As sport psychology consultants working with teams on a season-long basis, we are all performers similar to the athletes with whom we work. Just as the athlete strives to perform to his or her potential, we as consultants must have a similar focus, especially if we are to be effective throughout the entire season and during pressure situations. The mental skills that we teach athletes and coaches to enhance their performances are skills that we should regularly use to enhance our own performances. For many of us, this pressure occurs most often in the “Gaining Entry” phase (Ravizza, 1988). During the selection process (with coaches and management) as well as before the introductory presentation to a team, we still feel the “butterflies.” We expect that we will always have these feelings and sensations because we are excited about the opportunity and want to do well. Like the athlete, we set high expectations for ourselves, and it is completely natural and appropriate to employ techniques that improve our performance. This is an opportunity to practice what we preach and use skills like breathing and relaxation to calm ourselves and maintain a present focus.

Early in the lead author’s career he was invited by a professional baseball team to give a presentation on the “Importance of Sport Psychology to Enhance Performance.” If the presentation was well received, he would be given the opportunity to develop and deliver a program for the team. He was given a 30-minute time period and would have to get 75% of the players to indicate that they wanted more. They would vote “yes” or “no” on his return right after the talk. This was your classic “sport psychology sell

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job." If he didn’t get 75% of the players to vote “yes,” then he would not be given an opportunity to work with the team. For the consultant, there was definitely pressure. Even the coaches recognized that in this situation, he had only one chance to make a favorable impression, while their players have far more opportunities to show their potential.

He gave the presentation in the back of the locker room, where the hot water heater was located. In the midst of the talk, the water heater turned on and made a loud, continuous roaring sound. He was either so focused or so nervous that he didn’t even hear it. After the 30-minute presentation, which was well received, 90% of the players voted “yes.” Many of the players said they were so impressed with the way he handled the noise distraction that they figured that they had something they could learn from him about focus.

We as sport psychology consultants are models for the mental skills that we teach, and applying them in our own work, allows us to continuously refine and develop them for our own application and to educate others. In this paper, we will address some of the major issues and skills that we discuss with teams and how we can use them ourselves in our consulting performance. This should not, by any means, be considered an exhaustive list, but your ability to incorporate these techniques will take you a long way in establishing a successful relationship with a sports team. The issues we will discuss include: cultivating a clear understanding of one’s personal philosophy and why we choose to work as sport psychology consultants; knowing and understanding one’s personal strengths and weaknesses as a consulting professional; the realities and expectations of peak experiences in the consulting setting; the value of preparation as a consultant; approaching the consultancy as a performance, and incorporating performance routines; the need to maintain present focus when working with others; the necessity and value of performance evaluation; long-term strategies for taking care of oneself; and finally, the need to keep learning.

**Philosophy: Why Do You Do Sport Psychology Consulting?**

One of the first issues that we discuss with athletes is why they are involved in their sport. Athletes’ clarity about their purpose provides a foundation for their passion. The passion provides direction and fuels the motivation to achieve performance excellence. The pursuit of excellence in sport is a love/hate relationship with one’s sport. Similarly, sport psychology consulting brings up many questions and challenges. Being on the road away from one’s family and the daily routines is not always a positive thing. It is important to know why you choose to do sport psychology consulting. What do you love about it? What is your purpose in being involved in this area of sport? There are as many reasons as there are consultants, and each consultant must find his or her own meaning. For some, it is about furthering the profession; for others it is about the joy of teaching, one athlete at a time. For us, enjoyment comes from working with highly committed people, teaching and learning from athletes and coaches, effectively collaborating with coaches and the total staff, the immediate feedback that sport provides, and the creativity and flexibility that is required to deliver a synchronic program in a complex, fast-paced environment. Each consulting experience has its own unique context, and our expertise lies in the ability to compensate and adjust to meet the demands of the particular situation. At times, this can feel like being in a pressure cooker, but by the end of the season we can always reflect back and realize how much we have enjoyed the challenge.

For example, in almost every presentation to a group of coaches, there is always that one coach who sits at the back of the room, with arms crossed, and seems disinterested. In any other social situation, this would be considered rude. The challenge for the sport psychology consultant is to impact this individual and make a connection with him or her. The goal is to change the coach’s negativity by reaching him or her through an example or an experience that he or she can relate to and that also has relevancy to sport psychology. As the consultant, having a clear mission provides direction, motivation, feedback, meaning, and a sense of purpose. It is this foundation that fosters the ability to maintain perspective and passion as you work through the difficult times.
Know Thy Consulting Self

To become a more effective sport psychology consultant, you must know yourself. What are your strengths? What do you need to improve? What do you enjoy about consulting? How well do you manage your time and energy? What can you do and what can’t you do? The answers to these questions provide the framework for continuing self-improvement for the sport psychology consultant. One of the greatest compliments the lead author ever received from a professional athlete was when the athlete thanked him for introducing him to himself. Like the athlete, it is critical to know who you are so your identity doesn’t get totally distorted in the consultant role. Also, this knowledge of who you are and why you engage in this work will help you deal with the rejection that is an inevitable part of consulting (i.e., your suggestions are not followed or you are not chosen for the role). We often reflect upon a story that the lead author likes to share in relation to this idea:

I remember when I first began working in applied sport psych; I visited one of my mentors, Dr. Bruce Ogilvie. When I told him about my first opportunity with a professional baseball team, he told me something profound. He warned, “You are going to be fired! Rejection is part of the consulting process.” I remember feeling a sense of disbelief at his words. “That won’t happen to me,” I thought.

But he was absolutely correct—the reality of this work is that you will experience rejection, on both a grand scale (e.g., management terminating your services, or failing to hire you in the first place), as well as on a smaller scale (e.g., players avoiding you). This rejection from the players is an endemic part of sport psychology consulting, as not all of them are ready for what you have to offer, nor do some even see a need for it. It took us a while to adjust to this. It doesn’t mean we are not trying to get everyone involved, but sometimes the consultant has to be patient and wait for the reachable moment. This requires patience, confidence, and acknowledgment of your consulting self so that you can maintain perspective and clarity as you cope with the distractions and frustrations that go with the job.

Knowing yourself will also be critical in determining what situations and/or sports you want to work with. For example, in some sports sexuality issues are prevalent, and if one is homophobic it will likely be an uncomfortable environment and not be a good fit. Furthermore, certain sports may not be appropriate choices for you. The lead author was hesitant to work with boxers based on his philosophical values, but recognized that there was a point to be learned about concentration within this sport. He figured what better group of athletes to learn about concentration from, because if the boxer loses concentration he or she receives immediate feedback, usually in the form of a debilitating jab or uppercut. In addition, the culture of a sport is an important component in determining if we want to work in that situation. For example, the golf-country club culture is totally different from the rugby culture, and while the two may share many similarities, the skill set required of a sport psychology consultant working within those environments can be very different (Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza, & Rotella, 2003).

We strongly believe that, as a consultant, you have to “bring yourself to the dance.” Knowing and being yourself is one of your greatest assets because you are being authentic, and athletes/coaches have keen intuition to determine if someone is not being authentic.

Realities and Expectations of Peak Experience in the Consulting Process

In our work with athletes, we always have them reflect on their best performances. Even though this superior level of performance doesn’t happen often, there is a lot we can learn from it. When athletes are “in the zone,” or at peak performance levels, they consistently report that they are totally immersed, confident in their preparation, focused in the present, possess a relaxed concentration, and are thinking clearly. As sport psychology consultants we, too, can get into this “zone,” but just like any other performance, this experience is fairly rare. You cannot always be in the zone, and it is unrealistic to set too high a standard for yourself or your team. We personally think we are in the zone about 20% of the time; for the rest of the time we are compensating
and adjusting. In our work with athletes we want them to set the conditions for being in the zone by being prepared, maintaining a present focus, thinking clearly, and having that relaxed concentration. As consultants you have to do similar things, but recognize that there are going to be those days when you are not in the zone. For example, jet lag, illness, back pain, or issues in one's personal life all interfere with the present focus needed to approach peak experiences. We must actively get better at having what we call a "good lousy day."

As we always tell athletes, you have to learn to be "comfortable being uncomfortable." As consultants, there will be times that you will feel awkward. Just like athletes, you must learn to deal with the setbacks and rejections and persevere through the adversity. Some of these distractions will be the number of players who want to be involved in the program, as well as the amount of support you will receive from the coaches, administrators and/or physios/athletic trainers. Sometimes people are threatened by outsiders and they may attempt to sabotage what you are trying to do. This is where you must work to gain support at all levels, although many times this is not possible and you must be prepared to deal with it effectively and work within that context (Ravizza, 1988). This is similar to what we say to athletes when we tell them to focus on what they can control. You must have methods to go to when adversity presents itself. For those consulting days when you are in the zone, go with the experience and thank the "gods of sport consulting." Most days, however, will be more ordinary and will require a lot of hard work. From our years of experience, we have identified four skills that provide the consultant with a strategy, or "something to go to," when adversity happens. These are (1) preparation, (2) routines, (3) focus, and (4) performance evaluation. The development of these skills provides a contingency plan to deal with adversity, because adversity will occur. Be prepared to embrace it and use it to your advantage, instead of losing your focus because everything isn't going well. The mastery of these four areas will enhance your ability to manage your consulting day more effectively.

**Preparation: Prepare to Prepare**

One of the primary things a consultant has control over in the quest for peak consulting experiences is preparation. It is vital to immerse yourself in the preparation. You have to know the context in which you will be working. This includes knowledge of the sport, the group dynamics of the team, the politics of the team and/or organization, and the specific demands of the sport. You must be prepared to adjust your program to the unique context of the situation and sport (e.g., open vs. closed sports, team vs. individual sports, contact vs. non-contact sports). For example, working with a women's basketball team has both subtle and blatant differences from working with a men's basketball team. You must know the history of the team, the coach's philosophy, previous sport psychology consultants who may have worked with the team, and the unique context in which you will deliver the program. There are many ways to obtain this information, but it is essential to do your homework in each of these areas. All of this is in addition to the basic consulting and counseling skills. Good, solid preparation enables you as the consultant to build your confidence and deliver an effective program.

This preparation also allows you to design and implement your performance enhancement program to meet the demands of that unique situation. Developing short-, medium-, and long-range goals and objectives is important. As coaches and players know, a contingency plan is necessary for when the original plan doesn't work. As a consultant, you have to be flexible. We can likely all recall the times we have had a well-established plan, which then promptly changed when we began our day with the team. We must quickly adjust our plans to deal with the unforeseen circumstances of a team sport environment. This is why working with a team is dramatically different from teaching an academic class or working on an individual basis with athletes, because there are so many factors over which you have no control (e.g., access to the team, sufficient time to deliver your program, the amount of support by the coaching staff). Most times, once we have been working with a team and have a clear understanding of the history, coach, and team dynamics, we can go in ready for whatever may present itself. Not surprisingly, these have been some of our most productive days.
Similar to the athlete, we have to have a game plan, but we also need to be flexible in order to meet the demands of that day. This is very important in our consulting performance because our aptitude for dealing with adversity serves as an example for the athletes. Our actions count, and they are definitely watching. If you, as the consultant, are going to expect the athlete to deal effectively with obstacles, then you must be prepared to model this behavior yourself. How you handle interruptions, audio-visual or technical malfunctions during the presentation, athletes or coaches who are not paying attention, and other unexpected difficulties will be observed by all. Your credibility can be seriously compromised if you are unable to handle yourself when a problematic situation occurs—and it will.

When you are gaining entry with a team/coaching staff there will be a point at which you will have to perform, so prepare for this. You must earn their respect and trust or you will not be able to work productively. With one major American university’s football team, the first author had to give a preliminary presentation to the 11 assistant coaches, who then evaluated whether to have him continue with the remainder of the team. After gaining their approval, he had to present to 25 key players. When he did this, the head coach positioned his seat so he could observe him and watch the players’ non-verbal reactions to the presentation. You are going to be evaluated at all levels, so be ready for it, and realize that if you expect to gain their trust you are going to have to earn it!

The Use of Routines
Sport is driven by routines. There are game day routines, pre- and post-game routines, and pre- and post-performance or practice routines. Athletes are accustomed to getting ready to perform and to learn from their performances. The same holds true for sport psychology consultants. For some, getting dressed is an important transition to symbolically shift from the personal life to the consulting role. The drive or walk to the consulting area is when we begin our routine. We review our plan, get centered and balanced, and immerse ourselves in a present focus perspective so that when we meet the team we are ready. We then take a few moments to check-in, monitor ourselves, make any needed adjustments, and “Get Big” when we walk into the pressure of the situation. Throughout the lead author’s consulting experiences he has also always debriefed during the car or plane ride home to process the lessons learned from that experience. Just as we ask the athletes to learn each day, we have to learn things to keep getting better at what we do. And when we no longer want to get better, or feel as if there is no longer anything new for us to learn, it is time to retire.

Another important part of the post-consultation routine for us is checking in with other professionals in this field. At times, we have had the opportunity to collaborate with fellow sport psychology consultants, and these experiences have provided us with wonderful insights because we are in the environment together and, inevitably, see the same situation from slightly different perspectives. We would strongly encourage any consultant to collaborate with someone if and when the opportunity presents itself. The capability to debrief after consulting sessions with a colleague who is familiar with the pressures and expectations of the work can help you to fully appreciate the similarities and differences of your perceptions, and go a long way toward helping to improve your own personal consulting skill set (Balague, Dee, & Ravizza, 2005; Ravizza, 1995).

Present Focus
Just as it is essential for an athlete to be totally immersed in the present moment to perform to his or her potential, so too the consultant must be in the present. We cannot emphasize this enough. At times this present focus just happens, but when adversity occurs, a present focus is critical if one is to compensate and adjust effectively. We always tell athletes to do everything they can to perform at their best, but not to be surprised by adversity when it occurs. This resiliency occurs in the “here and now.” For consultants, an analogous example would be when you start your day with a presentation for the coaches and it doesn’t go well, and you have 10 minutes to get ready for a presentation to the team. You must start over of the presentation to the coaches before you move on to the next thing. This may sound simple, but it is more difficult that it may first appear. Not surprisingly, this is also what a lot of our work with athletes is about—keeping them focused on performing, in the present moment, and as positive as they can be.
This process or skill of maintaining present focus is about self-control. The first and most important step in maintaining a present focus is taking responsibility for your performance. As a consultant you don’t have control of what goes on around you, you only have control of how you choose to respond to it. Many factors associated with consulting in an athletic setting—such as players, coaches, access, and management—are out of your range of control. In order to maintain your present focus, it is important to remember that what you do have is control over yourself. You must be in control of yourself in order to maintain your present focus. The extent to which you are in control of your thoughts and feelings is directly related to your success with the team. Just as we tell athletes that they do not have control of the end results, we as consultants don’t have control over whether we are going to be selected to work with a team. We do, however, have control over giving ourselves the best opportunity for success. That is all you are going to have control of, and this type of focus on the process will help you perform and deliver your program in a more effective manner. Remember, players and coaches will be observing how you handle adversity.

Another prerequisite to present focus is awareness (Ravizza & Hanson, 1995). You have to recognize what is going on in your environment. We relate performance to the experience of driving a car (Ravizza, 2005). We have to recognize the traffic or signal lights we confront during our journey. When the light is green, one is aware of it and just moves forward without additional thought. When the light is yellow, one must check the traffic and make a decision whether to continue forward, or make an adjustment. When the light is red, one must stop until ready to move forward again. This signal light analogy has two functions in relation to consulting performance. The first is to help recognize potentially stressful situations. For example, when your presentation time is shortened, or when certain key players may not be able to attend a meeting, the consultant must be able to recognize this new situation and make the necessary adjustments. The second function is to help recognize how you experience the pressure—what happens in your body, with your thoughts, and behaviors. For example, do you respond to pressure with an elevation in heart rate, an alteration in your attentional control, and/or a decline in patience? As consultants, if we know our stressors and how we experience them, we can be better prepared to deal with them. In comfortable situations, we simply perform our role to the best of our ability. When we are not comfortable, we must recognize it early and do something before we begin to spiral out of control. As consultants, when you begin to spiral out of control you must take responsibility for your performance and continually monitor yourself in the environment to recognize the need to make adjustments. This will better enable you to remain on task and get the job done in an effective manner.

Through our years of experience, we have developed a simple process that allows us to make continuous adjustments in the midst of the consulting experience by following a routine we commonly refer to as “The R’s.” As already described above, the preliminary requirement of “The R’s” are individuals’ willingness to take responsibility for their actions. Recognizing where you are in a situation and accepting that you have the power to adapt and adjust to the fluctuations within that situation are critical prerequisites for this model to be effective. As shown in Figure 1, “The R’s” model of self-control in performance is a cyclical process of continual adjustments. The following is a brief explanation of each step in the process, and some practical examples of how this model works.

Recognize—Signal Lights
After people have accepted responsibility for their actions and reactions in any given situation, they are able to recognize what is going on around them. The previous section on developing and improving awareness describes this initial step. Before you are able to make any adjustments to your reactions in a given situation, you must first be aware of what those reactions are. If everything is going well and you recognize that the “lights are green,” you can proceed directly to “Refocus” because no further adjustments are necessary; simply refocus on the task at hand. If, however, you must make adjustments, then you must proceed to the next step in the cycle—“Release.”
Release—Let It Go
One must establish techniques to let things go. For example, we use breathing techniques, progressive relaxation methods, and individual coping strategies to let go of thoughts and feelings that might interfere with performance. If someone is being a pain in the neck, after you have finished the interaction, tighten your shoulders and then release them. This way you consciously tighten the muscle, gather up all the residual tension that might be remaining, and then let it all go in one action. It helps to rid you of that individual's negativity before the next interaction. If you are distracted by the previous interaction, you may miss key insights in your subsequent meeting and lose your present focus. This is the same issue on which we work with athletes, because if they make a mistake or get called for a penalty, they can't afford to dwell on it or they will lose the proper focus.

Regroup—Get Big
After you let it go, regain your composure, stand tall, get centered, and get ready to perform. A technique that we find useful is to monitor the way we walk from one interaction to the next. We learned this from working with golfers when we have them monitor the way they walk from one shot to the next. When they struggle, they begin to lean forward and walk faster. Not surprisingly, this energy is going to affect their next shot. Another approach is to locate a focal point, which is a productive tool to help regain your composure. By focusing on that external object, it helps to shift your focus from an internal perspective to a more external perspective.

Refocus—Get Back to Your Plan
When you are in control of yourself, things slow down; you can focus more clearly, and subsequently determine a plan of action for the next task at hand. If your mind is racing, and you are not focused, how can you think effectively to make a commitment to what you are trying to do and execute the required skill or provide the needed information?

Ready—Breathe Deep
Now that you are in control and can think more clearly, you are ready to perform. A productive way
to do this is to take a slow, steady, breath. We believe this breath is extremely critical to an athlete’s or consultant’s performance because it is such a basic but effective technique. However, it is not easy to remember to breathe calmly when adversity strikes. The breath pulls you to the present and brings oxygen to the brain so you can think clearly. The breath also allows you to release if you focus on the exhalation, and activate if you focus on the inhalation. We have found this to be a very productive way to “check in” and determine if we are ready for the next situation.

Respond—Trust Yourself
The final step of this cycle is to trust your preparation, your experience, and your intuition. As a consultant you have prepared a lifetime for this. There are so many times you just have to be centered and balanced, and know that you are prepared. Trust yourself and just do what you do.

Performance Evaluation
A final and critical issue we review with athletes, which is equally important for a consultant to consider, is performance evaluation. In athletics, failure is part of the process—there will always be a winner and a loser. It is the nature of sport. As sport psychology consultants, we help athletes learn and adjust from their failures. This is analogous to the “black box recorder” when an airplane crashes. The recorder is located after the crash so that the information can be analyzed and procedures can be implemented to eliminate the problem. As consultants, we all make mistakes, but the key is to learn from them. This is where a support group can help you process your experience and provide a perspective that is productive and often affirming. Our willingness to be honest and learn from each other is what allows our field to remain vital and continue to help athletes and coaches achieve their full potential through sport.

Long-term Strategies for Taking Care of Yourself
Just as we inform athletes that they have a support group to help them in their quest for excellence, that they must take care of themselves physically, emo-

tionally, and spiritually, and that they have to make a commitment to learning and getting better, so we as their consultants must do the same. As a consultant, establish a support group with people you can share ideas with, ask questions, and gain perspective. A support group should have people who are accepting, yet able to offer critical feedback, and provide information that can support you. As we always tell athletes, when we have a problem, we know what we want to hear before we ever decide who we are going to call. Athletes have a support system that consists of coaches, athletic trainers, massage therapists, sport psychology consultants, personal trainers, and friends. As consultants, we need others with whom we can share ideas, successes, and failures. As caregivers and educators, it is imperative to make time for our own personal needs. If you do not care for yourself, you will eventually burn out. For example, during the intense involvement of working with athletes and coaches at an Olympic Games, it is easy to get totally involved in the experience. It is critical in an environment such as this to take some time for yourself during and after this involvement. When traveling with a team, we know to take some time for ourselves to get away from the players and coaches. This helps us to be more reflective, recharge ourselves, and is vital in ensuring we don’t lose perspective, which helps to regain that critical balance.

Keep Learning
The quest for excellence is an ongoing journey. We have to keep growing and developing. This is why attending conferences, reading books and journals, sharing ideas with coaches and players, keeping a consulting journal, and exchanging ideas with colleagues in the field is so important. We have found sport psychology consulting to be like an onion: There are layers and layers to it. Just when you think you have complete understanding, some event or situation arises that shifts your perspective. We find this to be exciting and stimulating…and isn’t this exactly what the athlete goes through in his or her quest for excellence?
Summary

It has been the purpose of this chapter to demonstrate how the sport psychology skills and issues that we teach athletes can be used by sport psychology consultants. One of your greatest teaching tools is to role model the skills and issues that you present. After all, working as a sport psychology consultant is just as much of a performance as being an athlete is, just on a different playing field. We can build our credibility and effectiveness by incorporating the skills that we encourage athletes to use to enhance our own performance.

References


