

## Amazing Athletes With Ordinary Habits: Why Is Changing Behavior So Difficult?

We all know that eliminating nondesirable behaviors can be difficult, even when there is a clear understanding that poor habits are detrimental. Athletes often know the benefits of diet, exercise, and drinking less alcohol, yet short-term bursts of enthusiasm are more common than long-term change. Academics in behavior change consistently report that efforts to change health behaviors, such as the ones mentioned, have had limited success.<sup>1</sup> Experienced coaches and sport scientists often represent the “front line” when it comes to promoting changes in an athlete’s behavior and positive habits. Unfortunately, change is often difficult; some athletes will resist change as the effort required to change poor behaviors may not always seem to be worth it. Or, perhaps fear of the outcome stifles initiation and following through with desired changes.

Trying to get athletes to sleep more is a common example of trying to modify behavior to improve performance. Many will agree that sleep is a pleasant activity. Additionally, sleep researchers have revealed many benefits of consistent sleep for the athlete. The fact that most individuals actually *like* to sleep and complain when they do not get *enough* sleep suggests that it should not be difficult to get athletes to improve sleep behavior. However, athletes often obtain well below the general recommendation of 8 hours of sleep per night.<sup>2-4</sup> Potentially one of the hardest things to change is the use of electronic devices before bed. How do we get our athletes to limit or stop Instagram and Netflix time creeping into sleep time? How do we get athletes to prioritize sleep over “the fun stuff.” Athletes can have knowledge and desire, but continue to miss out on what is good for them. We can *know* something and even believe that changing a behavior is important and yet still do *nothing*. Clearly, changing behavior is more complex than just common sense. If it were simple we would all make the changes we know we should make.

Behavioral modification has been theoretically discussed and applied by many. More recently, Bill Beswick (British sports psychologist) presented a model that discusses 3 drivers of behavioral change, credibility, reliability, and intimacy, all underpinned by trust.<sup>5</sup> In elite sport, credibility is crucial; on one hand there are the necessary qualifications to consider, and on the other hand, and perhaps even more important, is “street credibility,” which is typically related to the level of experience possessed by the sports scientist or coach. It is relatively easy to provide athletes with basic sleep information, but to be effective it can be important to consider issues such as late-night video games and caffeine use that are unique to the elite athlete. Sometimes “experts” in their fields cannot connect and engage with the athlete if they do not fully understand the athlete’s world. The second driver Beswick refers to is reliability. How many times have you heard a sport scientist promise to deliver a report or follow-up with the athlete, yet fail to deliver? If you are not reliable, athletes’ trust can be lost and athletes may not want to work with you. The third driver is intimacy, similar to emotional intelligence and reflecting how in tune you are with the athlete. How well do

you listen, observe body language, and understand the athlete’s mood without even talking? Will the athlete open up to you about what may be interfering with his or her sleep or just lie and tell you everything is going fine? And, of course, many athletes may actually like sport science but not like the sport scientist they work with.

Given the complex nature of trying to change behavior, where do we go from here? Using sleep habits as an example, there are some identifiable strategies worth considering. First, we need to recognize that expertise and information are important but do not drive changes in behavior. Standard education sessions for athletes will not be sufficient, as information in isolation does not result in change. We need to understand the reasons athletes do what they do from *their* perspective. Social-media use that interferes with sleep may seem irrational to scientists and coaches; however, athletes may see this as important for sponsorship or, perhaps more commonly, self-worth. Rightly or wrongly, these practices and their underpinning rationale can help us understand where we might be able to intervene. Understanding what motivates each athlete and seeing the situation not just as a scientific observer of habits but also as an observer of the preceding conditions and situations can increase the likelihood of successful change.<sup>1</sup> It may be important to know if the athlete is facing team, social, competition, or economic pressures.

Focusing on negative emotions may be less helpful for encouraging behavior change. Therefore, if we focus on how sleep may improve performance, this can be a more successful motivator than “If you don’t sleep, you may not train or race as well.” In our experience, informing athletes of what the best athletes in the world do (ie, Roger Federer sleeps 12 h/d) is much more successful than highlighting the science of sleep and performance.

Setting specific goals with measurable outcomes that can reinforce good behavior can be beneficial. Having the athletes decide these goals and come to their own conclusions regarding how to achieve them can increase personal responsibility for the outcome. Making small changes over time, rather than an all-or-nothing approach, is also important. An example of this is recommending that the athlete go to bed 15 minutes earlier every night this week and suggesting that “next week will be better than this week.”

While our job as sport scientists may always have elements of education, monitoring, and research, we should never underestimate the value of understanding how to best modify behavior in athletes. With encouragement, support, and motivation for change in an evidence-based environment, we just might provide the most beneficial platform for athlete success.

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## **Erratum: Halson and Lastella, 2017**

In the original publication of this article, the second author's first name was misspelled in the online version only. It appeared online as Michelle instead of Michele, the latter of which is the correct spelling. The online version of the article has been corrected.