

Queen's Psychology's **Dean Tripp** works with every varsity team on campus, as well as individual athletes addressing anything from pregame anxiety to stress associated with performance to focus, or lack of focus, in performance mode, or distraction and lacking confidence during performance.

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Queen's secret weapon - Dean Tripp helps athletes maximize their performance

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Jack Rabb - Queen's Journal

Queen's women's rugby lost to Guelph in the playoffs five years in a row. This year they won. Queen's women's cross country came second at nationals three years in a row. This year they won. What changed?

“They did not quit on the one-yard line. They pushed it through.”

That was **Dean Tripp** in an interview with The Journal. Tripp is in his fourth year as Queen's mental training coach, and that ‘finishing’ mentality is what he tries to instill in athletes.

When Sean Scott was named director of Queen's High Performance Sport Operations, he wanted to model Queen's Athletics after the Canadian Olympic program, with a focus on pillars of performance.

One pillar he singled out was mental training. Enter Tripp, a Queen's psychology professor.

The mantra Tripp introduced to the women's rugby team this year was, “Make people quit.”

“You want to make your opponent quit. You want to take away their will to fight and cross that one-yard line, you want to make them believe that they're going to lose. You want to put them in a mental position so that their performance starts to sag because they lose their confidence.”

Not many other teams in the OUA have a mental training coach. It's not the same as a sports psychologist, Tripp was quick to clarify.

“That’s a protected term,” Tripp laughed. “It would be illegal to call me that.”

A native of the Halifax area, Tripp graduated from Dalhousie University with a PhD in clinical psychology. After a short stint working at Acadia University, Tripp came to Queen’s strictly as a scholar. Nearly two decades later, it’s still a great, albeit slightly different, fit.

Tripp now works with every varsity team on campus, as well as a lot of individual athletes addressing anything from “pregame anxiety to stress associated with performance to focus, or lack of focus, in performance mode, or distraction and lacking confidence during performance.”

“There are times in an athlete's life where their head is noisy, it's full of all these things like doubt, confusion, not sure what I'm supposed to be doing, worried about what the coach thinks of me,” Tripp said. “Mental training is about trying to take those things on in a way, either through your behaviour or through your thinking, to dismantle the impacts they have on you emotionally.”

“When you start to lose your confidence, you start to lose your focus, and if you lose your focus, you lose your performance.”

This truth isn’t lost on Tripp’s teams.

“Doc Tripp was one of the points of difference that we brought in to help nudge us across the finish line,” said women’s rugby Head Coach Dan Valley in a phone interview with The Journal.

“We initially brought him in to chat with the group. Our big mental hurdle [...] was just getting ourselves that notion that we can go and we can not only hang with Guelph, but we can beat Guelph.”

“That was a mindset that we knew we had to go after, and we figured that Doc Tripp would be the best resource that we could possibly employ to help us with that.”

The women beat Guelph in a convincing fashion, 46-17.

Men’s rugby Head Coach Dave Butcher also turned to Dr. Tripp to help his team zone in against the Gryphons. He asked him to speak to the team before their OUA Finals game.

“Many people quit before they’re successful,” said Tripp. “People quit on that one-yard line all the time, and they don't even know they're on the one-yard line.”

So at the game, Tripp centred his talk around not being the team that blinks first, and “believing that there's just one more yard to get done to be successful, one more push, one more play.”

“The emphasis was really on this concept that when it gets really hard, when you're at that position of the game where you're starting to feel a bit of panic, that's when you push twice as hard.”

Queen’s scored 10 points in the final minutes of the game to beat Guelph, winning the OUA Championship and securing the second seed at nationals.

“It seemed to resonate with a lot of the players. [After the win] they looked at me, and any guy that I talked to, they all said to me, ‘Tripper, we didn’t quit.’”

One of Tripp’s specialties, something he’s published pioneering studies on, is the idea of catastrophizing, which describes the implications of the human tendency to imagine worst-case scenarios.

“We’re designed to be emotional. Nervousness and fear are huge signals for survival. If we talk about our brain stem, if we talk about neuroscience for a second, we have a very old part of our brain that responds to the fear cue, and it responds to fear strongly.”

“All athletes have this feature of being a human being. I don’t work with dogs and I don’t work with hamsters, I work with human beings.”

Tripp, who also works with the Ottawa Senators and their AHL affiliate, has his athletes identify and write down the worst fear they associate with their sport. He has them explicitly go through just how bad it could be—if every throw was an interception, if every kick missed, if they bungled the game-winning play.

He has them think through how likely that situation is (and it’s generally very unlikely). Then they consider how bad things would be if it actually happened, what they would do if it did, and the resources they would have at their disposal.

Finally, Tripp asks the athletes what they would do if their best friend was in this catastrophic situation they just invented.

“We are the worst at helping ourselves out of situations,” Tripp mused. “But I’m pretty quick to help my best friend in the world, and probably with real good advice.”

Before the meat of the talk, Tripp asks the athletes how much power their specific situation has over them. Rated out of 100, they generally estimate around 90 per cent.

But afterward, with their potentially paralyzing fear put in perspective, that number drops to 20 per cent.

“And that is Dean Tripp’s magic right there.”

[Read the original Queen’s Journal story here](#)