

The sports vision maverick

Optometrist Nick Dash, CEO of sports vision advisory company ProSportsVision, has been involved with sport throughout his career.

Alex Thomas reports

Having represented the south-west region at hockey, a sport he still plays along with cricket, Nick Dash's enthusiasm for all sports is apparent. 'My love and passion in everything I do relates to sport,' he says. 'I have simply married my work with my hobbies. Sports vision also fits in nicely with my principal interests in optometry, which are contact lenses and laser surgery.'

Although ProSportsVision was created in 1999 by a group of optometrists, Dash reveals: 'I've always done my sports vision training alone, as a maverick. I believe individual athletes warrant individual solutions to their vision problems, because their visual tasks from one individual to another can be variable.'

Best solutions

Dash's belief in working autonomously extends to the products that he uses: 'Bausch & Lomb and Adidas are products that I often use, but I have no affiliation to either of those brands. I feel it's important to retain true independence to be able to offer athletes the best possible solutions, rather than being dependent on a company that is potentially supporting an exercise.'

'Often with sports vision programmes there are preset criteria and players are often fitted with a certain lens in a situation where you feel the lens is made to fit the player rather than the player to the lens,' he says.

Giving an example, Dash claims that in rugby, fly-halves have different demands to second row forwards. Stating the need to customise advice in terms of vision training and vision correction, he says that some contact lenses are more stable in certain situations than others. 'A second-row forward would need something more stable that drapes over the eye, something like Johnson & Johnson's Acuvue which is more stable with



Nick Dash: 'I like to see proper scientific data to support claims'

its steeper curvature. Whereas a back needs to have a greater visual field and peripheral vision, I'd fit them with a soft lens daily disposable which has an aspheric lens.'

Outlining his sports vision philosophy, Dash reveals: 'It's a matter of using your optometric skills in a sporting environment. You have to communicate with athletes at a level they can understand and use the best products for that individual player in regards to the tasks that they are undertaking.'

'Sports vision optometry is 75 per cent contact lenses, 10 per cent spectacle correction for sunglasses, 10 per cent is giving advice on laser surgery and 5 per cent is vision training.'

Dash's work is largely through sporting organisations, principally the Rugby Football Union, the Football Association, the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) and the England and Wales Cricket Board.

Detailing ProSportsVision's work with these organisations he says: 'We work within multi-disciplinary teams including professionals in the fields of sports medicine, sports physiotherapy as well as strength and conditioning coaches. Using cricket as an example he comments: 'After assessing the players, I sit round a table with these professionals and together we build a complete medical profile of the team.'

'If I see a squad of 20 or 30 players, there's going to be 10 to 12 players that have some sort of visual anomaly in terms of vision correction or muscle balance that would benefit from a customised programme.'

The next step is 'getting into

the cricket nets, getting on the tennis court and working with the coach to understand players' visual idiosyncrasies'. The final stage involves interacting with individual coaches. 'The coaches have day to day involvement with the players, so if I empower them to understand their visual setup, they customise the training to maximise the visual performance of that athlete.'

Between 2002 and 2007 Dash was responsible for the sports vision training of all the LTA's academy players from age eight upwards to professionals such as Andy Murray and Tim Henman.

'The key differentiator in terms of elite tennis players is dynamic visual acuity, as in their ability to see moving targets,' he says. 'If you look at tennis shots, you'll often see the player not looking at the ball, but they track the movement of the ball over the paramacular area. We look at where their greatest sensitivity of vision is and enhance that.'

'We discovered that a lot of elite tennis players alternate their ocular dominance. On the forehand they may be using their right eye in terms of orientation and on the backhand they'll be using their left eye.'

'If they don't have that ability I work with them about taking up compensatory head postures to improve their vision and orientation, to change things on the court, getting their coach to feed the ball in with particular patterns to challenge their areas of weakness.'

Proven science

Asked about the pleasure he derives from his work, Dash says: 'It's nice when you work with sportsmen and they achieve success. If you're part of their support structure, you get a great deal of satisfaction from that.'

Revealing his own blueprint for the discipline, Dash says he looks at sports vision training as being founded on primary orthoptic exercises that are well proven in the medical world, such as looking at muscle balance, ensuring that extraocular muscles are well balanced and well controlled.

'I like to see proper scientific data to support claims and unfortunately some programmes are poorly validated, which diminishes the credibility of sports vision as a whole,' he says. ●