



Fine-tuning Visual Performance In Elite Athletes

Interview with Senior Lecturer Dr Zöe Wimshurst

Zöe has taught at AECC University College for two years and is a Chartered Psychologist specialising in visual performance in elite athletes and she shares her story with us.

Consultancy for elite athletes

“Alongside my role at AECC University College, I run a consultancy business working with elite athletes. I specialise in optimising their visual perception and decision-making. For example, if you imagine a footballer being able to anticipate where the ball is going to go, so they can start their movement to get there a little bit earlier. I work across lots of different sports, all focused on how athletes’ visual systems can help their performance.



“I’ve been really fortunate to work with some incredible athletes. Recently, I’ve been working a lot with some Formula One drivers and I’ve previously worked for Harlequins Rugby Team for eight years – it’s been great to see their younger players coming through and making it into the England team. I also made a TV programme with Cristiano Ronaldo. I’ve worked with all kinds of sports professionals, from the British Bobsleigh Team to British Shooting.”

Getting started

“I played Junior International Hockey U16 and U18 and we had a Sports Psychologist who worked with us. I remember thinking that it looked like a great job. I studied BSc Psychology at University and then went on to study a Masters degree in Sport and Exercise Psychology – both of which we offer here at AECC University College. I have always been interested in how people make decisions.

“I used eye-tracking technology in my Undergraduate dissertation that was pretty new at the time, monitoring where goalkeepers looked when they were trying to save a penalty in hockey. For my PhD, this evolved into whether you can train athletes’ visual systems to work faster and more accurately.

“My first client was the Great Britain Hockey team: I worked with the Men’s Olympic Team in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. After that, I had a phone call from Sir Clive Woodward who had recently won the World Cup with England Rugby and was Head of Performance at the British Olympic Association. I actually thought it was one of my friends just messing around at first!

“After several meetings with him to discuss my work, the British Olympic Association agreed to fund the rest of my PhD. I worked for them part-time, working with hundreds of Olympic athletes. It was an incredible opportunity and I built a lot of connections there.”

Leading the industry

“A career in this area is so exciting, because there’s virtually no one else doing what I do. Being at the forefront of this field is really exciting. It’s incredibly rewarding too. I’ll work with an athlete and sometimes the tiniest tweaks will make a massive difference to a person’s performance. I see players’ weaknesses become their real strengths.”

Case Study | Sport Psychology Staff Profile



Research

“I’m working on research into eye dominance at the moment and whether it affects athletes’ peripheral vision or reactions. This is a project that I got AECC students involved in for one of their assignments as research participants.

“I’m also looking at eye-tracking for coaches, rather than athletes. So when they’re coaching from the sideline, how much they actually look at each player or do they just follow the ball? I’m also identifying how a coach watches a game is different to someone watching for entertainment value.

“My third area of focus is dual-tasking, so if you’re thinking about something whilst trying to do a task, how that affects your vision. I’m interested in looking at applying it to motor racing drivers: when they take the step up into cars where they’re suddenly getting auditory feedback. Does it affect their driving performance?

“I feel very fortunate to be at AECC. The class sizes are small in the School of Psychology, Sport and Physical Activity which is brilliant because I get to know the students on a more personal level and we develop good working relationships. It’s nice to recognise everyone in the corridors too.”

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