

Talking to Change: An MI Podcast

Glenn Hinds and Sebastian Kaplan



Episode 81: MI for Sport Performance, with Dr. Ben Freakley, CMPC

Sebastian Kaplan:

Hello everyone. Welcome to another episode of Talking to Change, a motivational interviewing podcast. My name is Sebastian Kaplan and I'm based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. And as always, I'm joined by my good friend Glenn Hinds from Dairy, Northern Ireland. Hello, Glenn.

Glenn Hinds:

Hey, Seb. And I think, given that the today's episode is exploring sports and performance, I just put a bit of background sound in there. This is the crowds outside just welcoming this episode. Okay, everybody, thanks very much. Thanks. It's okay.

Sebastian Kaplan:

That's right. Well, certainly, I mean, we just had our conversation with Ben today, and I think it is cheer and applause-worthy for sure. So that's very appropriate to have that on there. Well, before we get talking about the episode, Glenn, why don't you remind people how they can contact us?

Glenn Hinds:

Of course. So on Twitter/X it's @ChangeTalking. Change Talking. For Sebastian, it's SGKfromNC, so SGK from North Carolina, NC. And I'm at @GlennHinds. Instagram is Talking to Change podcast. Facebook is Talking to Change. Questions, ideas, queries, and information on training, it's podcast@glennhinds.com.

Sebastian Kaplan:

All right. Well, yeah, we just spoke with an expert on all things sport and performance psychology. Very interesting conversation with Ben, who's got a great history in terms of collegiate sports coaching and consulting, now in sports, as well as some experience working in the military setting. So he brought a lot of interesting ideas and wisdom. Glenn, what do you think? What kind of stood out for you?

Glenn Hinds:

I think immediately was, we've mentioned this before, I think it's Steve Bell talked about the Tent Pegs of motivation interviewing, and Ben's conversation with us today really highlights just how far MI, which in its early days was seen as an adjunct to medical interventions, as a way of supporting people with drugs and alcohol, has now expanded to the point where he shows just how motivational interviewing has aided and benefited sports teams and athletes in their performance and development.

Sebastian Kaplan:



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Yeah, I agree. There's this thing that we call MI, right, that is recognizable and it's measurable and we can code it, have fancy statistics around it, the reflection to question ratio and the global scores and these kinds of things. But a lot of the wonderful experiences that we hear about, both in doing this podcast, but then in our trainings that we do and just working with other colleagues, are just these moments that might last two or three minutes, and it may not even involve a reflection.

But there are these moments that can happen across a number of different contexts. And Ben referenced that a bit today, talking about the different ways that MI can be helpful in a sporting context. So maybe at halftime of an important game, how approaching an athlete from in a certain way with a particular question in mind could be just a very useful question to ask, as a replacement for maybe a more traditional exchange where a coach might be doing a lot of instruction or telling an athlete what to do.

Yeah, so the Tent Pegs are certainly growing from a contextual standpoint, and also, I think a lot of us are curious about this distilled versions of how MI might sound or feel in a two-minute exchange at halftime of a game. So that was certainly something that stood out to me.

Glenn Hinds:

Along with that was just how Ben personifies the integration of the spirit of motivational interviewing. And he talks an awful lot about, it's not about the relationship just with the team or the players, it's creating a culture within the organization around connection and whole team development.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah. Yeah, I mean, it's sort of this really zoomed in work that he's doing with specific athletes, and then really zoomed out working with whole coaching staffs, and even broader than that, just the sort of managers and leaders. And so, he gets into a lot of that.

Speaking of spirit, another thing that stood out to me, I think is very much aligned with the MI spirit. He had a way of phrasing things, the idea of partnership. He talked about being a guest in another person's world. So in the context of sport, being a guest in the athlete's world, but that concept you could translate or generalize to any number of clients, where you approach the work as being a guest in their world. And I don't know, that's something that really stood out to me as well. Yeah.

Glenn Hinds:

While this is specific to sports and performance, I have no doubt that people who are supporting individuals in any way, there's a lot to get from today in the context of the relationship that Ben describes and how to create that in a way of helping this other person become the best version of themselves, whatever that might be.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Absolutely. Well, we hope you enjoy it.



All right, well, good morning Ben. Welcome to the podcast. We're real excited to talk to you today. As always, we like to just invite our guests to introduce themselves. Tell us a little bit about what you do and how you got into motivational interviewing.

Ben Freakley:

Thanks Sebastian, and thank you Glenn as well for having me on. As I was saying, as we were prepping for this, it's just great to be part of the MI community.

My name's Ben Freakley. This is coming up on 25 years of being in sports and teams for me in different capacities. I spent about 14 years as a college soccer coach here in the United States, and now, knowing what I know about MI, I wish I had a complete redo, and I think that would have really changed the way that I could have been the coach I wanted to be for my players.

For the last decade, I've been full-time in sport and performance psychology, doing a master's degree in sport and performance psych, ultimately a doctoral degree in sport and performance psych with an emphasis health counseling.

And my MI journey, or aha moment, started in 2014 when I was working with the United States Special Operations Forces, specifically the Army Rangers. And I had attended an online training that really was not that interesting to me until they switched gears and said, "Now we're going to talk about motivational interviewing." I'd never heard that term before. And about 10 minutes in my hand started cramping up because I was furiously taking notes about all of these things that just seemed to smack me right in the middle of my head, and I just said, where has this been all my life?

And then it got really real when, not too long later, an Army Ranger came into my office and had experienced a work setback, a failure, and in my mind I'm thinking, well, how can I help this person in front of me right here? And I said, oh, well, I've been learning about asking all these open-ended questions, maybe I should try one of those out.

And that led to a couple weeks of exploring some values, getting into what the ways ahead meant. But it was very difficult for me because that was a very new way. Everything up to that point, I was looking at somebody in front of me thinking, I need to solve this and make all this go away for them. Letting go of that, even to this day, is something that is really tough. But that was kind of the intro to me.

And I think for the last 10 years since then, I've really been on the journey to try and, as I tell athletes all the time, it's not a skill unless it holds up under pressure. And I think this way of being with people, the skills and the spirit of MI, are very much the same.

Glenn Hinds:

So quite a pivot for you from what you're saying, that you were successful as a coach, and you were introduced to motivational interviewing, and you heard something in that presentation that, as you say, hit you in the front of your mind. I'm just wondering, what was it you heard that made you pivot so much that made you go, I wish I knew this before, that you weren't doing?

Ben Freakley:



Glenn, I think autonomy is probably the first thing that I would think about there. I think in school, when you learn, and self-determination theory is very MI-related. But hearing it and reading about it as a theory was one thing, but thinking about the role that autonomy played in somebody coming up for their own reasons for change, or just thinking about the righting reflex, for example, and the role that that can play in actually impeding people making progress in their own lives. I think though, the autonomous nature of letting people discover for themselves in this guiding style was just so interesting to me, and then I got really, really hungry for it.

Sebastian Kaplan:

It's interesting that you're referencing autonomy as a thing that stands out. So 2014, if I was doing kind of a rough math with your career as you just shared it, you perhaps had finished your coaching career at that point. So if we think about sports coaching, maybe collegiate coaching in particular, and then your work with the Army Rangers, another industry where there's top down, there's authority, that you follow orders, right? So both of those environments or contexts seem ones where supporting someone's autonomy would not be encouraged. Perhaps it would be discouraged. It's like, I'm the coach, you do what I say, or I'm the sort of leader hierarchically in the Army setting. So how did you see autonomy fitting so clearly in those contexts that you were in or had been in?

Ben Freakley:

Well, the one example about that soldier, that ranger that was sitting in my office, this was something that these goals that we were discussing were very personal to him. And so, I saw in that moment how powerful it would be for him to just talk about what he wanted his life to look like professionally. And I also realized a little bit of what you're talking about there, Sebastian, that was a big difference here in those contexts, in those environments.

And I will say, yes, mostly it can be like that, but there's always outliers. Certainly I had been a lot of that in my style as a coach, that very directive style that you just referenced. But when I was learning more about MI, it made me think, I think I could do this as a coach, and I think it would be authentic to me.

I think what I've found about coaching or leadership is that a lot of times, the style and way we are with people is really just adopted from the way people were with us. So I know me personally in my life, I'd never really had somebody come along beside me in that guiding style, allow me to engage in that conversation about change, have somebody reflect back to me in a meaningful way that suggested this person is really listening to me. I think if I'd had that really modeled to me explicitly, repetitively in my life, I would have come across this earlier. But I think it's one of those things for coaches and leaders, a lot of the style is adopted from the people that led them. So if there hasn't been a lot of exposure to this, it would take some real searching and hunger to learn different ways, and that was this for me.

Glenn Hinds:

So really quite significant, the sense of someone coming alongside of you, listening to you and the sense of value that gave to yourself. And it sounds like that, having been



given that sense of value, that that in itself enhanced your, almost like your own perception of the world and your place in it and your opportunities to interact with the world in a slightly different way.

And it sounds like that's what you're endeavoring to do then, modeling that in your conversations, even in a hierarchical organization, where this Army Ranger wanted to be an Army Ranger, wanted to achieve certain things within his life, and including his outcomes as a soldier, and what you were exploring with him is what can you do about that for yourself? And that in itself is the shift, is the pivot, where, yes, you're working towards perhaps a shared organizational goal with the individual, but rather than you giving it from the top down, you're saying, "Let's work on this together."

Ben Freakley:

That's exactly it, Glenn. And let me be more specific, and this is why I loved the episode, I listened to both of you, where acceptance and commitment therapy was brought in an MI perspective, because in that day when I saw this person sitting across from me, I said... And it was a closed-ended question, but it led to the next one. I said, "This moment, does this define you?" And he leaned forward, I thought he was going to punch me in the face, that I even suggested it. And he said, "No."

And I paused, mostly thankful that he didn't punch me in the face, and then I said, "Well, what does?" Trying to get at a values question, and this is why I love the connection between motivational interviewing and acceptance and commitment therapy, specifically speaking to one's values. And that question alone kept us together for another 45 minutes that day, and then coming back and then coming back and coming back several times.

The other thing, just to go back quickly, in those environments, in the sport environment, in the tactical environment, there's some times where motivational interviewing would not work. On the battlefield, maybe minutes before starting game time. I want to be clear for maybe other coaches or people that might be listening to this, that's another, to me, benefit of using this guiding style, is there's no rules saying that you can't occasionally flex into a directive style. But where I've come to appreciate MI so much is just acknowledging the pros and cons of staying in a directive style or staying fully in a following style, and why a guiding style and keeping that as kind of the North Star can help leaders, coaches and any professionals decide when, let me just step back here for a moment and really promote this person in front of me as they're working out for themselves who they want to be in this world and what it's going to take to get there.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah, it's, I think, always a helpful reminder about those who do motivational interviewing or the different contexts where you might apply MI, is that you're not going to use reflective listening in every situation, no matter what. And you're talking about a specific context there with sport or perhaps even in battle, that it may be that that might be a time for whoever the leader is to give some clear orders and directives about how you do this or do that.

And even though that might be a departure from MI in some kind of technically defined way, it's certainly something that, I know Steve Rolnick talks about this a lot, about



those three styles that you just referenced, following, guiding and directing. And it's not about rigidly following one, it's about flexibly shifting between them. If you're doing MI, more often than not, you're in the guiding style, but you also need to recognize when some of the other styles are needed. So it's wonderful. It's a great reminder for us.

And so, maybe moving into the focus of our discussion today in the sporting context, maybe you could give us a sense of what the work is that you're doing now in sporting context and how MI fits in with that.

Ben Freakley:

Sure. Well, I love, Sebastian, that you just mentioned Steve Rolnick because, so my first full-time job in professional sports after I had left the Army Rangers was with the Toronto Blue Jays. And so, I spent five years working in Major League baseball in some different roles there, all in mental skills, mental performance.

I think it was 2018 or 2019, I reached out to Steve, and for all of us that know him, this will come as no surprise. He was just so gracious with his time. And I remember he and I jumped on a Zoom call together and I was just like, well, it just makes sense that this is one of the guys that founded motivational interviewing, because just, he was that the spirit and the skills all wrapped into one, even in that professional call.

So I invited him, maybe a couple of weeks later, to speak to our whole team of mental skills coaches. I think there were five or six of us on the call. And one of the biggest things that stuck out to me that I constantly remind myself of in doing this work is that without the spirit of motivational interviewing, without partnership and acceptance and compassion and empathy, these skills are nothing more than a parlor trick.

And that's something that I wasn't even thinking about in 2014 when I first learned about MI. I was really focused on the skills, and I was also very rigid. You've probably seen one of Steve's slides where it's not open-ended question, affirm, reflect, summarize, and I was working that way. I'd say, okay, I did an open-ended question. Let me find a strength to affirm in this person or an emotion that I can validate for them. And then it was years later when I saw, no, it can be open-ended question and then reflect, and reflect some more, and reflect some more and summarize. And that was just so helpful to me, letting go of that rigidity.

Currently, I'm working mostly in pro soccer, and I've just been really focused on MI and ACT work with athletes and coaches. One of the things I really love about the work that I get to do is, it's not just with the athletes. And one of the things that I believe is that coaches are already the sports psychologist and social worker for the teams that they lead, and I want to make them a great one. That's kind of my philosophy on this, because I love the Jackie Robinson quote, "A life is not important except for the impact that it has on other lives." And I think coaches have such a significant impact on the lives of the people that they coach. And if I can maybe drip in some MI skills occasionally, some of the spirit of MI, talk to coaches about a different way of being with players, especially in the practice and the training environment.

We already mentioned earlier that in game time, it kind of needs to be directive. Players want some tactical information that can help them perform their role well under pressure. Who wouldn't? But I see so much value in those days between games, in a



training environment, where there's a significant difference in the level of pressure that a player is feeling on a Tuesday morning at 10:00 AM as opposed to a Saturday night at 7:00 PM, and to be able to go up to that player and just say any of the things that we might think of in that moment. "Saturday night, you really seemed to be playing at a different level." And pause. Let the player reflect on that, and then maybe just say, "What changed? What really influenced you going into the game?" And let the players speak to that. Or even just ask, off that game, "What do you think is important for this week? What do you need to do to be at your best six days from now? What do you need?" And I think without some practice in this and without some training in this, it's a little bit harder to get there.

But the other thing I want to acknowledge from time to time is, I love the strengths-based approach. One of the traps of MI is that deficit detective. So I think anytime I see a coach using anything that could fall under the skills or the spirit of MI, I want to go to them, I want to acknowledge that, I want to call that out and really affirm the power that has when they're working with athletes.

And then, just quickly, when I'm working with the players, recently there was one in particular that had some anxiousness around performing, and I just said, "What would the world miss if the real you didn't show up tonight?" And he immediately, "Creativity." And I said "Creativity?" I said, "Can you say more about that?" "Oh, when I get the ball, I'm going to be on the front foot. I'm going to be running right at defenders. I'm going to be looking to get into the box. I'm going to be looking to get into scoring positions." And then I just reflected all that back to them. Running at defenders, getting into the box, creativity. And then it was all, "Yeah, yeah!"

I mean, this is a three-minute exchange. This is one of the things I love about the applied work. We don't have to be sitting in an office for 45 minutes. These are things that can be regularly dosed with some intentionality. And those are just some examples of where I'm spending most of my attention and efforts.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah, I'm struck by the fact that when you talk about the three styles, when used, the goal is to be helpful. And like you say, when the soccer player is running down the wing, you're not shouting, "On a scale of one to ten, how important is it for you?" You're saying, "Throw the ball into the middle," and their expectation is that that's what they're going to receive of you.

But also, beautifully what you described there was those post- and pre-match conversations that, again, taps into the genius, the values and the purpose of the individual themselves, and you're drawing it out of them and bringing it to their own attention, and then exploring with them what work they need to do to achieve that for themselves and for the team on the way forward. And you're identifying the significance of the anchor of the spirit of the approach, that the tools themselves come to life in the presence of this mindset, or as Steve Rolnick calls it, the heartset of the practitioner.

And I guess for people who are listening who are learners or enthusiasts, curious about this, I'm just wondering, what was it that helped you achieve and become more attuned to the spirit of MI? What, if anything, that helped you with that for yourself, Ben?



Ben Freakley:

Steve talks about this. It's the metaphor of being a warm fire. And when I do my own mental preparation to go in and do the work or start a session with any client, I really do close my eyes and envision, it's dusk, and maybe you're tired, maybe it's a little bit cold outside and you see this fire, you come upon it. And this fire provides warmth and it is inviting and it sheds light in the darkness.

And to this day, I've found nothing more compelling in my own life than just to get into the right heartset and mindset before I do the work, than to envision being that fire for somebody else. A fire is approachable. Some of the best conversations that I know I've had, the ones, that being out camping or being around with friends are around a fire, and people are not in a rush to leave. And when things get going really good, people are saying, "Well, throw another log on the fire." Well, that's another open-ended question right there, is throwing another log on the fire. That means we're going to be here a little bit longer.

And that's, to me, the best metaphor for what the spirit of motivational interviewing is. The partnership is, we can be around this fire together. The acceptance, the compassion, the empathy, all of those things to me really hit it with that metaphor that Steve gifted us with. And I know it helps me do my best work, because I'm very much, the old school coach in me wants to be solution focused. Let's get right to it. And this helps me kind of sit on my hands, so to speak, and pause more and reflect a lot more, and really just let that person know, hey, we're in no rush here. Let's be in this together.

Sebastian Kaplan:

And I keep thinking about the kinds of people that are involved in sports, and some of the cliches, and still some genuine or legitimately accurate truths about the sporting context, where creative metaphors about warm fires might not hit with all the leaders and coaches out there that are about winning games and pressure, and you have to be mentally tougher and all that kind of stuff. And I guess, I'd love to hear some of your experience around, not really selling the way you do your work, but grabbing people's interest or hooking them in some way, in a helpful way that opens somebody's eyes to a different way of interacting and communicating that otherwise may not have been there, or may not have been modeled to them before, as you mentioned earlier.

Ben Freakley:

Well, I've been extremely lucky. The last few environments that I've been in were and are very progressive. The Blue Jays, for example, with a president like Mark Shapiro, big believer in mental skills. My first year with the Blue Jays, we'd had a relatively new director of high performance Angus Mugford, who's with the New Jersey Red Devils now. I was kind of brought in under that wave that our competitive advantage is going to be development. That's what our competitive advantage is going to be.

And even taking an approach that even at a major league level where players might be finished products, that even there, there might be opportunities to continue to find that 1% or 5% advantage to get better, whether that was a physical advantage, a technical advantage, a leadership advantage, a nutritional advantage, a mindset advantage. If



there were a possibility to explore that, let's explore that. Let's not look for good enough, let's look for the best.

And I've also found in the professional soccer environments that I currently work, the coaches have been so open. They, like the players, they want to get better. And that, Glenn, to your reference of the scaling questions earlier, that those have afforded me occasionally, when the time seems right, I'll ask there for their permission for 10 minutes during a staff meeting, and I might ask a question on a scale of one to 10, how well do we feel like we're connecting with the players in this moment? I don't think I would do that without the sense of relatedness that they have given me. I credit to them, I very much felt like a part of the staff, even though I'm in a consulting role.

And the other thing, Glenn and Sebastian, that I really am mindful of is, when I go in, I really try and just sit back, really observe, really listen, and try and pick my spots. Almost from a systems level, trying to model some MI spirit and skills. Not going in with a lot of ideas, not going in with a lot of content, but really, really picking my spots.

I'll observe a coach, and he may do a video session for the whole team, and then I might just afterwards go and affirm so many strengths that he may or may not be aware of in the way that he presented that information to players. Same with a coach who might be working with an athlete during a rehab journey, maybe one of the toughest things that athletes go through, from an injury perspective, identity perspective, there are so many emotional, physical, social elements to a player who's not able to compete due to injury. I might go to some of the fitness coaches working with that player and just maybe suggest some of the questions that that coach might want to ask to the player to get a sense of where they are mentally during this process, emotionally during this process, or maybe even suggest to them how they might affirm some of the emotions that that athlete might be experiencing, and what that could do for the relationship and connectivity in the two of them.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah. So curiosity really finds how you're approaching this, is that before you give anything, you're asking, and you're bringing very clearly a drive for engagement and collaboration. And from what you're describing, that takes trust on your part and acceptance, that while you may be the head of the department, there's a lot of wisdom in this room as well, and that we are working as a collective. And it's almost like you're modeling good teamwork in the background team. That translates then into the relationship that the players have on the pitch, that the whole organization is working with each other, working each other's strengths, and that you're looking to build on what's there, rather than replacing what's absent.

And I'm just wondering, what then, having done this, what are you noticing that's different? Because you said at the beginning, if I'd known this then, I would have done it earlier. What is it you've noticed differently, then, about the consequences of you making this change in your coaching and leadership roles and the way the people around you perform and behave?

Ben Freakley:



That's a great question. More patience in my own life. A lot more, to maybe use some more ACT language, a lot more letting go. A whole lot more, and you touched on this, Glenn, a whole lot more putting on my Strengths Finder glasses. I mean, so much of my early journey, I was that deficit detective as a coach. "This is wrong. That has to be better. This hasn't been fast enough." This is so much more going in and using that strengths-based approach, reminding myself, I'm a guest in their world, and even if I had met with this coach or player 24 hours ago or 48 hours ago, a lot could have changed in their life during that time.

A lot more silence, which has maybe been one of the hardest things, especially as you addressed, Glenn, when there is some experience there, when there has been some reps, and when I might notice an opportunity to get in and suggest or direct, I still really pause and ask myself, would this be helpful? What is my intent? Is this the right time to do this? And you touched on it beautifully.

I've found that more of those behaviors that I'm still always working on have been very helpful in building trust, which in pro sports, not impossible by any means, but due to so many factors that we could dig into on a whole nother podcast, it's tough. But I really do have no agenda other than to really, and I've reminded myself and others that while I would love to see us win every time that we go out there, it would make me so happy, for them, for everybody, the overall wellbeing of the people in this club is what's most important to me.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Hearing you talk about your experiences in sport a couple decades ago and to now, you're sort of highlighting perhaps a real shift that others have experienced more broadly in other sports and other parts of the world, where there seems to be more awareness and more interest in things that might feel more kind of fundamental and more basic, not necessarily easy, but more basic, like building trust, the relationship, using silence, things like that. Which, and alongside of that, within sports, things seem to be increasingly more complicated with all the sports science and the nutritional habits and analytics and all the different ways that sports are getting more and more complicated. It just struck me as you just described your own career in sports, how some things people are connecting with things that are kind of basic, while also getting really complicated.

Ben Freakley:

Well, I think that that touches on, again, to reference the self-determination theory, we all have that deep, deep psychological and emotional need to belong. And even though we can have the best systems in place, the best resources, the best equipment that money can buy, at the end of the day, having that ability to show up at work, really feeling like the full Sebastian is showing up, the full Glenn is showing up.

I mean, Owen Eastwood talks about that in his book, *Belonging*. And I think the best coaches, and I love the Netflix, the *Playbook*, I think, that explores five different professional coaches, that talks about their philosophy, how those philosophies were developed. You are right, Sebastian. There's just going to continue to be more and



more and more. It is a race to find a 1% advantage anywhere, anywhere in professional sports.

And that's what I think I love so much about an MI approach is, it's free. It's very costly in terms of the investment that it would really take to go deep. But these skills and the spirit of it, I think are things that some coaches and staff members may be doing anyway. And so, when we can intentionally shed more light on that, or as Glenn talked about earlier, even if all of these resources are in place, can using an MI approach help with the collaborative process, how we bring an intervention in front of an athlete. Or even when we do have the data to back something up, being able to, if an MI person is in the room, they're going to be really curious about the best way to get an athlete to care about this tactical information or a change that we might like this athlete to make.

Or if some of their behaviors are more antisocial, instead of going in with that old school, let's bench the player, fine the player, some of the more understandable consequences that are also important in a team environment. How would using MI change the way that conversation goes down, where we might help player understand for themselves why being more pro-social in some of their behaviors would have a benefit for them and team?

So these are just always things that I'm thinking about, or when a player is transitioning in, even from another country, how using motivational interviewing early on can help us achieve at least two goals. One, make the player feel, wow, I've never felt this level of support before. And also, learn things that a scouting report on a player would never give us.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah, so measuring success has been expanded. It's not just about how many trophies we win. It's about creating an environment where, it's almost like you're creating a legacy where individuals having spent time with your team reflect and consider having that time in their life to have been a benefit to them and as a success in itself. And if we win cups as well, that's fantastic, but it's also recognizing the question that every human being is asking, is what's in it for me? And taking that into account.

And when there are difficult questions or difficult topics to be explored, you're approaching it from, well, this is really important for us, the Blue Jays. We need this to happen. You're approaching from, let's help explore why doing it this way will have actual benefits for you too, so that there's a buy-in to the whole process that that's not just soft and easy. There's challenging conversations going to be had here, but from an understanding of the individual and human nature in itself. And it sounds like that in itself is bringing about changes across the organization that you're working for.

I'm just wondering, how do you deal with those pressures that, I guess, that the chairman wants results, that the fans want results, and there is certain time pressures. How do you marry those external pressures with that idea that we're going to sit down around a campfire and we're going to just take this nice and easy?

Ben Freakley:



Yeah. Oh, man, you just hit on it right there. Well, I want to go back for a second before I answer that one, Glenn. You touched on it that for me, this is in addition to trophies and championships. Because I want that too. I want that. That's one of the things I love about working in pro sports. Which is why I frequently ask the question, beyond winning, what is success? Do we have a definition of success beyond a trophy every year or beyond winning every year? And that's where the coaches that I'm currently working with, so many of them will immediately talk about the social nature that sport can be so beautiful about. The connections, the relationships. Those are the questions that I love getting at, is what are we doing here beyond, if we haven't gotten three points on a Saturday night, has it been a complete waste?

And then, back to your question, well, how do we balance when there is the expectation to win, and let's go after a trophy, and we have got to be successful right now. We're never going to get around that, in my opinion. That's where acceptance, and again, why I love the relationship and the way that an ACT and an MI framework can really work together.

One of the things I learned working with the Army Rangers, the first stanza of their creed is recognizing that I volunteered as a ranger fully knowing the hazards of my chosen profession. The hazards of your chosen profession as a professional athlete is that people are going to expect you to perform on a consistent basis, week in and week out. That expectation is never going to go away. The coach is going to want it, the president's going to want it, the general manager, the fans are going to expect it. Your teammates are going to want to expect that of you as well. So that's step one. We've got to learn that to accept the pressures and the expectation of working at this level.

Now, once we've done that, then we get back into the situational component of when MI might really make sense. And to me, that's fully in between the games. And maybe even maybe small moments at halftime where a question, or where using the athlete's own words back to them at halftime can have a way of helping them self-regulate their attention. When I was with the Blue Jays, that was our, and it still is a personal philosophy from a mental skills perspective, that elite athletes can self-regulate their attention and their emotion under pressure.

And so, you're touching on that, Glenn, that the pressure's never going to go away. But what do I do when my mind is focusing on what happens if I don't perform? What happens if I don't meet these expectations? And that's where MI and getting back to, "Well, tell me about your goals for tonight. What's one thing that maybe in the first 45 minutes, you think you could do well?" And that's where, when I get into the focusing aspect of doing the MI work, when it feels right to make that transition, those types of questions around task orientation, what can you do? What would you like to do? There's a lot of stability in that, because the outcomes are just, there's no control. The opponent is always going to have a say, and there's always going to be external factors.

So getting back to those open-ended questions that help get a little bit more role-specific, especially as we get closer to the game, maybe helping an athlete come up with one or two process goals for themselves. I've tried to help, especially during the game, for athletes to be a lot more intentional about, I've told them not all stoppages in a soccer game, or Glenn, in a football game, not all stoppages are created equal. There could be a two-minute stoppage, there could be a four-minute stoppage. And can we



use those times to come back to the promises that we made to ourselves or some of the intentions that we set before the game had even started? Those can be some built in check-ins to center ourselves.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Love how you're describing these opportunities that will last minutes, if that, and how some of the MI terms that many people are familiar with, things like focusing, as you said. Evocation is another one. Just the idea of well, and also just traditionally there being a real opportunity to tell, tell, tell. Tell the athlete what they did wrong, or tell the athlete what they should do differently, or remind the athlete what they said last week, or whatever it might have been. You're inviting people to consider the power of drawing that out from them, and with an open-ended question with a question that.

And you're kind of adding another piece to it, which I don't know that we talk very much in the MI world about, which is self-regulation, and in particular kind of shining a light, maybe, on the task at hand. That they might be thinking about a bad call or a teammate who didn't see them in the right moment and didn't give them the ball, or fans that are ridiculing them, or maybe something that they're worried about because their kid is sick at home, or whatever it might be. The reality is, they signed up for this and they have a job to do, and the second half is coming, and hey man, you're down one-nil and it's time to get after it here. And so, there's so much that you could overwhelm an athlete with, and just a couple of these, again, simple but not easy questions that kind of draw some of this out.

And as much as I'd love to hear you talk more about that, I'm kind of interested in those, or very interested in the days in between competition, and in particular, all the information that we have now, not just the traditional film review, but the analytics, all this sort of stuff. And I'm just wondering how you've found MI being helpful. You alluded to it briefly, but how you found MI to be helpful in having conversations where information is now present. And of course, this is something in the sports context for you, but in healthcare and mental health and so many fields, there's data to be shared. And so, it could be helpful to hear your experience, how MI facilitates those conversations better.

Ben Freakley:

Yeah, well, one example that comes to mind might be a fitness plan for an athlete. We can have the age of the player, we can have all of the testing and data on where this player is from a physiological perspective, injury history, all those things. And then I'm going to be really curious about what percentage of this plan that we're coming up with, has the athlete had an opportunity to weigh in on?

And those can be, Glenn touched on this, those could be, they're not... They could or couldn't be maybe tougher conversations, because I fully appreciate how the medical experts in a high performance, in a pro sports environment would say, "Based on everything we know about the player, this is the plan that they need." And that's no different, Sebastian, than, "Based on everything that I know about smoking, this is what you need to do," right?



There's no difference there. The difference when we add MI is that we're going to invite the player in on that conversation. "We'd like to propose to you a four-week plan to building you back to 100%. Before we do that..." And then we can come up with 10 questions that we might want to ask the player. "Is there anything else you want us to know that's going on in your life? What have you done here so far, from a training perspective, that you really feel is helping you as a performer?"

And that does so many things. One, it signals they're validating that I'm the expert on my own life and you are a guest in my world. And then two, I love, we talked about this a lot at the Blue Jays, that people are a lot more likely to commit to what they help create. I believe that. I think that is the power of MI, that if you want me to buy into this two-week, four-week, six-week, whatever it is, program, but you're not going to give me any autonomy over the program? And I've been a soccer player for five or 10 years?

So that's just a challenge for me. I mean, I look at, I don't think it's on Netflix anymore, but Ryan Giggs who was just a legend at Manchester United. If you watch this documentary, everything that he's doing from a routine perspective was almost 100% different than what he was doing as a young pro at 17 or 20. And you listen to his language. "I discovered... I found... I had to change..." And I imagine the way there were really good medical experts suggesting that at 35 you need something different at 25. But I just think that those documentaries and in that Giggs example, highlights, he was looking for what he needed.

So when the information is there, we have got to consider that the athlete is going to have their own ideas and opinions. Now, Glenn touched earlier, if there's strong trust between these departments, those conversations go much smoother and they're easier. But it just gets back to how we could help the providers. And I'll use a video example, as well. When a coach is breaking down video with a player, that's where I'd be really curious, what do we want to ask the player? Are we there just to use the video as evaluation of performance? This is right, this is wrong, this is good, this is bad. Or are we there for developmental purposes? Can we tie video moments to personal goals of the player? Do we know those personal goals of the player? So that's where I think we could use, especially the skills of MI, to help go deeper in some of these video moments or rehabilitation moments for the best possible outcomes.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah, so again, it's the difference between being a teacher and being there helping someone to learn. That the power differential there is that you're evoking, you're inviting information before you give information. And from what you were saying there about that relationship, particularly with maybe more senior players on a soccer, football team, is that what you're endeavoring to do is to avoid losing the dressing room. And we've seen it across many sports, where those in charge who've lost the dressing room. The players go out and do their own thing anyway, so they will assert their own autonomy. And even if it does mean a loss in the team, they're sending a message, that the team performance is a message, and is anyone listening?

And it sounds like what we're recognizing is that there's, certainly at the moment, there's a change in organizational structures, certainly evidenced in the UK around soccer and football. I'm a Manchester United fan. In the '90s, Sir Alex Ferguson ran the show from



top to bottom, and he created this legacy for himself. Now in Manchester United, more recently under INEOS, are changing the whole departments. Brought on Dave Brailsford, who when you were talking about those small one-percentages, he talks about these marginal gains. If Erik ten Hag is still here at the end of the summer, he will be a coach in an interconnected organization.

And it sounds like what you're describing is that each one of those departments has now a much more specific role in the big picture, but it's how do they communicate with each other, as well as communicate with the staff? And what you're describing is that invitation for them to be curious and to work with the individuals towards this greater goal that they themselves want. They all want medals. They all want trophies. They all want big wages, and they all want fame and fortune. And you're exploring, how can we achieve that while keeping you well, emotionally, psychologically, physically? Because your career's going to come to an end and we want you to have a life after that as well.

So again, it's building on all that you've been talking about. If there was anything in particular you would say to our audience tonight, if they were beginners, where would you invite them to look towards or to consider for themselves in relation to themselves as coaches? So for example, if there's people here who are interested in MI coaching as sports coaches, more than anything would you say, look, maybe consider thinking about this in a way that you found was a useful takeoff point for you?

Ben Freakley:

Yep, great question. So one, constantly reminding ourselves that we're a guest in this person's world. That just promotes trust and respect. Now, Glenn, Sebastian, you're working with me as athletes. I'm working with you. Always presenting this idea that you are the expert on your own life. I'm here to follow. I'm here to follow. Maybe guide, but I'm here to follow. So we're a guest in their world too.

We get better at what we practice. So this is a great time for self-awareness, asking myself, how good am I at asking open-ended questions? How good am I? And I think that that's what I'm constantly striving personally, still 10 years in, thinking. I'll ask the question and think to myself, there were five better ways to ask that right there. So second point is, be on the mastery journey for asking really good questions.

And how do you know if you're doing that? Because the person you ask it to will say, "No one's ever asked me that before." Or they'll say, "I've never thought of that," or, "That's a great question." Or they'll just sit there and they'll be thinking for a long time before they answer. And that signals you're on the right track.

I think third, what I would want to tell to beginners in this is, if there's a way to role play the spirit and the skills with others. That's why probably MI training is so wonderful, is it's being able to practice. Because I think inherently when we present these things, people would say, "Oh, I do that. Oh, yeah, I ask open-ended questions all the time. And oh, reflect. I reflect, yes. Summarizing, I can do these things." But when you put people in a training environment and pause after a five or a 10-minute simulation and ask, "How did that go?" You'll get some honest reflections about, "Oh, that sucked. That was terrible."



So I think, how can we get better at asking open-ended questions, and then finally, when we do it, can we also be channeling the spirit of MI that it's done in a way that doesn't seem like an interrogation, but a true spirit to just want to help somebody, and acknowledging that they already have everything that they need, the resources, the strengths, the ability to make a change, and maybe in this work together, we're going to draw that out in a meaningful way.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Well, that was a wonderful invitation, Glenn, and some wonderful nuggets there from you, Ben, about even that idea of we're a guest in their world. Just thinking of all the ways that that might apply, and with the kinds of context or clients, it would probably feel so shocking to them to be approached in that way from a professional. If a coach approached a rookie draft pick from that standpoint of I'm a guest in your world, or I'm about to go work with a group of teenagers in our hospital in a couple hours. If I approach them as they're literally locked on this unit for really difficult circumstances for many of them, if I approach them from that standpoint of I'm a guest in your world, it would be quite moving for them, having quite an impact on them. So that's a wonderful reminder for us.

Ben, as we often do, as we approach the end of our conversation, we'd just like to hear what's going on in your world? What's catching your attention lately? Could be work related, could be personal. Just wondering what's going on for you.

Ben Freakley:

Big day today. My oldest son turns 16, so that will be the full focus for the rest of the day, is hanging out. We're going to take he and his friends to an amusement park, go and do that. That's reminding me that I'm getting up there in age. But we are going to have a great time doing that today.

I'm just thinking about how we can, me specifically, help coaches with where MI would fit in their style of coaching, their way of being with athletes. I'm going to be working with a group of about 50 coaches this weekend, going to be speaking about how to have life- and game-changing conversations using motivational interviewing. And that'll be about the fourth or fifth time that I've spoken on that topic this year, and I hope to have the opportunity to speak about it a lot more.

I love working with athletes. I love it. I think having been a coach for so long, Sebastian and Glenn, I'm often curious what it would have been like if somebody skilled in MI was a mentor or a resource that I could have, that could watch me coach, that could watch me engage a team and players and give me feedback just on the style and the way that I presented information and communicated in a group or an individual setting. I know that would have added a lot of value to my life.

And one of the things I'm very grateful right now is, I've got a small group of head coaches that I'm able to do that type of work with, that are really into it. And I'm very optimistic that the landscape of coaching, and I'm not going to knock down directive styles at all. Again, I referenced that at the beginning, that there's a time and a place to really step in and be the expert, and coaches working at high levels are not there by accident. Their experience, their knowledge, it matters.



I'm optimistic that with some little tweaks, just little tweaks, that's going to evolve the coaching landscape to where, even if it's not called MI, I think some of the things that MI practitioners would say is MI might show up as evidence in a team environment. And I know you'd love to see that in medicine. Glenn, I know you'd love to see that in the environments that we talked about earlier that you're currently working in. And I'm very optimistic that that's going to happen in sport, and I'm personally taking responsibility that when I have an opportunity to work with a team, that MI is going to be part of the way that I approach that work.

Glenn Hinds:

So I just want to start by congratulating and wishing your son a very happy birthday, and I imagined you sitting in the front of a rollercoaster, realizing that you're not as young as you used to be, thinking, what am I doing here?

Ben Freakley:

That will be us. That will be us.

Glenn Hinds:

Fantastic. Sounds brilliant. And as we're finishing, what, again, just comes across from what you're saying is just the importance for you of that partnership relationship, both in your coaching role and your performance support role, that you are being supported to support other people. That there's no one in the network that is left with only one hand being held. There's always, you're holding one hand to support, but your other hand's being held to support you. So there's a connection, there's a collaboration, there's a partnership, and in big terms, there's much more of a team.

And I love that word that you use. In many ways, it's recognizing that MI is literally and metaphorically game-changing, and I think that's going to be probably the most profound takeaway for me, is that just in sports performance, but also in life, how game-changing motivational interviewing has been for you, and how game-changing has been for the people you supported, and potentially for other people in their efforts to be helpful to other people.

Again, no doubt there will be other people who will now want to reach out to you, Ben. If that is okay, how can they do that and what would be the best ways of reaching out to you?

Ben Freakley:

So a couple ways. They can find me on LinkedIn, and there's also my website, RSRcoaching.com. RSR stands for Ready, Set, Resilient. And then, third would be through email. My email is BenCFreakly@gmail.com. If they leave out the C, they'll email my dad, which they probably would like that even more, because he is a retired three-star general, and if somebody wants to talk military, just leave out the middle initial C and they'll get my father.

Glenn Hinds:



We really appreciate that. And again, just a reminder of ways people can contact us. It's on Twitter, it's @ChangeTalking. For Sebastian, it's @SGKfromNC. And for me it's @GlennHinds. Instagram is Talking to Change podcast. Facebook is Talking to Change, and email for questions or ideas or information on training, it's podcast@GlenHinds.com.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Awesome. Well, Ben, thanks so much for joining us. This was really great. We appreciate it.

Ben Freakley:

Guys, as I said, man, to be in the MI community, it's a real privilege to be on with you. Thank you for having me.

Glenn Hinds:

Thank you.

