reason, NLP has definitely become more familiar to coaches, managers and performance directors working within British Sport.

When I wrote this initially for *ontheup* (the magazine for elite coaching in cricket), it was not only a great opportunity to write a little bit about NLP in a great publication, it's also shown me how many different approaches you could take regarding the use of NLP in elite sport simply by the amount of times I re-wrote it – and I also recognised that it's something to do with the mental programmes I used for writing an article of this type – time for a change eh?

So what is NLP?

NLP is an amalgamation of practical knowledge about human communication and personality, which provides us with a set of guiding principles, attitudes, and techniques about real-life behaviour. It offers techniques to change, adopt or eliminate unwanted/unhelpful behaviours, and gives us the ability to choose our mental, emotional, and physical states of well-being.

N – Neurology: *How we store and interpret information in our mind and nervous system*

L – Linguistic: *How we use language (verbal and non-verbal) and the effect it has on us and other people*

P – Programming: *How we develop and run the patterns and habits that are responsible for the behaviours we produce.*

NLP is also fundamentally about **the study of excellence**. It's about recognising where the differences lie between someone who is merely competent at what they do, and someone who excels. It's a bit like having an 'operating manual' of the *process* of how we think, feel and behave. This provides us with insight into 'how' the player is producing the behaviours they do, and if that behaviour's not working for them, we can use the manual to give us ways with which to change that behaviour.

As a Sport Psychologist, I was impressed by the techniques NLP offers to help us with the 'How'. I have to admit, I was always a bit frustrated that the learning I had from psychology provided me with many theories about 'why' something happens, but didn't really give me a lot about *how* to change it.

Other than the basic 'mental skills' techniques' that are good 'general' techniques, I always felt that we needed more 'in-depth' techniques to deal with the underlying core – **particularly in Sport where the slightest thing could be the difference between performing at your peak – or not.**

Would you believe that something as seemingly unimportant as facial muscle, chin protrusion and tilt could be the thing that altered how a 10 metre platform diver felt about performing? I wouldn't have done until I 'experimented' (ethically of course!) with an athlete and discovered that what was going on in this area of their body was a key component of triggering off a positive or negative physiological response! Mad? Yes, I thought so too. A fluke? Again, my thinking, except that this isn't just a one – off. It happens to us all, because our physiology affects our thinking just as our thinking affects our physiology.

'How we think and feel affects how we perform and act'



- ❖ Take the footballer who feels sick at the thought of taking a penalty – how is he thinking to cause him to feel this way?
- ❖ Or the tennis player who regularly manages to win the first set and falls at the later stages – what internal processes is she using?
- ❖ And the team who don't believe they can win, despite the words they are saying out loud – what does that say about their trust and cohesion – how are they thinking about themselves collectively and as individuals?

NLP approach to 'The Mind'

The Conscious Mind

Everything we are paying attention to, *right now*.



The Unconscious Mind (or sub conscious)

Everything we are **not** consciously aware of, including physiology.

NLP is interested in both the 'conscious' and 'unconscious' processes of thinking, feeling and behaving.

In particular, it is concerned with the effects our thinking has on our physiology, and vice versa. We all know that thinking negatively can bring about feelings of negative anxiety, as opposed to the motivating effects of a positive anxiety. We also know that focusing on things going as you want them to can also reduce that anxiety. It's really hard to feel anxious if you focus on a performance going exactly as you want it to – it's only when we start thinking about the *what ifs* of it going wrong that we get the negative feelings kicking in.

By the time you are focusing on a competitive performance you will have identified possible obstacles and put strategies into place to overcome them, therefore performance anxiety prior to an event is very dependent on the way you are thinking about something.

This isn't to say that a test winning match or an Olympic final should be anxiety free as this can be the pinnacle of someone's career. It's more to suggest that we have more control over our emotional responses than we sometimes acknowledge!

NLP began as a model of how we communicate to ourselves and with others, and was developed by Richard Bandler and John Grinder.

The NLP Communication model (see overleaf) explains how we process the information that comes into us from the outside, (through our senses) with the premise that "The map is not the territory." – i.e. how we've interpreted things in our heads might not be the correct interpretation of what's going on outside in the 'real' world.

For example, how many of you have ever been in a meeting, gone away, read the report of that meeting and thought 'that's not what happened?!' **Different maps**

Or maybe you've watched a match between two rivals and agreed/ disagreed vehemently with the umpire or referees decision (maybe based on who you are supporting?)

Different maps



NLP Communication model

7 +/- 2
134 bits

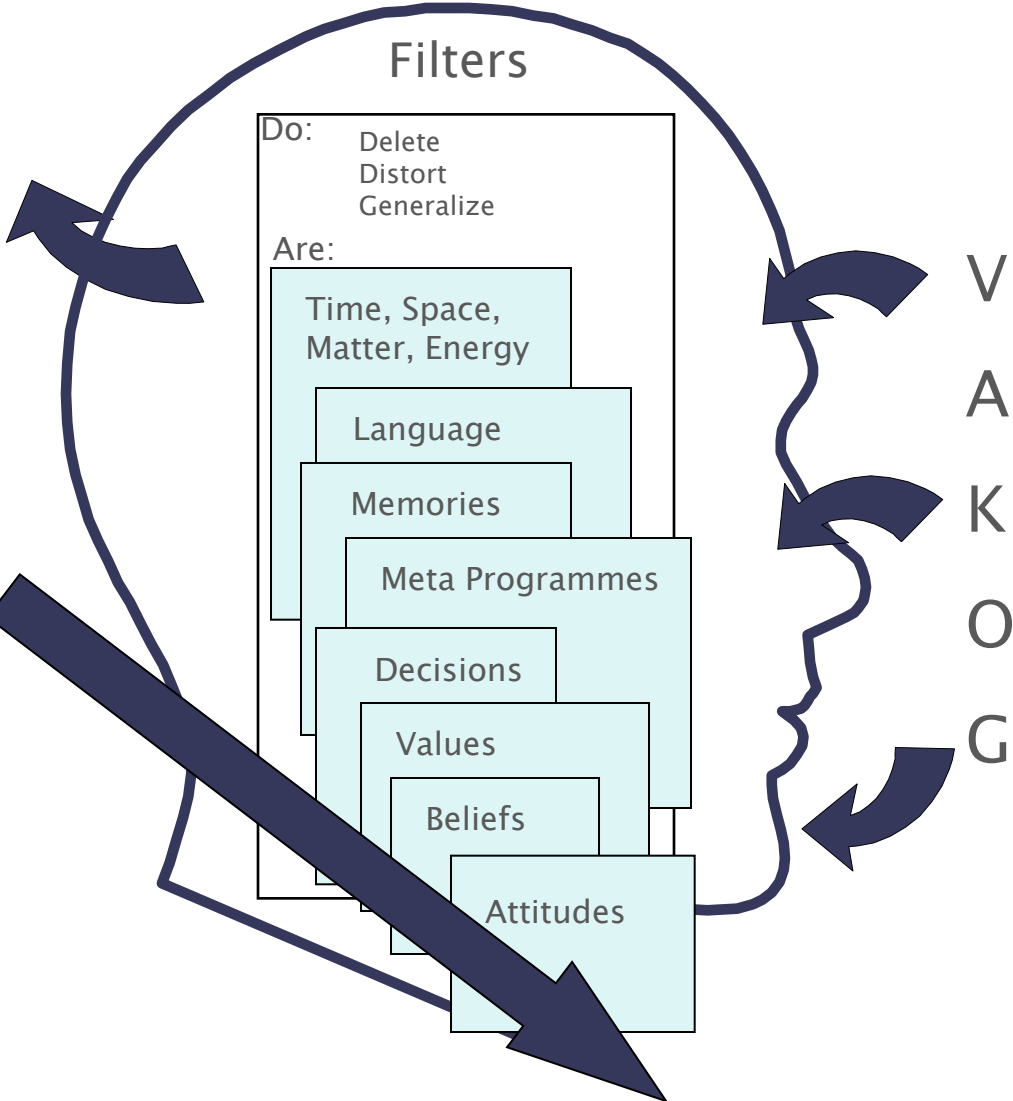
Internal Representation



Internal State



External Physiology



2 million bps
External Event

Behaviour



Performance

As a rule, we experience an external event and we run that event through a number of filters to process it. As we do, we delete, distort, and generalize the information that comes in, meaning that we're editing what we see, hear and feel to what we already know. It is these filters that affect how we think, feel and behave about things, and as such this is what NLP is concerned with.



Take the filter of Beliefs for example. How does what you believe affect how you interpret a situation?

Why do some players 'know' that it's important to work as hard on the mental side of the game as the physical – and others don't?

Or that recovery is just as important to getting fit as training? – A player's beliefs will make a difference to how they go about their goal of being successful, and if their beliefs are different to team mates or the coaches, then this can be problematic.

We make an Internal Representation (I/R) of that event in our 'mind', made up of pictures, sounds, self talk and feelings which we combine with 'messages' from our physiology and this information produces a state. Our "State" refers to our internal emotional state - a happy state, a state of readiness, a motivated state etc.

A good example of a State we are all familiar with is the '**Flow**' State or '**Being in the Zone**'. A key factor in peak performance and as such is something we can use the NLP Model to help us identify and recreate in an individual and teams.

Experienced coaches (and commentators) look at a player and make a pretty good guess at whether they're confident or not.

Why? Because that player will have a particular body posture/shape/movement that they adopt when they are feeling unconfident.

Possibly this player has made some kind of analysis about their performance status, for example, 'we need too many runs to pull it around, or 'we're going to lose this match'. This can result in more negative thinking that translates into the players stance, and although we often can't put our finger on what specifically is the thing that tells us (because it's often an unconscious process), that drop in confidence is observed – both as spectators, the opposition, and more importantly, by ourselves.

What's happening here is the effect of how our interpretation of the events going on around us is affecting our I/R, our physiology and therefore our state. Because the State we are in affects how we behave, this obviously affects the performance we produce.

What's good about states is that the opposite happens too. Just as we have a low confidence state, we have high confidence states too – and this also can be seen.

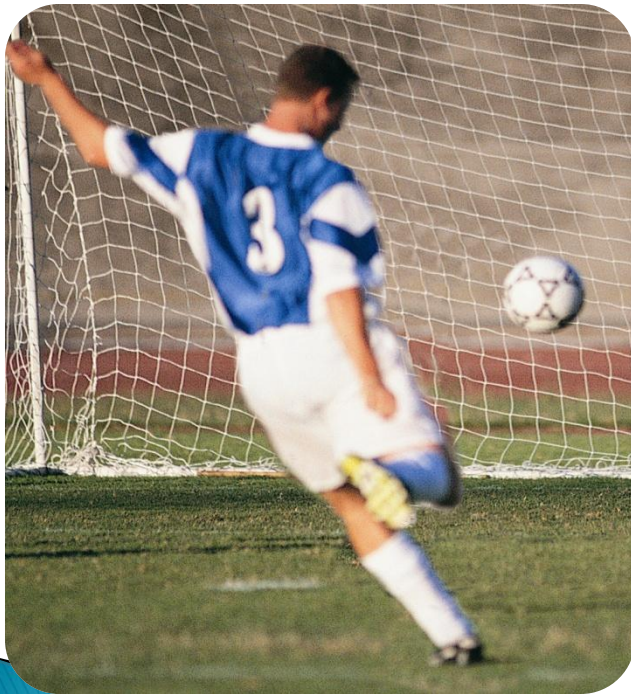
What's important about this is that when a player adopts their 'confidence stance', it will be triggering positive feelings and emotions, and our thinking picks up on this as we recognise that we 'feel good'.



The more we are in this state, the more our bodies get used to and respond favourably, as what is essentially happening is that we are creating an habitual state within our nervous system (our neurology) and this starts to become the norm.

A team or player who is on a good run of form will be operating from this habitual state, and it takes quite a big dent to knock them off. What's important when they are 'knocked off', (if you'll excuse the expression), is that we get them back to the thinking, feeling and, in turn, the behaving (or performance) that they were previously running.

To do this, you have to know *how* to identify *where* the differences lie.



This is where I think NLP gives us a lot of additional techniques for working in sport, because it provides us with a way of working with the less obvious things – the patterns and behaviours that athletes' do that lie *outside* of conscious awareness, but in actual fact are the driver behind everything they do.

For coaches NLP gives us a way of thinking that challenges many of the preconceptions and beliefs often held about what's possible, and provides us with a set of tools and techniques to start to reflect on what we do as coaches, what works for us, what doesn't and how we can change things, should we so wish.

This also goes for working with our athletes too, as it provides us with insight into how their thinking, feeling and behaving affect their performance, and what you can do to assist them get the most out of their sporting lives.

To summarise, NLP is an attitude and way of thinking that is based on curiosity and a willingness to explore - to go beyond the boundaries imposed by ourselves and others, about what we *should*, *ought* and *have* to do, and to seek other, new and different ways for effective change and behaviour.

I'd like to leave you with a comment sent to me from someone who trained on the Sport Programme a couple of years ago, and I thought this was really indicative of how changes can occur in ways that are not obvious at the time....

***“I was thinking about NLP just the other day, and realised actually how much my short-term memory had improved from how I now frame things. I used to be terrible at forgetting things like my keys, or wallet etc. but after the sport practitioner course I started framing things like ‘I must remember my keys before I leave’ rather than ‘I mustn’t forget my keys’ .. when I forgot my glasses on the weekend, my wife commented how out of character it is for me now, which was really interesting when I used to do all the time!*”**

A little thing, but in Sport it’s sometimes the little things that make the biggest difference.....

Louise is a BPS Chartered Psychologist, a BASES Accredited Sport and Exercise Scientist and an experience performance coach. She delivers NLP and Sport Psychology development programmes throughout Europe, as well as specialist trainings on Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Development for Governing Bodies and Corporate Business. If you would like to know how we can help with your performance management please call us on **020 8398 2127** or email **info@inside-performance.com**

