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Foreword

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'Wired to Play: The Metacognitive Athlete' is a timely publication as society turns its attention to understanding and supporting individuals suffering from mental illness. The remarkable stories shared by coaches and athletes in this book provide a powerful insight into mental health. Many individuals struggle with mental health issues at some point in their lives and our athletes are not immune to these challenges. However, such challenges do not define the individual person, their achievements in life or their value to our community. *'Wired to Play'* provides hope and direction for all individuals struggling with mental health issues.

Australian sport is overwhelmingly about community and Australians are ardent lovers of sport. They love to participate in, volunteer for, and watch a wide range of sporting events across the country and internationally on a daily basis. Australians are involved in every level of sporting endeavour from children's and school sports, through the professional codes, world and Olympic events. Our passion for sport is much more than entertainment. The relationships that exist within the sporting community and the mentoring provided by coaches, provides participants with life-skill development that underpins both physical and emotional wellbeing. *'Wired-to-Play'* is a unique and comprehensive look into just how important these connections are and reminds us never to under estimate the role sport and exercise play in the mental wellness of all Australians.

The author, psychologist, Gayelene Clews, is a former world class athlete who has represented her country in two sports. In her role as the 2000 Australian Olympic Team Psychologist to Women's Water Polo, Clews contributed to the team's exciting Gold medal. Her extensive work with professional football codes includes time as a consultant for the Australian Wallabies during their 1999 World Cup win and six years at the Canberra Raiders along with 5 years with NSW cricket and 15 years at the ACT Academy of Sport. Today, Clews combines private practice with her position of Senior Psychologist at the academically outstanding Radford College, implementing exceptional support structures that help young people maximise both their athletic and academic performances.

In *'Wired to Play'*, Clews draws attention to the challenges confronting athletes and coaches that could trigger mental illness. She highlights the signs that may indicate an individual is at-risk and provides insightful counsel on how to work effectively with individuals to minimise potential harm. A wide range of strategies for the building of metacognition and supportive sporting environments are provided, with an appendix at the end of the book on where to access help for those in need.

Mental illness is a serious topic with potentially devastating consequences and its de-stigmatisation is a whole community responsibility. Unified praise for *'Wired to Play'* across both Olympic and Professional sports is testament to its significance in increasing awareness and support for, athlete mental health and the mental health of all Australians.

Wired to Play: The Metacognitive Athlete

By Gayelene Clews

Gayelene Clews
Psychologist, MAppSci

For a million years mankind's descendants have moved in order to survive. It has only been in recent years however, that humanity has begun to understand the importance of movement for emotional and psychological wellbeing. Sport and exercise doesn't just protect against physical illness and disease, but is also a vehicle for holistic wellness, including mental health, or what I prefer to call 'mind wealth'. Mind wealth is more than an absence of mental illness and more than baseline emotional and behavioural adjustment. Mind wealth is what enriches the brain to be creative, adaptive and exceptional.

Participating in sport can build the capacity for mind wealth. Physical movement releases neurochemicals which help with mood regulation and moderate the impact of conditions such as depression, anxiety and inattention. Sporting communities provide social support which can act as a protective factor against mental illness. Coaches and teachers deliver instruction and mentoring providing young people with access to significant adults and role models. Sporting participation encourages life-skill development and emotional intelligence through working collaboratively as part of a team to dealing with setback or perceived failure. When instruction through sporting participation is done well, individuals are immersed in an environment full of opportunities for metacognitive growth and mind wealth.

Metacognition is the ability to think about our thinking, to have knowledge about knowledge, and reflect on and adapt our thoughts, feelings and actions. Metacognitive knowledge involves understanding one's own emotions and motives. For example, an athlete who is aware of how his/her own expectations escalate their feelings of anxiety causing their muscles to tighten and biomechanics to change when shooting a goal in basketball has metacognitive self-awareness. If they know how to slow down their breathing, relax their muscles and quiet their mind to better execute the shot, they also have metacognitive self-regulation. The ability to not only monitor one's own thoughts but to implement strategies to self-regulate is metacognition in action – the process used to regulate and problem solve for a more positive outcome.

Metacognitive knowledge involves thinking a certain way, reflecting on this knowledge, and having a willingness to revise and make adjustments to thought processes and actions. Metacognitive self-regulation is the employment of various strategies to make the adjustments that have been identified so that challenges which arise can be managed. These strategies can be taught through many psychological interventions. For self-regulation to be effective however, an accurate self-assessment of what is known and not known about one's self is required. Athletes may overestimate or underestimate their abilities, which may indicate they have poor or underdeveloped metacognition and a reduced ability to self-regulate.

Many athletes know that they get nervous before competing because they do not wish to perform poorly but many do not understand how their own negative ruminations contribute

to that nervousness and the resulting physiological changes in their body that may flow into poor skill execution. Alternatively, they may know that their worrying contributes to an increase in heart rate, muscle tension, perspiration and breathing rate, but feel they have no capacity to regulate or change these responses. An athlete with poor metacognition may hope they wake up feeling confident on the morning of competition but see it as something left to chance rather than something they have control over.

"Wired to Play: The Metacognitive Athlete" looks at how metacognitive education via sport can improve awareness, reflection and decision making for more successful outcomes while also protecting against mental illness and building mind wealth. Unfortunately however, metacognition is not always properly understood or taught. Metacognition is not a requirement for success or a guarantee against mental illness, but it certainly helps.

Success in sport is not dependant on the absence of mental health challenges or difficult life circumstances, but rather, the metacognitive ability of an individual to cope with setback and disappointment. With awareness and insight into their own thoughts and behaviours, individuals can be taught how to monitor and regulate obtrusive thoughts in favour of problem solving strategies to build resilience and move forward.

The athletes and coaches in this book share their personal struggles and the metacognitive awakenings that have shaped their insight into managing their mental health and lives. In doing so, they provide insight into the importance of metacognition for improved psychological and emotional wellbeing for everyone.

Olympic Swimmer Kieran Perkins, in his Australian Story interview in 2014, talked about giving himself a "*mental slap*" to get himself out of negative rumination that threatened to undermine his 1996 Olympic victory.

Dual winter and summer Olympian and world champion hurdler, Jana Pittman, shared her experience of hiding in the toilets out of fear and missing her first race against Olympic gold medallist, Cathy Freeman. Pittman's reflection on her experience allowed her to reframe her fear of failure as being okay as long as she "*had a go*".

She says, *"I told myself then, when you walk away - this is how it feels. Remember this pain Jana, because this is how fear will always feel. But know that you have a choice, deal with the situation or walk away."*

World Champion Boxer, Anthony Mundine, doesn't seek to tell young Indigenous Australians what they should do. Rather, he helps them develop an awareness of who they are and encourages them to make better choices about how they want to be in the world. Mundine asks the question and then allows the quiet space between his question and their answer to sit there. He does not fill it with his opinion but allows young people to reflect and find their own truth.

He says, *"All Aboriginals see and hear from the system is that they are no good because they are this and that, alcohol, drugs, all the negatives. When I talk to youth I say, "this is not who we are, none of this is a part of our culture. We don't drown our sorrows to feel in a better place. It isn't even our way of dealing with it". They have to deal with constant negatively but are not taught to deal with it in the right way."*

World figure skating finalist, Miriam Manzano, shared how she learnt to think differently about having a larger physique compared to some of her competitors. Using affirming statements such as, "*she may be thin but can she jump*?" taught Manzano to work with the body she had, to value her strength and power, rather than stressing because she didn't look like someone else's ideal.

Triathlete, Steve Baker, continued to train for an Ironman triathlon during his wife's terminal illness, getting up in the early hours of the morning to exercise before the rest of his household was awake. At first his coach, Olympian Ben Gathercole, thought he was "*crazy*" but Gathercole understood his need to keep some structure in his life when everything else felt out of control. Gathercole said he was not surprised when Baker emotionally broke down halfway through his Ironman event, distraught at the thought of losing his wife. As a coach, he knew that sometimes people need to push themselves to physical exhaustion before they can let go emotionally. Baker's experience provided him with the metacognitive knowledge he needed to understand and express his own grief.

In unpacking the stories shared by the many coaches and athletes who were prepared to speak about their struggles, I hope to demystify perceptions of mental toughness and mental illness. I also hope these stories provide some insight into why certain types of mental health conditions may arise, how to minimise the risk of them occurring, and how to help those who may be affected. Much of the language used around mental illness is unhelpful so I have also endeavoured to normalise common mental health experiences and use more positive, constructive and helpful language. As long as society continues to stigmatise mental ill health there will be road blocks to individual and collective wellness.

My own sporting career provided numerous opportunities for metacognitive growth, but none as powerful as the day I decided to stop competing.

I had always been involved in sport having been brought up in country towns in Western Australia where there weren't the distractions of the big cities and engaging in sporting activities was the thing to do. Sport shaped my identity from an early age. I swam in national championships, ran in world championships and was eventually ranked number one in the world in the Olympic distance triathlon. My metacognitive awakening occurred the year after my world ranking. At the time I was the only mother on the professional triathlon circuit and married to world marathon champion, Robert de Castella. Managing the challenges of being a new mother, together with the rigours of training in a multi-discipline sport,

led to overtraining and burnout. Throughout the season I struggled with mental and physical fatigue, and was frustrated that I could not replicate my successful performances from the previous year. At the time I was living in Boulder, Colorado and training at high altitude. Altitude training with its thin air only exacerbated my fatigue, but without metacognitive awareness I thought I just needed to train even harder to perform better. Concerned about my waning motivation, I reached out and visited a psychologist, only to be horrified when she suggested I may be struggling with retirement. I didn't go back!

As the season progressed my fatigue worsened but I continued to overtrain. Three quarters of the way through a half Ironman triathlon in Hawaii (2km swim, 80km cycle and 20km run) I was fighting myself mentally. I kept drifting in and out of negative thoughts, one moment telling myself how much I wasn't enjoying the cycle leg and the next telling myself to stand on my pedals and push through the pain that was building in my thighs. Back and forth my thoughts swung. At about 60Km into the bike ride and sitting comfortably in second place, my thinking changed. I thought, *"You do know, you do not have to do this anymore if you do not want to?"* The comment caught me by surprise and instead of berating myself to work harder I found myself saying, *"You know, you are right. I don't have to!"* At that point I got off my bike, put out my thumb and hitched a ride in a local pick-up truck. I threw my bike in the back and got the driver to drop me off at the accommodation I was sharing with friend and multiple World Ironman Champion, Mark Allen. I packed my bike into its travel case and it took me five years to unpack it. Cutting open a brown paper grocery bag, I started to write. What came off the tip of my pen was an article titled, *"The Pain of Letting Go"*, which was later published in an American Triathlete magazine.

I wrote about having always been an athlete. My first competitive swimming race was at the age of four. I was a state championship medallist in butterfly by the age of six. As a distance runner, I by-passed my junior years and became the Open Women's Australian Cross Country Champion at age fifteen. At sixteen, because of a lack of experience and knowledge about heat exhaustion, I ran myself into unconsciousness racing in Central America. I met de Castella when I was thirteen years of age having asked for his autograph after a national cross country event. We were engaged when I was eighteen and married at nineteen. Then we travelled the world as elite athletes.

I wrote about not knowing who I was if I was not an athlete any more. I wrote about being confused about that and needing to find out. Being an elite athlete was only part of who I was. I needed to own the strengths I had as an athlete so I could apply them to other areas of my life.

After my story was published people wrote to me and thanked me for sharing my insights and providing them with a better understanding of their own struggles. A close friend of mine suggested that I consider a career in sports psychology and that opened the door to

my next career step. Having completed an undergraduate degree in Arts, I returned to the University in Colorado and began working towards a Masters Degree in Sports Science with a psychology emphasis. When I eventually returned to Australia I worked with athletes, coaches and teams at the ACT Academy of Sport, the Canberra Raiders Rugby League Team, the Australian Wallabies Rugby Union Team, NSW Cricket and the Australian Olympic Team (including the Olympic Gold medallists in women's water polo).

Over the years I have been fortunate enough to work with some of the best athletes in Australia and the world. I have accumulated knowledge from study and research, and experience that has been enriched by every person I have consulted with. Fifteen thousand consultations later, I have learnt as much from my clients as I hope they have from me.

In today's frenetic world many individuals fill every waking moment with distraction, partly to avoid the feeling of discomfort which comes with quiet contemplation. It takes courage to sit with one's discomfort in order to find a better place. The nature of competitive sport requires athletes to face challenges all of the time. Performances won't improve without appropriate goals and the ability to reflect honestly on each and every performance. Metacognition requires time and space to contemplate, plan, re-focus, implement, monitor, reflect and adapt. Psychologists invite contemplation but so too can coaches, teachers and families.

For athletes to successfully transition across their life span, their metacognitive abilities in the sports arena need to be fully developed so that they can transfer their skill sets to other aspects of their lives. When individuals develop a higher degree of self-complexity and adaptability they are generally more resilient. It is not a given, however, that metacognition used in one situation will transfer automatically to another. It has to be taught, developed and fostered.

"Wired to Play: The Metacognitive Athlete" aims to educate athletes, coaches, parents and teachers about how to develop metacognition through sport to build mind wealth and good lifelong mental health. It teaches individuals how to look within to create change rather than seeking to control external circumstances. It is often not the event, but how one responds to it which triggers distress. With metacognitive awareness individuals may be empowered to have greater control over their lives and mind wealth.

It has been my good fortune to have my office over the years filled with passionate and amazing individuals not focused on illness but on achieving wellness. I thank them all for allowing me to be part of their journey. It has been an honour to work with and interview so many remarkable people who have willingly shared deeply personal experiences to help shed light on issues surrounding mental ill health. We never cease to learn as we age, and what we may lose in physical fitness and agility, we hopefully gain in wisdom. I hope others may become a little wiser through reading and reflecting on *"Wired to Play: The Metacognitive Athlete"*.