Gaining Entry With Athletic Personnel for Season-Long Consulting

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Consulting issues that confront applied sport psychology personnel in gaining entry to working with athletic teams on a long-term basis are discussed. Barriers to entry are examined at the outset and it is emphasized that these obstacles must be overcome by all consultants. Strategies for overcoming such barriers include establishing respect and trust of key athletic personnel, gaining the head coach's respect, knowing the sport, becoming knowledgeable of the coach's orientation and team dynamics, gaining support at all levels of the organization, clarifying services to be provided, and making presentations to coaching staffs and athletes. Additional guidelines are discussed in an effort to better clarify the role of the applied sport psychology consultant. These include clarifying one's own consulting needs, maintaining confidentiality, the need for open and honest communication, support demonstrated by coaches, and collecting research data while consulting.

For the past 10 years I have worked extensively with elite athletes at inter-collegiate, Olympic, and professional levels to enhance their performance through mental skills training. The programs I have developed are carried out on a season-long basis. In other words, from the point of implementation they involve a continuous process throughout the season. In all these settings my goal has been to help athletes and coaches develop, individualize, and refine mental skills over time (up to 7 years with one team) so that mental skills become an integral tool to use during a variety of pressure situations.

Mental skills, like physical skills, take time and self-discipline to develop. The foundation of my approach seeks to enhance performance by emphasizing that mental training is one component of the total program. This educational approach is vital for equipping athletes with the mental skills to reach their full potential. Speciﬁcally, it is important to emphasize performance enhancement because the sport psychologist is often labeled by the coaches as the professional who works with the “head cases” or so-called “problem” athletes.

I have learned much from the coaches and athletes with whom I have worked in these settings. Of particular signiﬁcance was the realization that while most
coaches and athletes recognize the importance of mental skills training, the sport psychology consultant is not always greeted with open arms, recognized as the voice of authority, listened to, or even allowed to work with these individuals. Instead, the sport psychology consultant must work to gain entry to teams, coaches, and athletes, earning their respect and trust.

Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the importance of gaining entry to athletic teams and personnel in the professional applied sport psychology literature. Instead, writers in the field have focused almost exclusively on intervention methods and techniques, without stopping to consider whether athletes and coaches will readily accept the consultant in their environment. This article examines issues that confront applied sport psychology consultants from gaining access to working with athletic teams. Further, it discusses major barriers to functioning effectively with athletic teams, methods of gaining entry to athletic teams, and guidelines for the role of the applied sport psychology consultant.

**Barriers to Entry**

The sport psychology consultant must recognize the variety of significant hurdles present when outsiders like himself or herself become involved with any athletic team. In my experience there are three significant barriers: (a) negative connotations related to the "sport psychology—shrink" image, (b) lack of sport-specific knowledge on the part of the consultant, and (c) inadequate knowledge of and experience with the politics of each sport environment. Sport psychology concepts are not a natural part of most athletes' experience, and until they become the norm these obstacles will continue to threaten the best intentioned and most conceptually sound programs.

Perhaps the most difficult issue to deal with in introducing a mental skills training program is the connotation the athletic community attaches to the term sport psychology. Like it or not, the average athlete views a sport psychologist with a degree of apprehension due to the perception that psychology is associated with problems. Further, on some level there is awareness that principles of psychology involve examination of vulnerabilities and weakness; this threatens all but the most secure and confident athletes. I use the terms mental training or mental toughness because athletes can relate to the concept of mental toughness; they may have difficulty relating to the term psychologically prepared athlete.

Not only are athletes skeptical of sport psychology services but so are many coaches. Although academic colleagues understand and value the potential impact of sport psychology on improved performance, the average coach generally attaches much credibility to external consultants offering sport psychology services. In my experience, most coaches do not welcome the sport psychologist with open arms. Veteran coaches often feel they have done the job without assistance of a sport psychologist and they may resent any intrusion.

A second potential barrier to entry is a lack of knowledge of the specific needs of that sport. There are many ways of gaining experience with and knowledge about the specific sport. These range from personal experience in that particular sport to advanced training in physical education, or a combination of both. Regardless of the route you take to the coach's door to present your program, general understanding of sport studies and a thorough knowledge of the specific sport is essential for interacting effectively with athletes and coaches. Consultants unable to relate to the sport experience are usually ineffective and generally do not last long in the system (Orlick & Partington, 1987).

The third major hurdle to overcome in initiating any effective program are the political constraints of the existing sport environment. Every team has an organizational structure and major political components that must support, or at least not block, the program. At the college level for example, the athletic trainer may have a long-standing relationship with the coach or, at the professional level, the front office may control the coach's options. If these formal or informal decision makers in the organization are alienated or threatened by the program, there will be much resistance to it. Even a simple misperception about one's attitude can represent a significant risk to the success of the program in the early stages. Typically this obstacle occurs after the coach has decided to begin the program. In most cases the problems can be minimized by carefully defining the purpose of the program and communicating with all those with whom you come in contact on an ongoing basis, whether the content is about your program, progress of the team, or the weather.

**Gaining Entry**

**Establishing Respect, Credibility, and Trust**

Establishing respect, credibility, and trust is essential to gaining entry to athletic teams and personnel. At the onset, it is the most important factor for the sport psychology consultant because it is impossible to implement any program if one is unable to gain the athlete's and coach's respect and trust. To do this I have found it necessary to structure each program according to the needs of a specific team. For example, team cohesion may be a critical need for one team but only minimally important for another. Initially the coaches will express their concerns and priorities. Later the athlete may take some initiative to express their needs, either verbally or nonverbally, and the role of the sport psychology consultant is to facilitate the needs assessment process and tailor a program to meet those needs.

Certain components of mental skills training have become established and may have been acquired outside the existing sport environment. For example, the relaxation skills may be obtained generically in a nonathletic context such as through stress management and yoga courses. However, the key element in performance enhancement is to use the relaxation in the face of high pressure situations. This calls for an integration of the mental skills to task-relevant cues so that the mental skills dovetail with the physical skills. This strategy helps the athlete to experience the mental skills as an integral part of total skill enhancement. Thus the mental skills are not viewed as something independent of the performance but rather as an essential ingredient in the overall training regime (Ravizza, 1987).

This concept of integration helps the coach see and appreciate the potential impact that mental training can have. The coach who is an expert on performance can be frustrated when the athlete has done all the right things in preparation for an event but chokes under pressure. It is such a circumstance that makes the mental skills training most appealing for both the coach and the athlete.
ample, a pitcher in baseball is vulnerable to momentary lapses of attention that result in a bad pitch. In a game situation the pitcher nonverbally communicates that he is ready when he places his foot on the rubber. Yet he may be thinking of a bad call or worrying about the next pitch when he places his foot on the rubber. In order to regain a singular focus of attention and truly be ready, the consultant may suggest that the pitcher learn to take a breath when his foot is on the rubber. This is a self-monitoring method to see if he is in control of himself before he tries to control the next pitch.

When the sport psychology consultant takes the time to gain the coach’s respect and trust and learns the most effective method for integrating the mental skills training into existing structures, the coaches and players are less threatened by the mental training. This integrative approach is vastly different from that of a prepackaged program being superimposed on the team. The latter approach results in coaches and players perceiving mental training as an independent component that is only reinforced by the sport psychology consultant.

**Gaining the Head Coach’s Respect**

In most situations the consultant must earn the respect of the coach before there is an opportunity to work with the athletes. Coaches are generally protective of athletes they work with. They realize the mental aspects of the game are important and are justifiably selective about who works with their team. To help coaches and athletes obtain quality sport psychology services, the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) has established standards for sport psychologists (Clarke, 1984; Danish & Hale, 1981, 1982; Harrison & Felz, 1979; Heyman, 1984b; Nideffer, 1981; USOC, 1983). This has resulted in a registry of people who have met selected qualifications. However, the reality is that a listing in the registry only allows access to the coach or coaches. The coach’s subjective decision about who works with the team represents an evaluation of the mental skills program and, most important, the rapport the consultant establishes with the coach and athletes (May, 1986, Orlick & Partington, 1987). The failure to establish respect and trust dooms a program to elimination or to peripheral performance issues.

As might be expected, respect and trust develop over an extended period of time but the effort to earn that respect and trust must be initiated early and must remain the first priority. In the ideal setting the consultant could merely focus on teaching performance enhancement skills, but he or she must properly negotiate many subtle factors just to have an opportunity to deliver his/her program.

At this time only the secure and innovative coaches are willing to implement a mental training program because it involves surrendering a certain amount of control and responsibility to an outsider. If a coach is going to commit to a mental training program, then he/she should extensively evaluate the sport psychology consultant. At Cal State University—Fullerton, where I am presently working with five teams, I spend a lot of time initially learning the coach’s needs, explaining the services I can provide and, most important, taking the time to establish a trusting relationship.

This trial period also determines whether I want to work with this coach. One of my goals during this entry period is to have the coach feel comfortable with my approach as I am with me. If the rapport is not there, it will be more difficult to communicate my concerns and, more important, obtain access to the coach.

Most coaches will give you the time in the early stages because they want to check you out, but gaining access to them as the season progresses may be more difficult.

Establishing initial rapport with coaches takes time. Yet the pressure on coaches of elite teams is for quick results. Thus it is essential for the consultant to gain initial experience with nonelite athletes in order to refine presentation skills for efficiency and effectiveness. One must either gain initial experience with a less competitive team or be honest with the coach of an elite team about the current limitations and the need for a long-term commitment. Too many individuals have sacrificed a long-term perspective because of the pressures for a quick fix in competitive athletics. All too often the result of the quick fix is a program that is jettisoned before it could make a substantive impact on the coach and/or players. These programs often end in failure and are a discredit to the profession, making it harder for other competent and responsible professionals to get started with a team.

In order to develop expertise in mental training, the consultant should be familiar with the literature in the field and have experience working with athletes. In the initial stages, I encourage would-be sport psychology consultants to volunteer their services and spend time observing practices and competitions to learn directly from the sport experience. The sport psychology consultant must earn the sincere acceptance of coaches and players. The “hands on” knowledge will help integrate the reality of the competitive arena with the specialized knowledge base. This background will help in relating to the athletes because the focus is not just on psychology or theory, but the emphasis will be on speaking their language.

**Knowledge of the Sport**

To gain the respect of coaches and athletes, the consultant must know the task-relevant demands of the sport and the variations inherent in the sport. There are significant differences between the psychological demands of individual versus team, contact versus noncontact, ball-centered versus player-centered, and fine versus gross motor demands, as well as the physical risk factors of the sport. To the coach, one must demonstrate knowledge of that particular sport, including an understanding of the vocabulary, terminology, basic strategies, performance skills, and specific demands that confront the athletes.

The knowledge and expertise described above can be developed through reading, taking physical education courses, talking with people who play the sport and, if possible, viewing the game in action. Some consultants prefer to experience playing the sport themselves. For example, I worked with the 1984 Women’s Olympic Field Hockey Team, and initially I knew very little about the sport. Prior to developing their mental training program, I read books on the sport, spoke with former participants, and even learned some basic skills. I began to use the coach’s language and became knowledgeable about the demands of that sport. It was critical for me to demonstrate to the coach and athletes that I was aware of both the mental skills training and the skills of field hockey in order to be selected as the consultant to that team. However, knowledge of the sport does not qualify one to give coaching feedback. Some sport psychology consultants have been terminated because they could not refrain from giving advice in areas traditionally covered by the coach, such as skills analysis or player selection (May, 1986; Orlick & Partington, 1987).
For the sport psychology consultant, the sport-specific application of the mental skills to task-relevant cues requires detailed knowledge of performance demands and ongoing communication with the coaching staff. For example, helping the athlete relax and concentrate in a quiet room is important, but the ability to implement those skills during performance is the real challenge. The coaching staff should learn to integrate basic ideas and techniques of the mental skills program so the principles are reinforced in your absence. Without this reinforcement the mental training loses its effectiveness. For example, with one major university football team I encouraged the coach to reinforce the mental training concepts and techniques in practice and before games. When the athletes heard it repeatedly from both the coach and the sport psychologist, it had a much greater impact than if only the sport psychologist had said it.

My initial consulting with individuals and teams focused mainly upon the competitive arena; gradually my energy became directed toward implementing the mental skills in practice. My goal is to increase the quality of practice on a day-to-day basis (Ravizza, 1987). This concept earns the coaches’ respect because they value quality practice. More important, the athlete can work in practice (a less stressful environment) on gaining control and refining concentration. Daily repetition can contribute to the athlete’s confidence in his or her ability to handle adversity under pressure. In addition, some athletes may not get sufficient competitive experience to develop their mental skills for competition, and simulation of pressure situations is a practical alternative.

**Become Knowledgeable of Coach’s Orientation and Team Dynamics**

Before meeting with the coach, it is important to learn about the coach’s philosophy, reputation, staff dynamics, and receptivity to mental skills training. If the coach has tried a sport psychologist in the past, ask about the coach’s and players’ reactions to that program. In addition, it is important to recognize the team dynamics and situational demands of that team. For example, playing on a team that has a strong winning tradition is far different from being on a team that seldom wins. Recognition of these issues earns a measure of credibility from the coach because it is clear that the consultant has done his or her homework.

**Gain Support at All Levels of the Organization**

Gaining entry also means earning the respect and support of assistant coaches, trainers, physicians, equipment staff, and other staff members. It takes time to determine which individuals influence decision making, particularly in regard to an experimental program. For example, with one team the trainer had a direct line to the head coach and his input was highly valued. As an outsider, I was moving into the trainer’s “territory.” Before there were sport psychologists, athletic trainers often held the informal role in caring for the psychological well-being of athletes. In fact, some trainers have an instinctive ability to provide emotional as well as physical support. Thus it is important to establish credibility with such individuals, both for the information and the support they can provide. The more people who support the program, the better. For example, an assistant coach may be totally supportive but his or her opinion may not be valued by the rest of the staff. Therefore, start by identifying the role of all staff and seek to gain the support of critical staff members. This may sound very basic, but without ample sensitivity to these issues at the entry level, the entire program can be easily sabotaged by those people who have been alienated. **Clarifying the Services Provided**

In the process of earning the coach’s respect it is helpful to convey the range of services available. Many coaches do not have an in-depth understanding of the sport psychologist’s role. During the entry phase I discuss all of the services I feel competent to provide. These include performance enhancement, team and staff development, cohesion building, goal-setting strategies, individual performance counseling, communication training, more effective use of practice time, and conflict resolution. I seek to demonstrate how these services relate to performance enhancement, without falsely implying that performance enhancement is guaranteed.

Be careful not to set yourself up for failure by making claims about how sport psychology and your program can result in definite performance outcomes—such as more victories. There is a dual trap in this approach. First, put yourself in the coach’s position; the coach could easily take your comments as an insult. Second, there are many factors beyond your control, such as injuries, which can limit effectiveness (Rotella & Connelly, 1984). In addition, research literature does not demonstrate that psychological skills will work in all situations and with all people.

My presentation to the coach focuses on helping the athletes learn and/or refine mental skills for more control while performing. At the same time, this only happens if the athletes are receptive. Most coaches realize that not all athletes feel that a formal program of mental skills training is appropriate or necessary for them. With professional baseball players, many of the older, established players have reached a stage where a formal program is too threatening to them. They have made it to the professional level on their own and are unwilling to tinker with an approach that is unfamiliar. Generally, younger players, who are in a precarious situation, are more receptive. Thus the sport psychologist should not be discouraged if a majority of players do not get involved in the program in the early phase. Unfortunately, fear is often the impetus for participation, and later in the season the teachable moment may present itself.

In general, I find that about one third of the athletes on a team are very receptive to the program in the beginning, one third will seek it out when they are struggling, and one third are not receptive. For this reason the applied sport psychologist must have patience and not get discouraged when this happens. All of the coaches I have worked with realize that not everyone will view the program as appropriate for their individual needs. If possible, try to determine what the coach views as an appropriate number of players to be involved in the program if it is to meet his or her expectations.

At the beginning of the programs I have developed, the athletes are required to attend and participate for five mental training sessions because this is when the basic structure of the program and the basic techniques are presented. After these five sessions the program is optional, except for the team-building meetings. The athlete who elects not to participate should be expected to explain the methods being used to enhance performance. As long as the athlete maintains solid self-control and performs well (as determined by the coach and athlete).
there is no problem. But the athlete who chokes should be encouraged to participate in the program. I recall one athlete who viewed the mental training as a waste of time; he walked into his fourth session and said, "I want to work out and not space out." However, in the first competition he choked "big time." As a result he sought assistance and proceeded to immerse himself in the mental skills program.

**Presentation to Coaching Staff and Athletes**

If the coach is receptive to the mental training program, the consultant is typically asked to give a presentation to the coaching staff and athletes. This presentation must be dynamic, somewhat entertaining, and must demonstrate knowledge about the sport. If the players and coaches do not respond favorably, the program is not likely to be approved. This is a clear declaration that the athletic world is not always receptive to gain the sport psychology knowledge that is available.

I recall two experiences that illustrate the resistance one might face in working with athletes. The first was a presentation to 30 major league pitchers at spring training camp. The coach had made it clear that I had 1 hour to explain my program and that 15 players would have to participate in the program or the organization would not support it. Before the meeting, I heard some players complaining about having to attend a meeting when their contract did not call for it. They were very resistant from the start. This is the type of adverse atmosphere you may confront when you deliver your presentation.

The second experience occurred when I addressed 200 football players at a major university to discuss the potential impact of mental training on their performance. At the time, they were tired, hungry, and irritated about heavy meeting and practice schedules. Not surprisingly, they were restless and a little rude. I overcame the resistance by using specific examples demonstrating my knowledge of the sport. The consultant must speak the athletes' language and give relevant examples or they will be unresponsive and disinterested.

During the presentation, one must "read" the audience carefully for attentiveness or lack of it and incorporate plenty of examples, demonstrate how it is relevant to their specific sport, and keep it entertaining or they will drift off. An elite athletic team is different from an undergraduate class. I attempt to make five major points and not overwhelm them with technical information.

After the presentation, it is important to get players' feedback on an individual basis. The goal of the initial presentation is to garner interest and support from as many key players as possible. By contrast, gaining their respect and trust occurs over a longer period of time, often during informal situations such as in casual locker room or on-the-field interactions. The consultant must demonstrate commitment and availability to provide a service. This became obvious when I worked with an Olympic women's field hockey team. During one of my first visits I attended a 3-day tournament and it rained all 3 days. I stood on the sidelines, got soaked, and did my work. After the program was firmly established, I asked them when the turning point came for supporting it. Many of the athletes mentioned that rainy tournament and noted that when I demonstrated my commitment by getting soaked, they became more interested and supportive. Often the little things make the difference.

**Clarification of the Role of the Applied Sport Psychology Consultant**

In addition to facilitating the coaches' and athletes' receptiveness to the program and its potential impact, it is also important that the sport psychology consultant clarify his or her own role in the program and identify critical issues pertaining to this role. These issues include confidentiality, the need and procedure for referrals, the need for demonstrated support for the program by coaches, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of research data collection.

**Assess What You Want From the Team**

Besides explaining what can be done for them, assess whether the coach's philosophy and approach is consistent with your own. For example, I spoke with one coach who said all the right things, but when I began to observe practice sessions I saw that fear and intimidation were his main methods of motivation. I realized the program would have little chance for success, especially since he was not open to changing his methods, so I opted out. Of course, if you are just beginning to work with teams, it may be worth the time to gain experience with a team whose coach's values and methods conflict with your approach. It is important to work in a variety of situations so you can learn to adapt to a multitude of issues and situations. This challenge helps you to become a better consultant.

**Confidentiality**

The coach must agree that all information obtained is confidential and will only be shared with that individual's permission. In many situations the athletes or assistant coaches will give their consent for you to share the concerns of their conversations, but it should be at the athlete's discretion and not as a result of the coach's or management's desire to know information the athlete wants to remain private. The vast majority of coaches agree with the need for confidentiality. One way to make a program self-destruct is to destroy the trust of a confidential conversation. Breaking that confidence destroys effectiveness because everyone soon learns that nothing is truly private or safe. I make it very clear to the coaches that I am not an undercover agent, regardless of their reason for wanting the information. Information can be shared as general information, but be certain the player's identity is protected.

**Open and Honest Communication**

At the professional and major college levels, time with players is limited and access to the coach is frequently restricted. In these circumstances, communication must be direct, honest, and open. The time-limited consultant role may lead to insights that are valuable to the coach but that also carry the risk of being incorrect because the consultant may not pick up on unique situations. It is the coach's responsibility to assess the accuracy of the input. There is just not time to tiptoe around the coach trying to say the right thing. I try to obtain an understanding about this issue at the outset because it puts me at ease with the coach and staff in providing input. I also clarify procedural matters, such as obtaining permission to call the coach at home.
The Need for Referrals

I clarify with the coach at the outset that my training is as a sport psychology consultant, and that if serious clinical issues arise a referral will be made to a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist (Heyman, 1984a, 1986; Nideffer, 1981; Ryan, 1981). This need for referrals is also required of the clinical psychologist for complicated performance related issues (Brodsky & Ravizza, 1985). Therefore, whatever the situation, the sport psychology consultant should have the support of professionals who can complement their expertise.

Amount of Demonstrated Support by the Coach

One key issue in the early stages of working with a team is educating the coach and staff to positively influence the program’s success. This is why I put so much emphasis on earning the respect and trust of the coach and staff at the beginning. The coach can demonstrate support in various ways. First, the mental training should be a part of practice time. Adding extra time beyond practice is a burden to everyone’s schedule, particularly at the university level. Players know the mental training is valuable to the coach when practice time is given to it.

The sport psychologist gains credibility whenever he or she can integrate the program into practice procedures. For example, concentration training can be implemented into the stretching period by having the athletes really focus on the stretch and use breathing techniques to relax into the stretch.

A benefit of working closely with the coach is that the coach can reinforce the concepts by referring back to aspects of the mental training program. For example, in working with one major college football team during spring training I emphasized in our meeting session the use of the word “ready” as a focal point or signal to get the last play and get totally involved in the next play. In the first fall practice when the first huddle was formed, the coach stepped in and explained the “ready” concept and then asked me to address it. For the remainder of the season the coaching staff reinforced this concept. The coaching staff’s re-enforcement of mental training techniques and ideas definitely adds credibility to the mental training program.

Collecting Research Data

In the athletic community, where performance results are critical, some coaches are hesitant to have their players used as subjects for research studies. Many coaches feel they have been “used” by researchers because they were never given the results or the information gathered had little practical application. Traditional control-group research generally will not be supported because if the coaches decide to dedicate time and money to the program, they do not want only part of the group getting the program.

If a coach agrees to permit research, the consultant should clarify the instruments to be used, the purpose of the study, and the potential impact the collected data can have. I strongly advise consultants to be flexible in this area. The athletes may quickly be discouraged with a program if there is too much objective assessment, and that should not be a primary goal of your program.

Summary

It is important to realize that the applied sport psychology consultant is moving into a subculture that has done extremely well without a sport psychology consultant. He or she must earn the respect and trust of the coach, the staff, and the players. It is crucial to be respectful of and sensitive to the dynamic, often pressured-filled environment of competitive sport. The applied sport psychology consultant must be completely prepared when making a proposal to a team and coaching staff. After earning their trust and respect, one must deliver a dynamic team presentation. Once that respect and trust is earned and entry has been gained, it is critical that the sport psychologist remain sensitive to the team and staff dynamics so an effective program can be delivered throughout the season.

References


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When the sport psychology consultant takes the time to gain the coach’s respect and trust and learns the most effective method for integrating the mental skills training into existing structures, the coaches and players are less threatened by the mental training. This integrative approach is vastly different from that of a prepackaged program being superimposed on the team. The latter approach results in coaches and players perceiving mental training as an independent component that is only reinforced by the sport psychology consultant.

Gaining the Head Coach’s Respect

In most situations the consultant must earn the respect of the coach before there is an opportunity to work with the athletes. Coaches are generally protective of athletes they work with. They realize the mental aspects of the game are important and are justifiably selective about who works with their team. To help coaches and athletes obtain quality sport psychology services, the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) has established standards for sport psychologists (Clarke, 1984; Danish & Hale, 1981, 1982; Harrison & Feltz, 1979; Heyman, 1984b; Nideffer, 1981; USOC, 1983). This has resulted in a registry of people who have met selected qualifications. However, the reality is that a listing in the registry only allows access to the coach or coaches. The coach’s subjective decision about who works with the team represents an evaluation of the mental skills program and, most important, the rapport the consultant establishes with the coach and athletes (May, 1986; Orlick & Partington, 1987). The failure to establish respect and trust dooms a program to elimination or to peripheral performance issues.

As might be expected, respect and trust develop over an extended period of time but the effort to earn that respect and trust must be initiated early and must remain the first priority. In the ideal setting the consultant could merely focus on teaching performance enhancement skills, but he or she must properly negotiate many subtle factors just to have an opportunity to deliver his/her program.

At this time only the secure and innovative coaches are willing to implement a mental training program because it involves surrendering a certain amount of control and responsibility to an outsider. If a coach is going to commit to a mental training program, then he/she should extensively evaluate the sport psychology consultant. At Cal State University–Fullerton, where I am presently working with five teams, I spend a lot of time initially learning the coach’s needs, explaining the services I can provide and, most important, taking the time to establish a trusting relationship.

This trial period also determines whether I want to work with this coach. One of my goals during this entry period is to have the coach feel comfortable with my approach and with me. If the rapport is not there, it will be more difficult to communicate my concerns and, more important, obtain access to the coach.

Most coaches will give you the time in the early stages because they want to check you out, but gaining access to them as the season progresses may be more difficult.

Establishing initial rapport with coaches takes time. Yet the pressure on coaches of elite teams is for quick results. Thus it is essential for the consultant to gain initial experience with nonelite athletes in order to refine presentation skills for efficiency and effectiveness. One must either gain initial experience with a less competitive team or be honest with the coach of an elite team about the current limitations and the need for a long-term commitment. Too many individuals have sacrificed a long-term perspective because of the pressures for a quick fix in competitive athletics. All too often the result of the quick fix is a program that is jettisoned before it could make a substantive impact on the coach and/or players. These programs often end in failure and are a discredit to the profession, making it harder for other competent and responsible professionals to get started with a team.

In order to develop expertise in mental training, the consultant should be familiar with the literature in the field and have experience working with athletes. In the initial stages, I encourage would-be sport psychology consultants to volunteer their services and spend time observing practices and competitions to learn directly from the sport experience. The sport psychology consultant must earn the sincere acceptance of coaches and players. The “hands on” knowledge will help integrate the reality of the competitive arena with the specialized knowledge base. This background will help in relating to the athletes because the focus is not just on psychology or theory, but the emphasis will be on speaking their language.

Knowledge of the Sport

To gain the respect of coaches and athletes, the consultant must know the task-relevant demands of the sport and the variations inherent in the sport. There are significant differences between the psychological demands of individual versus team, contact versus noncontact, ball-centered versus player-centered, and fine versus gross motor demands, as well as the physical risk factors of the sport.

To the coach, one must demonstrate knowledge of that particular sport, including an understanding of the vocabulary, terminology, basic strategies, performance skills, and specific demands that confront the athletes.

The knowledge and expertise described above can be developed through reading, taking physical education courses, talking with people who play the sport and, if possible, viewing the game in action. Some consultants prefer to experience playing the sport themselves. For example, I worked with the 1984 Women’s Olympic Field Hockey Team, and initially I knew very little about the sport. Prior to developing their mental training program, I read books on the sport, spoke with former participants, and even learned some basic skills. I began to use the coach’s language and became knowledgeable about the demands of that sport. It was critical for me to demonstrate to the coach and athletes that I was aware of both the mental skills training and the skills of field hockey in order to be selected as the consultant to that team. However, knowledge of the sport does not qualify one to give coaching feedback. Some sport psychology consultants have been terminated because they could not refrain from giving advice in areas traditionally covered by the coach, such as skills analysis or player selection (May, 1986; Orlick & Partington, 1987).
For the sport psychology consultant, the sport-specific application of the mental skills to task-relevant cues requires detailed knowledge of performance demands and ongoing communication with the coaching staff. For example, helping the athlete relax and concentrate in a quiet room is important, but the ability to implement those skills during performance is the real challenge. The coaching staff should learn to integrate basic ideas and techniques of the mental skills program so the principles are reinforced in your absence. Without this reinforcement the mental training loses its effectiveness. For example, with one major university football team I encouraged the coach to reinforce the mental training concepts and techniques in practice and before games. When the athletes heard it repeatedly from both the coach and the sport psychologist, it had a much greater impact than if only the sport psychologist had said it.

My initial consulting with individuals and teams focused mainly upon the competitive arena; gradually my energy became directed toward implementing the mental skills in practice. My goal is to increase the quality of practice on a day-to-day basis (Ravizza, 1987). This concept earns the coaches’ respect because they value quality practice. More important, the athlete can work in practice (a less stressful environment) on gaining control and refining concentration. Daily repetition can contribute to the athlete’s confidence in his or her ability to handle adversity under pressure. In addition, some athletes may not get sufficient competitive experience to develop their mental skills for competition, and simulation of pressure situations is a practical alternative.

### Become Knowledgeable of Coach’s Orientation and Team Dynamics

Before meeting with the coach, it is important to learn about the coach’s philosophy, reputation, staff dynamics, and receptivity to mental skills training. If the coach has tried a sport psychologist in the past, ask about the coach’s and players’ reactions to that program. In addition, it is important to recognize the team dynamics and situational demands of that team. For example, playing on a team that has a strong winning tradition is far different from being on a team that seldom wins. Recognition of these issues earns a measure of credibility from the coach because it is clear that the consultant has done his or her homework.

### Gain Support at All Levels of the Organization

Gaining entry also means earning the respect and support of assistant coaches, trainers, physicians, equipment staff, and other staff members. It takes time to determine which individuals influence decision making, particularly in regard to an experimental program. For example, with one team the trainer had a direct line to the head coach and his input was highly valued. As an outsider, I was moving into the trainer’s “teritory.” Before there were any sport psychologists, athletic trainers often held the informal role in caring for the psychological well-being of athletes. In fact, some trainers have an instinctive ability to provide emotional as well as physical support. Thus it is important to establish credibility with such individuals, both for the information and the support they can provide. The more people who support the program, the better. For example, an assistant coach may be totally supportive but his or her opinion may not be valued by the rest of the staff. Therefore, start by identifying the role of all staff and seek to gain the support of critical staff members. This may sound very basic, but without ample sensitivity to these issues at the entry level, the entire program can be easily sabotaged by those people who have been alienated.

### Clarifying the Services Provided

In the process of earning the coach's respect it is helpful to convey the range of services available. Many coaches do not have an in-depth understanding of the sport psychologist’s role. During the entry phase I discuss all of the services I feel competent to provide. These include performance enhancement, team and staff development, cohesion building, goal-setting strategies, individual performance counseling, communication training, more effective use of practice time, and conflict resolution. I seek to demonstrate how these services relate to performance enhancement, without falsely implying that performance enhancement is guaranteed.

Be careful not to set yourself up for failure by making claims about how sport psychology and your program can result in definite performance outcomes—such as more victories. There is a dual trap in this approach. First, put yourself in the coach’s position; the coach could easily take your comments as an insult. Second, there are many factors beyond your control, such as injuries, which can limit effectiveness (Rotella & Connelly, 1984). In addition, research literature does not demonstrate that psychological skills will work in all situations and with all people.

My presentation to the coach focuses on helping the athletes learn and/or refine mental skills for more control while performing. At the same time, this only happens if the athletes are receptive. Most coaches realize that not all athletes feel that a formal program of mental skills training is appropriate or necessary for them. With professional baseball players, many of the older, established players have reached a stage where a formal program is too threatening to them. They have made it to the professional level on their own and are unwilling to tinker with an approach that is unfamiliar. Generally, younger players, who are in a precarious situation, are more receptive. Thus the sport psychologist should not be discouraged if a majority of players do not get involved in the program in the early phase. Unfortunately, fear is often the impetus for participation, and later in the season the teachable moment may present itself.

In general, I find that about one third of the athletes on a team are very receptive to the program in the beginning, one third will seek it out when they are struggling, and one third are not receptive. For this reason the applied sport psychologist must have patience and not get discouraged when this happens. All of the coaches I have worked with realize that not everyone will view the program as appropriate for their individual needs. If possible, try to determine what the coach views as an appropriate number of players to be involved in the program if it is to meet his or her expectations.

At the beginning of the programs I have developed, the athletes are required to attend and participate for five mental training sessions because this is when the basic structure of the program and the basic techniques are presented. After these five sessions the program is optional, except for the team-building meetings. The athlete who elects not to participate should be expected to explain the methods being used to enhance performance. As long as the athlete maintains solid self-control and performs well (as determined by the coach and athlete).
there is no problem. But the athlete who chokes should be encouraged to participate in the program. I recall one athlete who viewed the mental training as a waste of time; he walked into his fourth session and said, “I want to work out and not space out.” However, in the first competition he choked “big time.” As a result he sought assistance and proceeded to immerse himself in the mental skills program.

Presentation to Coaching Staff and Athletes

If the coach is receptive to the mental training program, the consultant is typically asked to give a presentation to the coaching staff and athletes. This presentation must be dynamic, somewhat entertaining, and must demonstrate knowledge about the sport. If the players and coaches do not respond favorably, the program is not likely to be approved. This is a clear declaration that the athletic world is not always receptive to gain the sport psychology knowledge that is available.

I recall two experiences that illustrate the resistance one might face in working with athletes. The first was a presentation to 30 major league pitchers at spring training camp. The coach had made it clear that I had 1 hour to explain my program and that 15 players would have to participate in the program or the organization would not support it. Before the meeting, I heard some players complaining about having to attend a meeting when their contract did not call for it. They were very resistant from the start. This is the type of adverse atmosphere you may confront when you deliver your presentation.

The second experience occurred when I addressed 200 football players at a major university to discuss the potential impact of mental training on their performance. At the time, they were tired, hungry, and irritated about heavy meeting and practice schedules. Not surprisingly, they were restless and a little rude. I overcame the resistance by using specific examples demonstrating my knowledge of the sport. The consultant must speak the athletes’ language and give relevant examples or they will be unresponsive and disinterested.

During the presentation, one must “read” the audience carefully for attentiveness or lack of it and incorporate plenty of examples, demonstrate how it is relevant to their specific sport, and keep it entertaining or they will drift off. An elite athletic team is different from an undergraduate class. I attempt to make five major points and not overwhelm them with technical information.

After the presentation, it is important to get players’ feedback on an individual basis. The goal of the initial presentation is to garner interest and support from as many key players as possible. By contrast, gaining their respect and trust occurs over a longer period of time, often during informal situations such as in casual locker room or on-the-field interactions. The consultant must demonstrate commitment and availability to provide a service. This became obvious when I worked with a women’s field hockey team. During one of my first visits I attended a 3-day tournament and it rained all 3 days. I stood on the sidelines, got soaked, and did my work. After the program was firmly established, I asked them when the turning point came for supporting it. Many of the athletes mentioned that rainy tournament and noted that when I demonstrated my commitment by getting soaked, they became more interested and supportive. Often the little things make the difference.

Clarification of the Role of the Applied Sport Psychology Consultant

In addition to facilitating the coaches’ and athletes’ receptiveness to the program and its potential impact, it is also important that the sport psychology consultant clarify his or her own role in the program and identify critical issues pertaining to this role. These issues include confidentiality, the need and procedure for referrals, the need for demonstrated support for the program by coaches, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of research data collection.

Assess What You Want From the Team

Besides explaining what can be done for them, assess whether the coach’s philosophy and approach is consistent with your own. For example, I spoke with one coach who said all the right things, but when I began to observe practice sessions I saw that fear and intimidation were his main methods of motivation. I realized the program would have little chance for success, especially since he was not open to changing his methods, so I opted out. Of course, if you are just beginning to work with teams, it may be worth the time to gain experience with a team whose coach’s values and methods conflict with your approach. It is important to work in a variety of situations so you can learn to adapt to a multitude of issues and situations. This challenge helps you to become a better consultant.

Confidentiality

The coach must agree that all information obtained is confidential and will only be shared with that individual’s permission. In many situations the athletes or assistant coaches will give their consent for you to share the concerns of their conversations, but it should be at the athlete’s discretion and not as a result of the coach’s or management’s desire to know information the athlete wants to remain private. The vast majority of coaches agree with the need for confidentiality. One way to make a program self-destruct is to destroy the trust of a confidential conversation. Breaking that confidence destroys effectiveness because everyone soon learns that nothing is truly private or safe. I make it very clear to the coaches that I am not an undercover agent, regardless of their reason for wanting the information. Information can be shared as general information, but be certain the player’s identity is protected.

Open and Honest Communication

At the professional and major college levels, time with players is limited and access to the coach is frequently restricted. In these circumstances, communication must be direct, honest, and open. The time-limited consultant role may lead to insights that are valuable to the coach but that also carry the risk of being incorrect because the consultant may not pick up on unique situations. It is the coach’s responsibility to assess the accuracy of the input. There is just not time to tiptoe around the coach trying to say the right thing. I try to obtain an understanding about this issue at the outset because it puts me more at ease with the coach and staff in providing input. I also clarify procedural matters, such as obtaining permission to call the coach at home.
I tell the athletes that I will ask many questions and that they can say “not now” at any time. I realize that athletes need time alone and that it is important to be sensitive to and respect those needs. This is especially the case in the midst of or immediately after competition (Orlick & Partington, 1987).

The Need for Referrals

I clarify with the coach at the outset that my training is as a sport psychology consultant, and that if serious clinical issues arise a referral will be made to a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist (Heyman, 1984a; Nideffer, 1981; Ryan, 1981). This need for referrals is also required of the clinical psychologist for complicated performance related issues (Brodsky & Ravizza, 1985). Therefore, whatever the situation, the sport psychology consultant should have the support of professionals who can complement their expertise.

Amount of Demonstrated Support by the Coach

One key issue in the early stages of working with a team is educating the coach and staff to positively influence the program’s success. This is why I put so much emphasis on earning the respect and trust of the coach and staff at the beginning. The coach can demonstrate support in various ways. First, the mental training should be a part of practice time. Adding extra time beyond practice is a burden to everyone’s schedule, particularly at the university level. Players know the mental training is valuable to the coach when practice time is given to it.

The sport psychologist gains credibility whenever he or she can integrate the program into practice procedures. For example, concentration training can be implemented into the stretching period by having the athletes really focus on the stretch and use breathing techniques to relax into the stretch.

A benefit of working closely with the coach is that the coach can reinforce the concepts by referring back to aspects of the mental training program. For example, in working with one major college football team during spring training I emphasized in our meeting session the use of the word “ready” as a focal point or signal to let go of the last play and get totally involved in the next play. In the first fall practice when the first huddle was formed, the coach stepped in and explained the “ready” concept and then asked me to address it. For the remainder of the season the coaching staff reinforced this concept. The coaching staff’s reinforcement of mental training techniques and ideas definitely adds credibility to the mental training program.

Collecting Research Data

In the athletic community, where performance results are critical, some coaches are hesitant to have their players used as subjects for research studies. Many coaches feel they have been “used” by researchers because they were never given the results or the information gathered had little practical application. Traditional control-group research generally will not be supported because if the coaches decide to dedicate time and money to the program, they do not want only part of the group getting the program.

If a coach agrees to permit research, the consultant should clarify the instruments to be used, the purpose of the study, and the potential impact the collected data can have. I strongly advise consultants to be flexible in this area. The athletes may quickly be discouraged with a program if there is too much objective assessment, and that should not be a primary goal of your program.

Summary

It is important to realize that the applied sport psychology consultant is moving into a subculture that has done extremely well without a sport psychology consultant. He or she must earn the respect and trust of the coach, the staff, and the players. It is crucial to be respectful of and sensitive to the dynamic, often pressured-filled environment of competitive sport. The applied sport psychology consultant must be completely prepared when making a proposal to a team and coaching staff. After earning their trust and respect, one must deliver a dynamic team presentation. Once that respect and trust is earned and entry has been gained, it is critical that the sport psychologist remain sensitive to the team and staff dynamics so an effective program can be delivered throughout the season.

References


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Note

The program I developed for athletes and teams involves a four-stage process: (a) entry—gaining the respect and trust of coaches and athletes, (b) assessment—determining the specific needs of the team, (c) development and delivery of the program, and (d) feedback and ongoing evaluation. Because of space limitations, this article focuses only on the entry stage.

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Understanding Assertive

It is important to define the semantics of the term labeling intense, forceful competitive behavior. An athlete that is incentive motivated, with the goal in an appropriate manner (Husman & Silva, 1989), has been used as an all-purpose descriptor. In fact there are many forceful behaviors falling under this category. The injurious intent associated with aggressive behavior is central to the definition of aggression.

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