

Scott Pierce PodCAST Transcript

Kara Snyder:

Hello and welcome to The PodCAST, a Podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara, Snyder and I serve as the Assistant Dean of Marketing Communications and constituent relations for the college

Typically on The PodCAST, we chat with college alumni but today is a special episode. We have a chance to talk to Scott Pierce. Scott is an associate professor in the School of Kinesiology and Recreation, and a certified mental performance consultant. He is also wrapping up his year as a CAST research fellow. Welcome, and thank you for being here.

Scott Pierce:

Thank you, Kara, really excited to be with you today.

Kara Snyder:

It's going to be fun. So let's start at the beginning. Why don't you give us the CliffsNotes version of your educational journey? What brought you to Illinois State University?

Scott Pierce:

Okay, yes, so time has flown by. But I arrived here in 2015, I think, Kara, you were probably one of the first people I met in 2015. So it takes us back a few years, so, as you can probably tell from my accent, I am not from Central Illinois. I'm from New Zealand originally, so I was born and raised in New Zealand, and I won't go too deep into my journey. But I arrived in the US in 2008, and I did all my graduate study in the United States. So I did my master's degree at Miami University, in Ohio in sports psychology. Then I did my PhD at Michigan State University, up in East Lansing, Michigan, and during that time working in the Institute for the study of youth sport while pursuing my PhD. In sports psychology. And then that led me here. I guess it became a tour of the Midwest when I arrived here in 2015, in the cornfields of Illinois. So yep, started here as an assistant professor in 2015, and have been here since, doing my research, teaching community engaged work and programming as well as my work as a certified media performance consultant in the community here, and with partners locally statewide nationally and internationally as well, so really excited to kind of talk through some of that today, and share some of my experiences.

Kara Snyder:

Yeah, it's wild to think it's been almost a whole decade. I'm sure it's gone fast because you've filled it really well. You've been busy.

Scott Pierce:

Has gone fast. But yeah, it's been a fun journey so far.

Kara Snyder:

So tell me what led to your interest in sports, psychology in your area of expertise.

Scott Pierce:

Yeah. So I guess, like a lot of kids anywhere in the world, I grew up loving playing sport. As I mentioned, grew up in New Zealand. So sport big part of New Zealand culture. I played a lot of sports Rugby cricket, golf, basketball. I realized at a relatively young age that I was not going to be a professional athlete in New Zealand. Rugby is really big, the New Zealand all black Rugby team is kind of what a lot of young men aspire to be, or kind of what they want to be. So I realized pretty quickly I wasn't going to be an all black. But what got me really interested is as I was going through my undergraduate degree in physical education, sports, psychology, I became fascinated with the all blacks, the New Zealand Rugby team at the time had a motto, a guiding philosophy that "better people make better all blacks." So what they, really what they were talking about, what they were thinking about is that we can and should be developing good people on the field to be successful as athletes. But to be successful in other areas of their life. So as a fan, as someone interested in the field of sports, psychology, and athlete development, I really just became interested in that idea of how we can achieve, both through sport, how we can use sport as a fun, great developmental experience for young people, focus on performance, have success, but also how we can use it to support the psychological development of people in sport and in life, and how we can really coach and support that. So I guess that's kind of where it started from originally, and then, ever since my experiences again, my training and the work that I have done have really been around that that philosophy or that goal of how we can develop people, and then through sport, and how we can help support coaches and sport programs as a whole, to really support the psychological and life skill development of young people through sport.

Kara Snyder:

And I know that part of your research has included developing online leadership courses for student athletes. What sparked that idea to kind of formalize this training for them?

Scott Pierce:

Yeah, so when I was, this takes me back to my PhD days up at Michigan State. I worked closely with the Michigan High School Athletic Association. So part of my role and responsibility was working with their team as the governing body for High School sport in the State of Michigan. One of the big goals was again create positive high school educational experiences through sport. And they had a real focus on leadership development, how to support the development of leaders through high school sport. So during that time was able to go around the State of Michigan, delivering what we called Captain's Courses at the time. So these were educational programs for student athletes, a one-day course, where we take student athletes through some leadership, content give them some knowledge skills and approaches to be effective leaders on the field and across their lives. So I did that for a number of years, and then, at the conclusion of my PhD, and kind of as I was leaving, we started to work with the National Federation of High Schools. So that's the governing organization for high school sport across the country, and our charge, our goal there was to expand, I guess, our reach, expand who we could get programming to. So we developed online courses--an online course--at the time, sorry that we launched in 2015 as a way to support leadership development for high school student athletes. So that was back in 2015, continued that work along the way. And then, just last year or two years ago, we had the opportunity to revise and update those courses. So we've spent the last few years revising and developing the new program. And we've just launched three courses, three online courses, two for student athletes and one for coaches, really focused on leadership development of young people, and how we can teach them specific knowledge and skills to become leaders in sport and transfer those to other areas of life. So it's kind of a big part of how I got into the leadership focus and really working with those community partners and developing those courses. And we've been fortunate that the programs, I think, have reached over a hundred 1,000 High School student athletes over the last 10 years or so. Now, a big challenge, our big goal and opportunity is to really assess and evaluate the effectiveness. Understand if and how it's working, and under what conditions these programs are working to support the leadership development of the young people going through the programming.

Kara Snyder:

What I love about this is to your point that the percentage of student athletes that go on to become professional athletes is so small. But you're equipping them with these transferable skills that you would expect to take with them into life, no matter what life holds for them. So tell us

about the impact that studying leadership has on these student athletes. What do you expect that these students are walking away with?

Scott Pierce:

Yeah, I think that's a, it's a great point. The sport provides such a great opportunity, and I think a lot of people believe that we can and should be using sport and leveraging sport to help develop young people working with the High School State associations again. Very fortunate, some great people that I've had the chance to work with, and organizations that kind of do believe in that importance. But it's interesting, they have that in the mission statement, they say, "Hey, high school sport is developing leadership, developing life skills for these young people." But it wasn't really until we got into these courses that we had, and were able to develop the specific and explicit programming to really target that and really kind of live that mission out and live the messages out to ensure that kind of at the organizational level. They're putting things in place to really try and achieve those goals. So it's been great to work with again, partners that believe in that. And then taking steps to really drive that home. Because again, for a lot of people again who work in sport, it's easy to fall in the trap of just focusing on performance and just focusing on outcome. But when we can and do focus on the personal development. And these life skills again, just adds that extra element to sport and the extra benefit for the young people. So yeah, to your question. I totally agree that sport can provide these life skills and transferable lessons to be used on and off the court in other areas of life. But we also know that it doesn't happen automatically. So we can't just assume that young people, high school students, going through playing sport or being involved in sport can't just assume that they're going to take these emotion regulation skills, these communication skills and transfer them to other areas of life. So what we've learned through the research and the evidence is that the more explicit, the more deliberate we can be in developing these educational programs. Arming coaches and giving coaches, the material, the knowledge that the skills to have those conversations, the more it's the better it's going to be in them, the more beneficial it's going to be for the young athletes to really increase their awareness and their confidence that they have the skills to use in sport, and that they can be used and transferred to other areas of life. So definitely a fun ride to be on, and again great to partner with organizations and folks that believe in it, and want to take steps to just add some additional education and additional value to the high school sport experience.

Kara Snyder:

Well, and I'm curious. You know, we're kind of in this era where we're seeing, you know, some coaches are encouraging these student athletes to specialize earlier and really narrow down their skill set. And you know they have that focus on performance that you mentioned. So could you talk a little bit about how this programming has been received by the coaches, who only have

you know, so many hours in the day. How do they weigh the importance of leadership, training, versus performance training. And what does that look like? How do you educate them in that regard?

Scott Pierce:

Yeah, that's a great point and a great question. I think it's an interesting one for us to ponder, right? Because we, I guess, if we compare it to say high school teachers, and in the School of Kinesiology and Recreation we have physical education teachers, and they go through 4 years of intensive programming and evaluation to become a certified high school teacher. For a coach at the high school level, they may have to pass a background check. They may have to do a quick online training. They may have to take some a short course to become a certified coach, but the pathway looks a lot different. So oftentimes coaches are, to no fault of their own, just kind of thrown in the deep end, and have to work it out for themselves, have to rely on their own experiences a lot of the time: what they went through as an athlete, or what they've learned as a coach, and as you, as you mentioned, kind of stretched for time, they've got a lot of other responsibilities and other roles, so it's easy to knock coaches and say, "Hey, you could be focusing on this more, or you need to take your focus away from performance and focus on life skills." But oftentimes we don't, we kind of overlook kind of the support that they need. So it's great that we've been able to develop some programming for coaches, and the more we deliver coach education and coach development workshops and sessions, and have those conversations. the more open coaches are to that what I found personally. So I think coaches all for the most part mean well, and they're in it for the right reasons. So the more resources we can provide the better it is for coaches just to have more tools in their tool belt, to go out and work with young athletes, and what we find is when we have these conversations, the leadership, the resilience, the emotion regulation, the effective communication. These are skills that help performance. They don't hurt performance. They help performance, and then they help and can support that personal development. So again, just more resources for coaches to have. And typically, what I've found from my work, and is that the content is well received, and coaches do want this material.

Kara Snyder:

That's a great point. And you know, as I mentioned earlier, I know you've been busy in your decade here at ISU and your current Grant funded project is called Movember. Would you share with us what that is all about?

Scott Pierce:

Yes, yes. So, this is a different project that I've been fortunate to be working on for the past year. So, Movember is an organization, a global organization that's focused on men's health. Have you ever seen in the month of November, when men grow out their mustache. Have you seen that, Kara?

Kara Snyder:

Yes, and then I have to, every time I read the name of your grant, I'm like, "No, this is something else..." I have to shift gears and remind myself.

Scott Pierce:

Yeah, and there have been people who have tried to edit it in the system and say, "No, this should be November". But no, it is Movember, I can attest to that. So Movember is an organization again, it started with in Australia and is grown around the world. Lot of it was kind of an act at the start to grow mustache, for in the month of November, to support men's health. At the time a large focus was on cancer, men's cancer and as evolved to other areas of men's health. And one of their main focus now, and as they've moved into the US. Is, is supporting young men and thinking about how we can use sport and the power of sport, leveraging sport to support the health and wellbeing, mental health and wellbeing of young men. So I've been fortunate to be working with the Movember organization for the past year, the project we're working on, it's a partnership with the Movember organization. Two sport program sites, one in Chicago, one in San Diego, our research team and our programming team. So there's folks here at ISU: myself, Dr. Tony Amrose and one of our graduate students, Jorge Rodriguez, and then a team at the University of Kentucky. So we've been, we've been working with Movember and the program sites to develop sport programming to support the mental health, mental fitness of young men. The emotion, regulation skills, emotional flexibility of young men, and the development of healthy and pluralistic masculinity. So really, just thinking about how we can help young men become the best version of themselves through sport. So the programs we're developing are again with the sites to ensure, they're culturally and contextually relevant and competent for the programs that we're working with, but really using sport using basketball, using soccer and other sports to to help teach knowledge skills and attitudes around mental health, emotional flexibility and healthy masculinities to to help develop these young men. So it's been a really fun project. We're kind of working with different partners in different ways. And we're just diving into kind of the piloting phase. Now to hopefully develop some evidence based culturally and contextually relevant programming that that has an impact and a positive impact on mentors and young men. and the programs we're working with.

Kara Snyder:

Yes, I heard you list your partners for this, and the list is long. So tell us about the importance of collaborations, partnerships. What is it like to work with a group on a project like this?

Scott Pierce:

It is fun. It's a lot of fun. I'll start by saying that I I've been fortunate in a lot of the work that I've done again through the High School sport, for example, working with organizations working with partners in sport. If we're working in sport, doing research and sport, trying to support athletes and coaches. We need to be working with those folks. We need to be helping them answer the questions, the concerns they have help addressing the problems or the challenges that they have. So I think I've been fortunate, and really that kind of one of my guiding philosophies in the work that I do is that it needs to be community engagement. We need to be working *with* rather than *for* community partners. So it's been really important and powerful to just to understand the context, and the Movember organization, the goals of the bigger organization, the needs of the specific sites, and one in Chicago, one in San Diego. What they want to do with sport, how they want to use sport, and also how, as young men in Chicago working with a largely Mexican community in Chicago and then in San Diego, it's an East African community. So really trying to understand how they talk about mental health, how they talk about emotion, regulation, masculinity, and how we can use sport to build up these young men around those areas. So a lot of learning, constant learning, constant asking questions, and really just trying to work out. define what our role is, and bringing some evidence and best practice, but again, learning as much as we can from them, and working together on the project.

Kara Snyder:

Well, that sounds really exciting, and I love hearing about your work, because in all of your work you know both Movember, and your leadership courses, all of your research. The focus on leadership provides these student athletes with the transferable skills. And you know, as we've said, these are going to serve them well, both on and off the court. So can you describe for us? I know you mentioned emotional regulation, motivation, effective communication. I know you mentioned others as well. How are those going to positively impact these individuals? Let's say, if they go to college after high school, you know, once they're in the workforce, what happens when they take those skills with them?

Scott Pierce:

Yeah, so did you play sport growing up? I'll throw it back on you, Kara. Did you play-

Kara Snyder:

Yes, and I would say that was not an area of expertise for me, but I had the Jersey. I was a team member.

Scott Pierce:

That's great. Okay, what do you think you gain from sport? Can you kind of think back and reflect on anything that you think you benefited from or gain from, that's helped you in life?

Kara Snyder:

You know, I would say grit, you know, having to show up and do hard things. And you know, maybe learning that some things aren't always going to come natural. But even if that's the case that they're still worth doing, that's the first thing that comes to mind for me.

Scott Pierce:

Yeah, no. I like that. Now, I asked that question just because I think for so many people, right, we've experienced sport growing up, and we see the value in it. We see the many things that can be developed from it. So again, it provides kind of, put my scientist hat on here, but it provides, like an amazing laboratory or lab for understanding human development and supporting human development and the development of psychological skills and qualities. But also, we can't just assume that it happens so, we can't assume that everything we gain from sport is positive. So again, that's kind of what we've been focusing on, the work that I've been doing is really focused on really trying to understand if how and under what conditions that that works best. And I think what we're learning again, the there's so many things we can get implicitly. So just through being there, being in that team environment being kind of through those tough experiences, learning the grit, learning the resilience, learning how to manage the emotions and work through tough times. So there's lots of things we do pick up along the way. but the more we can be explicit and really deliberate about it, I think that's where we can really expand upon that learning and solidify some of the knowledge and skills. So I think that again, a lot of the work we're doing is it's trying to help the coaches help the athletes, really have the language to be able to talk about transferring the skills, helping to increase awareness and confidence, identify situations where a skill may be learned in sport, and then how, if and how it can be transferred and used in other areas of life, so really bringing that as part of the conversation, and really reinforcing some of the great learning and the things that can be developed through sport. So again, a lot of it does happen kind of naturally, but we can layer onto that and build upon that kind of through those

explicit and deliberate conversations and approaches to help coaches and help athletes really maximize that learning. And at the same time, I think it's important, we do recognize, we do realize that again, not everything that is gained or learned in sport will have a really positive outcome, and others may even create challenges in other areas of life. So some of the work we have done has identified things like an ultra-competitive mindset. Or really, that narrow minded grit, determination, kind of that 'tunnel vision' and working hard, working as hard as you can without giving up that can actually have its potential downsides when you try and transfer it to a maybe a less competitive team environment in the workplace. Or if you think about relationships at home or with loved ones, kind of if we are ultra-competitive or have that really narrow focus, maybe the skills are not as direct or as closely aligned as we think. So kind of just having the awareness of what skills can apply, maybe, how we need to adapt and use different knowledge and different skills and situations. There's different ways. We can maybe and should be thinking about it as well.

Kara Snyder:

That's a great point. Thank you for sharing. And when you think about all of your research findings, all of the work you've done in this space, if you could share one piece of advice, what would it be?

Scott Pierce:

Oh, is this from a from a research perspective, or from a like a sport perspective?

Kara Snyder:

How about both? I'm actually curious for your answer both ways.

Scott Pierce:

Yeah, let me let me start with the sport side of it again. I love sport, performance, outcome always a huge part of it. And I enjoy that. I've always been passionate about that. I think when we're especially working in new sport, we need to again just remember the great potential benefits of focusing on both performance and personal development. And I think one thing that we can do and let me cover both areas. So working in sport as coaches and with organizations as well as researchers. I think we need to really focusing on measuring what matters. So what I mean by that is if we're saying sport builds leadership, it builds life skills, If we're saying, "Hey, it develops good citizens, good people," then we can and we should be doing more to actually

measure and assess that, and not just hoping that it happens. We measure a lot of performance: metrics and sport wins and state championships and shooting percentage. And whatever it is, we have metrics for everything, aside from that personal development. So I think we could probably do more at the organizational level. And as research is to really try and measure and understand these psychological outcomes and the personal development through sport, and then really use that to promote and answer the tough questions. Are we achieving? Kind of, what we're setting out to achieve? So, measuring what matters is probably a big thing that we can do on both sides, right? So, on the programming as well as the research side-- and this probably came out and the examples I shared-- but as a researcher again, working in sport, I think we need to be working with the community, and that could be working with athletes, it could be working with coaches, it could be working with organizations again, just working with them to identify what questions they have, what questions they need answered, how we can help them solve their problems and doing scientific evaluative research to really help them, help them become better at what they're doing and really show our value and show that we're there to help as well.

Kara Snyder:

And when you say 'we're there to help,' my next question, then, is, what's next? What is next for you and your research? What do you think that you will dive into from here?

Scott Pierce:

Yes, I think I love working with the partners that I've worked with so far. And I think again hopefully, some continued work with these partners along the way, and see where it takes us. Same kind of work with a number of our graduate students here, and they all come in with great fresh ideas. So, working, working with them, working with our partners will be the goal, and I think it will be driven by this, this continued philosophy right to develop better people and better athletes at the same time. So, I think that's kind of the goal, continued mission for the research I'm doing, and we're doing and excited kind of in in the School of KNR. We've got some great people doing some good research around sport for development of athletes, development of sport as a whole. So, we're kind of working to try and formalize some structures and kind of have a hub here for sport research in the School of KNR. So hopefully, some exciting things coming down the pipeline there, as well to show the good things we're doing over here.

Kara Snyder:

Well, that's great, and thank you so much for being here, Scott, and I want to congratulate you on your success, and also on wrapping up your year as a cast research fellow. I appreciate you making time to chat with me today.

Scott Pierce:

Awesome. Yeah, it was great to talk through it hopefully, provide some interesting stories and insights great to reflect on that after 10 years in this role.

Kara Snyder:

You got it, you got it. Well, that was Scott Pierce, associate professor in the school of Kinesiology and recreation join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast constituents.