Reflections and Insights From the Field on Performance-Enhancement Consultation

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Early in my career after conducting a relaxation and imagery session with a group of athletes, the coach confronted me and said, "Ken, I know all this relaxation and imagery work is important, but I really don't care if they can relax in a quiet comfortable environment. I want them to relax in the midst of performance when the pressure is on." Like most coaches, that coach wanted something practical, and his comments prompted me to begin to integrate performance-enhancement skills into specific task-relevant performance cues. This approach of integrating the mental skills into existing practice and performance procedures has become a critical aspect of my work.

Many coaches and sport psychology consultants view mental training as something that happens once a week for an hour, and then they get to the "real" stuff when they go to practice. However, a successful mental-training program must be reinforced by the coaches and integrated into practice and performance. This integrated approach provides athletes the opportunity to develop, refine, and practice their various performance-enhancement techniques. The continuing emphasis on practicing the methods, in practice, allows them to be more effective in pressure situations.

My intention in this article is to share some practical realities of working with coaches and athletes. Two additional cues that are intricate parts of my approach are the role of personal philosophy and the holistic nature of my approach. I have discussed these topics in detail elsewhere (Ravizza, in press) and are, therefore, excluded from the scope of this article, in which I will discuss the approach that I have developed in working with elite athletes over the last 25 years. I will address the ideal working relationship with an athletic team and the way I integrate performance-enhancement skills into direct performance-related cues.

The chapter has four sections:

1. The basic parameters to my approach (i.e., educational approach, proactive perspective, the importance of collaboration, and receptivity to learning from coaches and athlete),
2. A discussion about gaining access and implementing programs,
3. Methods of enhancing quality practice including the importance of awareness, and
4. Some of the critical lessons I have learned.
Program Parameters

Educational Approach

My approach is educational in nature and focuses on the mental and emotional aspects of performance enhancement. I am not a psychologist, so when serious psychological issues become apparent, I make referrals to a network of professionals I have developed confidence in over the years. This also means that if the coach is looking for someone to address psychological issues (e.g., eating disorders, drug issues), then I am not the appropriate person. It is extremely difficult to be responsible for the serious psychological and drug issues and to be effective on performance-enhancement issues.

I believe mental skills can be developed like physical skills. Some athletes have “natural” abilities with the mental game, but most athletes must constantly refine and develop their mental skills to effectively meet the multitude of situations they confront. I have watched athletes go from being at the top of their game to aging and losing physical skills. For example, I have seen numerous athletes who never had a problem with confidence be flooded with self-doubts at the Olympics. As Dan Gould stated so clearly, “At the Olympic Games confidence is fragile” (Gould et al., 1998, p.9). I have worked with some teams for 5 to 10 years. I remember one older player telling me that when he was in his prime, the mental game was not that important because his talent was so strong. Toward the end of his career, he needed to use his mental game to harness that wealth of wisdom he had gained from his years of experience and use it to his advantage to make up for his deterioration in physical skills.

The foundation of my educational approach to performance enhancement provides the following three components: (a) accurate and relevant up-to-date information, (b) the opportunity to practice skills, and (c) support in learning the skills on a daily basis.

Respecting the Athlete’s Knowledge Base

The practitioner must be knowledgeable of the research data and be able to make the research meaningful for coaches and athletes. The psychologist should provide accurate information concerning the importance, development, and refinement of the performance-enhancement skills. In conveying information to athletes and coaches, the consultant must remember that elite athletes already have a very successful track record in their sport. One should provide accurate information concerning the importance, development, and refinement of performance-enhancement skills. For example, when I work with a Major League Baseball player, I am working with someone who is the top 1/10 of 1% of all the people who play baseball in the world. As a colleague once said, “When you work with Olympic and professional athletes, you are really working in the area of ‘abnormal’ psychology.” It is difficult to talk about “level of significance” with such an elite group. It is important to listen to the coaching staff and athletes about what they currently do they believe is effective and work from that starting point. In many cases, coaches and athletes already do many of the tasks that we talk about, and the consultant’s role is to provide a structure or framework for these existing techniques. This framework helps athletes make the required compensations and adjustments in pressure situations.

Thus, my role is to translate technical, research-based, theoretical information for that athlete and/or team. It must be practical, relevant, and effective for that situation. It cannot be information for the sake of knowledge alone. My goal is to interpret information in a manner that is effective for that ath-
lete and that unique situation. I want to equip the athletes with skills to deal with the variety of situations that they confront so that they can become their own best expert. As an educator, I have to assess where the athlete is starting from and move him or her toward the desired outcome. These athletes may not reach the ultimate goal, but at least I have helped them move in that direction.

A female gymnast I was working with was one of the most negative people I had ever worked with. I kept emphasizing positive self-talk and affirmations, but we were just not connecting. I was providing her with important information, but she was not hearing me. I was not making it "meaningful" to her, and I definitely was not speaking her language. Then one day, I walked in the gym and said, "Mary, it looks like today is not going as bad as yesterday." Her face lit up, I was speaking her language, and presenting my comments in a perspective that was meaningful to her. We definitely connected. She tended to have a negative orientation and I had to start from there. The technical information could now be processed. Then my goal was to help her move to a less negative approach.

I have become a "realist" in my work; to think one is going to help everyone change from a negative to a positive perspective is unrealistic. For some athletes, this negative perspective is what works for them. There will be resistance to changing unless this attitude is no longer effective. As consultants, we provide information, and we must learn the art of making it meaningful to the coaches and athletes. Sometimes the athlete must fail before he or she is willing to consider any new information or methods to improve.

**Developing Performance-enhancement Skill**

In the second component of my educational approach, I teach athletes performance-enhancement skills. I begin by teaching self-regulation skills, and I start with relaxation techniques. Once athletes have acquired these skills, I have them practice relaxation with various distractions such as tapes of crowd noise or coaches screaming in practice. I then have them learn to stand in a centered, balanced position and carry the ability to relax to a standing position. The next stage is to have them explain their preperformance routine, then practice being centered and balanced as they execute that routine. For example, in tennis, the player develops a pre-serve routine, and this routine is incorporated on a consistent basis as part of the performance execution. The final stage is to have the athletes be in control and trust their ability as they execute their performance. Thus, athletes learn to build confidence in their self-regulation and concentration skills so they can cope better with adversity.

I want the athlete to develop the self-regulation skills, but these skills must be directly related to performance. For example, the athlete who has difficulty performing when the pressure is on must learn to be in control of herself or himself before trying to control performance. Similarly, a javelin thrower who excels in practice but tightens up in competition needs to realize that self-control contributes to body control, which leads to skill control (Ravizza & Hanson, 1994). In the competitive arena, breakdowns are manifested in the mechanics. Often, the coach attempts to fix the mechanics when the underlying issue is anxiety.

When athletes first learn the mental game, many focus so much energy on the mental aspects of performance, and specifically the preperformance routine, that they forget to actually compete. As performance-enhancement consultants, we seek to get the athlete to the start of the performance with the best opportunity for success, by being ready and focused, and then to perform.
During the performance, the athlete should be equipped to use concentration and refocusing techniques as needed. I help the athlete make the transition from the general ability to relax, to the ability to relax in the performance situation, by having performance-specific cues to focus on.

**Supporting Change**

The final component of the educational approach is to support the athletes as they make the transition to integrate mental skills into every daily practice routine and in the competitive arena. This support is critical because athletes must continuously compensate and adjust as they learn what works for them. As with any new skill, the athletes must remain patient as they work through the learning process. The support can come from my comments, the coach’s feedback, and sometimes just the act of my being physically present, without even saying anything. Many athletes have informed me that sometimes when they see me, it serves as a reminder of the things they need to do. I serve as a “trigger” for the athletes to remember their mental game.

**Proactive Approach**

The proactive season-long approach has proved to be the most effective in my work. I want the coaches and athletes to understand that the mental aspects of performance are critical parts of performance. The performance-enhancement approach is based on the concept that the mental and emotional aspects of performance are essential components of what it takes to perform at an elite level. The proactive orientation is totally different from the medical model “problem” orientation of traditional psychology. I do not want to wait until things break down and then “fix” them.

The weakness of a medical model, or “problem” approach, is that players who talk with the sport psychology consultant are frequently typecast as “messes up.” Early in my career, I was introduced to the team with the coach’s saying “If you are screwed up, then talk with Ken.” I have worked with some coaches who say all the right things, but in reality when that coach observes athletes talking with me, it is viewed as a sign of weakness, as compared to the perception that these people want to be great, and they are willing to do whatever it takes to achieve their goals.

The proactive approach also promotes program implementation before the season starts because once the season starts, everything intensifies. Professional football coaches have a “bomb-shelter” mindset once the season begins. Time, energy, and the player’s attention become a high priority, and the basics of strategy and skill execution are the highest priority. As a performance-enhancement consultant, don’t fool yourself that your program takes priority over the basic needs of the coaching staff’s game preparations. For me, the performance-enhancement program is everything, but to the coaching staff, it is one small part of the total program. Thus, before the season begins, I want the players to know the importance of commitment and responsibility, the ways in which stress impacts performance, mental preparation strategies, effective thinking for that sport, concentration and imagery techniques, and self-regulation. Athletes need to develop these skills before the season so they can implement the necessary techniques when the pressure is on. For this reason, I like to start with five 1-hour presentations that cover the basic framework of the program. After the players have the basics and some experience with the various techniques, they are equipped with some methods for coping with adversity when it strikes. This approach helps me because I know that they understand the techniques, so when the teachable moment occurs, they can...
apply the skills that were previously just abstract concepts.

**Collaboration With the Coaching Staff**

In working with teams on a season-long basis, it is critical to earn the coach’s respect and trust. My approach is a collaborative approach, and the goal is to work together with the coach(es) to develop, refine, and reinforce the mental game. As I mentioned earlier, many coaches view mental-skills training as something that athletes do off the field, and then they go perform. It is critical that the mental aspects of the game, including skills, are reinforced by the coaching staff in practice, as well as during the competition.

Athletes learn physical skills through repetition. It is the same with the mental skills. When I first began my work, I approached the athletes like students in a class where you present the material, ask if there are questions, and move on. I learned that in sport, I had to keep repeating myself because performance knowledge is different from academic knowledge. Learning a sport skill involves constant compensation and adjustment. The athlete takes one step forward one day and two steps backward the next. There is a great deal of frustration especially at the elite level, where the improvements are so subtle.

When I first worked with a team on a season-long basis for successive seasons, I worried about what I would do the second year because I had “said it all” the previous year. Then I read a story about the great American football coach Vince Lombardi (Dowling, 1970), who, after winning the Super Bowl, was criticized because the following preseason, he began practice by working the basic fundamentals. He was asked why he would do this with such a great team, and he responded, “The players forget a lot during the off-season” (quoted in Dowling, p. 9). It is the same for mental training, but it is also important to remember that each player has changed from the previous season. The expectations change, and the player’s role on the team changes. Something that used to upset me was working with a player for three years and having the player come up in the third year to say, “Ken, I finally understand the importance of being focused.” Better late than never! Therefore, just because a consultant presents the information and believes the players may understand it, that does not mean that they are necessarily able to incorporate it in the pressure situation. They may understand it intellectually, but for it to be of any use, they must develop an experiential understanding of it, so that they can use the information when the pressure is on. They need to become their own best experts.

In order to build this type of collaboration with the coaches and players, it is critical to gain support at all levels. Initially, the coaching staff must understand and support the importance of the mental game and the applicability of these concepts and techniques in a manner that is consistent with their current approach. This requires taking the time to clarify the concepts and techniques so that everyone is comfortable with them. The staff should feel they have had an opportunity to modify my basic approach, vocabulary, and methods to integrate it into that staff’s approach (Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza, & Rotella, 1999).

It is important to build support for the program at all levels of the organization. Strength and conditioning personnel and athletic trainers have an impact with the athletes, and it is critical that they understand and support the performance-enhancement program. I always work closely with the strength and conditioning staff because the off-season conditioning is an excellent time to work on daily goal setting, preperformance routines in the weight room, and various concentration methods. The conditioning staff appreciates and values a more
focused and committed athlete. I find the athletic trainers appreciate my support for the athletes as they help the athletes go through the frustrating aspects of injury recovery. Some athletes have benefited from imagery skills to complement the healing process, as well as to visualize practice sessions, so that they keep their mental game sharp and are at least doing something to feel a part of the team. It is also critical for the injured athlete to have someone to share the emotional fluctuations that accompany injury recovery. In addition, we have to realize that we are infringing on the athletic trainer’s territory because we are “helping” the athlete, and this is the traditional role of the trainer. I found that many athletic trainers provide more than just physical expertise. They also provide important emotional support. The trainers are in a unique position because they are not directly involved in team selection or playing-time decisions. This makes them a safe outlet for the athlete to share things with. When all the people involved with the team understand the program, they are less threatened by it and more likely to support what a consultant is trying to do.

Another reason this type of collaboration is important is that I cannot be at every practice or every game. The coaching staff has to reinforce the concepts and techniques in my absence. If the athletes hear the information only from me, its effect will be limited. If they hear it from the coaching staff, they know it is valued. This is why I also encourage the coaching staff to be present at the mental training sessions because the players see that the coaches value the program. Also, this allows the coaching staff an opportunity to view the athletes in a totally different situation. Occasionally, the situation may arise where there may be some sessions in which the players have concerns about the coach’s being present. In this situation, I just tell the coaches we need to meet without them this particular time.

**Receptivity to Learning From Coaches and Athletes**

Elite athletes and great coaches use many of the techniques that we address in the academic study of sport psychology, often without much thought. Athletes realize that to perform they cannot be too analytical because it will get them thinking too much. As stated earlier, the role of a performance-enhancement consultant is to provide a structure and framework for the mental game. Showing how the various components of the mental game work as an integrated whole provides the player with a broader understanding of when and how to use mental skills in a variety of pressure situations.

I have always worked from the perspective that the elite athlete knows what works for him or her, and my job is to help that individual refine and develop the mental skills. I want the information to originate from the athlete’s personal experience, so it is relevant to that individual. Sometimes we think we have the “secrets for success,” but elite athletes already have many of these skills, or they would not be performing at that level. When the knowledge comes from the athlete, it is their knowledge, and they can take ownership of it.

Pat Summit, the University of Tennessee women’s basketball coach, expressed the importance of ownership and accountability when she stated,

The more responsibility they are given the more committed they will be to a project, and the more they then make it their project. When it’s theirs, they feel more accountable for its success or failure, and they do whatever it takes to help it succeed. It becomes “our” team instead of “my” team. Responsibility
equal accountability equals ownership. And a sense of ownership is the most powerful weapon a team or organization can have. (Summit & Jenkins, 1998, p. 37).

To promote this perspective, I ask athletes questions (i.e., when you perform well, what do you do to mentally prepare? When you lose control, what are the early warning signs?) These types of questions (Orlick, 1996) help the athletes become more aware, and they help provide feedback about what is effective for that athlete. Such questions also have helped identify what is effective, particularly when the pressure is on. Most important, talking with the athlete directly allows me the opportunity to build working relationship based on trust and respect. It also allows the athletes to know I respect their wealth of experiential knowledge.

A technique that I have found effective with elite athletes is to ask them what their mental game is like when they are performing well. Some people say if they start to think about it, they may lose that ability to perform. My response is that when they perform, they are eventually going to lose it, so we should get the information from it now. I have also found that an athlete’s discussing the mental aspects of the performance (focusing, mental preparation, etc.) is not quite the same as his or her thinking about the technical aspects of mechanics execution. If the athlete overanalyzes the mechanics, then problems are likely to occur.

One method I use when athletes are performing well is to set up a meeting and have them talk to me about their mental game as I tape the session. Then later in the season, when they are struggling, we meet and just listen to the tape. The players quickly realize they are not doing certain things now that they were doing earlier. What seems to make the difference is that the information is not coming from me; rather, they are listening to themselves, and what better authority is there? In addition, when they are struggling, everyone is giving them information, adjustments, and a multitude of strategies to try. This definitely contributes to a loss of concentration and intensity because there are now so many ways “to fix” the issue.

The educational, proactive, collaborative elements have served as the background to my approach. As I noted earlier, I have been fortunate to learn a wealth of information from the coaches and athletes I have had the privilege to work with. I have spent a multitude of hours observing and consulting with athletes. In the next section, I will discuss some of the important factors in gaining access in working with coaches and athletes.

**Steps to Gaining Access**

To gain access as a performance-enhancement consultant, I have to know the sport and the types of pressures that those athletes confront both on and off the playing venue. This type of sport-specific information helps me earn the trust and respect of coaches and athletes, which are prerequisites to having any impact on their performance. It also is important to understand the context of the situation in which I will be delivering my program so I can adjust it as needed. In some cases, the context that I anticipate I will be working in will help me to determine if I want to make the personal commitment to that team and/or situation.

**Know the Sport**

As a consultant, you have to learn the sport. There are major differences between each sport and the demands made on the athletes. For example, open sports (soccer) vs. closed sports (curling), contact sports (hockey) vs. noncontact (tennis), team vs. individual, time (swimming) vs. judges (figure skating). All of
these sports have inherent differences. In designing an educational program, the consultant must be aware of the inherent differences of different sports and adjust his or her efforts to meet these demands (Ravizza, 1988).

Although a background in athletics is important to your success, it is not essential to have played the sport to be effective with athletes in that sport. You must, however, learn the nature of that sport. Two sports that were unfamiliar to me were field hockey and water polo. I read books, sport journals, watched videos, interviewed performers, and observed practices. For example, I quickly learned that water polo has three components: swimming, wrestling, and basketball. I also never realized water-polo players are some of the most highly conditioned athletes. All of this sport knowledge is so important in talking with elite-level athletes.

For example, when we discuss arousal and its effects on performance, it is one thing to address the “inverted-U theory” and quite another to talk to field hockey players about how, in practice, they should be relaxed while making a stick-stop when the ball comes 12 inches off their stick; but, in the game, they may be trying too hard, the shoulders tighten up, and the ball comes 16 inches off the stick, which impacts the timing of the pass. This type of dialogue lets the athlete know that you understand the demands of the sport. This gives you additional credibility because you speak the athlete’s language and the information you present is applied immediately.

It is also important to understand the subculture of the sport and design your program to meet those needs. For example, the country-club golf culture is completely different from the hockey locker room. I have had the privilege of learning from a multitude of coaches and athletes. Just as coaches have to pay their dues climbing through the coaching ranks, sport psychology and mental training consultants have to pay their dues working with and observing athletes. I volunteered for many years before I began to ask for payment for my services. From an athlete’s perspective, a master’s degree or a doctorate does not mean you have “practical” knowledge. Elite athletes expect and know whether someone has the experience .. they can smell “garbage” better than most people can. Thus, you must know the subculture, information, etc. that you are presenting, or you will be wasting the time of the coaching staff and athlete alike. I was fortunate at my university to have direct access to coaches and athletes and was able to learn by observing and asking questions. I remember one player saying to me, “Ken, you are always asking me questions. What is your question today?” One question that yields a wealth of information is to ask coaches, while they are observing practice, “What are you seeing?” This really gives me their perspective and educates me to a completely new perspective. If I can gain a better understanding of what the coach is seeing and looking for, that awareness can only help me in my work with the athletes.

Earn Trust and Respect
Two teams I have worked with provide prime examples of earning this type of respect and trust. The first was early in my career when the baseball coach at my university wanted to learn more about the mental game (Ravizza, 1990). We met every Wednesday morning for one hour for 10 weeks. I shared my educational approach; he expressed his needs and concerns and taught me about the mental aspects of baseball. This type of “checking-out process” helps the coach lower the risks of handing over control over certain aspects of the program. The coach must have confidence in the consultant as a person and the material the consultant presents before he or she surrenders any control. If the coach does not check the
consultant out at the start, the lack of trust will become an issue at some point. The surrender of control is one of the major reasons coaches are reluctant to have any consultants work with their teams. This is especially critical with the mental and emotional aspects of performance. As consultants, we forget the coach has been working diligently for endless hours to prepare the team, and the thought of having an “outsider” come in and “get into a player’s head” is disconcerting to say the least.

The second team I worked with was a major college football team. When the coach first contacted me, he emphasized that another coach had referred me, which is how most of my consulting opportunities have occurred. I have never had a coach check out my academic resume and my publication record. After numerous conversations with the head coach, he gave me access to his 10 assistant coaches. I gave an hour-long talk with the staff that focused on the importance of the mental game. After my presentation, the head coach discussed my presentation with his staff and the feasibility of my working with his team. I then conducted a follow-up session to answer questions and address specific needs. Once the staff was supportive, the next phase was to give a presentation to 20 key players. During this meeting, the head coach observed my presentation and his players’ verbal and nonverbal reaction to the material. After the talk, the head coach solicited feedback from the players. The final phase was to address the total team (100 players) and have them give their feedback to the coach. By this point, the program had gained support at all levels, and I could refine it to work in the context of that unique situation.

This is the ideal type of evaluation because it allows me to know they truly want, value, and support the program and fosters my own personal commitment to that particular team. Going through this process also gives me an opportunity to assess if this is a group I want to work with. When I make a commitment to work with a team, I must make a total commitment and bring my passion to the consultation process.

I emphasize to the coach that we need to spend the time at the start truly getting to know each other as people and then to understand the concepts and methods involved in implementing a program. Regarding these types of presentations, it is critical to present material in a language that coaches and players can understand. Be careful not to use an abundance of overheads, Power Point presentations, or the traditional methods we cherish in the academic environment. The presentation needs to be practical, and the coaches and players have to feel it was worth their time to listen. One sport psychology consultant was invited to talk with a group of elite-level coaches; but his attitude was so condescending and irrelevant that 10 minutes into the presentation, the coach who invited him stopped the talk, asked him to step outside, wrote him a check, asked him to leave, returned to the room, and apologized to his coaching colleagues.

In all my years, I have never been asked to give research references. Athletes and coaches are pragmatic, and the manner in which a consultant presents his or her material is more important than all the technical information. For example, I seldom give research references because the coaches and athletes are not interested in research data but in practical application and various stories and examples of how the information has been used. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of giving practical stories or examples. This is why it is important for young practitioners to work with athletes at any level so they gain practical experience (Halliwell et al., 1999). Elite athletes can definitely distinguish academic knowledge and book knowledge from the real world of sport.
Understand the Context of the Situation

Throughout my career, I have worked in a multitude of diverse situations, which I will refer to as “context,” that range from working with individual athletes to working with teams and helping coaches provide the performance-enhancement program. I have also worked on the short “quick-fix” approach and on a season-long basis. In this article, I focus on the ideal situation of working with teams on a season-long basis. From the ideal situation, there are various contexts in which certain components of my approach, and the program as a whole, may have to be adjusted to meet the needs of each unique situation that I confront.

To be effective, I have to learn the context of the situation that I work in. By context, I mean that I first have to determine if the program can be effective. This determination is influenced by the support received from the coaching staff as evidenced by such things as the amount of time provided, the schedule of the time provided, and the amount of reinforcement the program receives from the coaching staff. Another way to determine the support for the program is how long I have to wait for phone calls to be returned by coaches and management’s staff. In my 15 years with the Anaheim Angels, I have had to work with nine different head coaches and four different general managers. Each placed a different value on the importance of the mental aspects of performance. For example, one coach said, “I am a big believer in the mental game,” yet when I asked him for a half-hour meeting with the team before practice, he claimed there was just not enough time to do it. Another coach, who was supportive would ask, “When is the best time to do it, because I want to be certain they are fully focused when you talk with them?” Even though I was working with the “same” organization, it is obvious that the context had changed, and I needed to adjust my approach accordingly, because the context impacts program effectiveness.

In the next section, I address two major aspects of my work. Awareness training serves as a foundation to my approach, and it is developing these skills in practice that is going to help the team perform to their potential. I have found that most coaches are very interested in whatever can help them enhance the quality of their training.

Awareness and Quality Practice

Awareness is essential for athletes to make the adjustments required to perform at the elite level (Ravizza, 1998). It is my assumption that increasing the athlete’s awareness can speed up the athlete’s learning process because the athlete is actively involved in it. The best opportunity to develop this awareness is in one’s practice and training.

Awareness: A Critical Foundation

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

—(Eliot, 1971, p. 59)

Awareness development has been central to my approach. If athletes are going to learn from their experience, they have to be more aware of their experiences. So often, the athletes are working hard, but they are doing the wrong work, or they are totally “mindless.” This mindless state may be great when one is “in the zone,” but there are awareness and conscious thought that go into the preparation. This awareness is an integral part of the holistic approach. The athlete is not just a body, but also a total functioning human being.
As athletes perform, their awareness changes from the conscious level to the more automatic level. This is similar to Zen philosophy where one has to be in control so one can let go of control and where one has to be aware to let go of awareness. When the pressure situation arises, it can be more effective “to try less than to try to do more,” which often results in unnecessary tension and excessive trying.

Some athletes are hesitant to get involved in sport psychology because it gets them “thinking too much,” which leads to “paralysis by analysis.” If the athletes lack awareness, however, then they can overreact, lack focus, etc., but because they are not aware, there is not a problem from their perspective. A performance-enhancement specialist has to be careful because some athletes will overanalyze and this pulls them from the actual playing of their sport.

**Traffic Control**

In the book, *Heads Up Baseball* (Ravizza & Hanson, 1994), we compared performing an athletic skill to the task of driving a car. When driving, we come to a signal light and have to check the color. If it is green, then we go. With athletic skills, I want the athlete to occasionally “check in” and, if all is well (green light), then keep going. D. Newburg (personal communication, December 16, 1998), a performance consultant, stated that the key to performance is to control “your response to the response.” We are going to respond to the pressure, but we need to respond to that reaction and not just mindlessly allow our emotions to pull us along. For example, when athletes experience pregame pressure, they need to recognize that response (shortness of breath) and respond to it (regulate the breathing). If the light is yellow, then the athletes need to quickly process the information and decide what to do. If the light is red, then they have to stop, or they will crash. I find many times when the athlete performs poorly and crashes, it is often because they were spinning out of control and didn’t even recognize it. The most pragmatic aspect of the signal light analogy is the green light. When things are going well, just go. This allows those athletes who are hesitant to reflect on performance learning to become more conscious only when there is a need for it. Another benefit of this traffic-light analogy is that it provides a vocabulary with which coaches can address the athlete’s experience and enhance their self-regulation skills. I call this “traffic control.” I want the athletes to recognize their signal lights. A person’s signal lights are unique to that individual. The signal light enhances the athlete’s awareness of his or her experience. What do I experience, think, and focus on when the lights are green, yellow, or red? For example,

- **Green**—total involvement, clear thinking, present focus, just doing.
- **Yellow**—negative self-talk, frustration, lack of commitment, excessive trying.
- **Red**—belief in the negative self-talk, things speeding up, rapid breathing, anger.

These are examples of emotional states that athletes experience during performance. It is important to recognize that there are differences among individuals. Not every athlete would necessarily agree with how these mental and emotional states are classified. This awareness is a critical first step to gaining control.

The signal-light concept is also used for the athlete to anticipate the potential stressors of the upcoming competition. What are the yellow lights for this competition: venue, opponent, umpire, travel, teammates, family, injury, etc.? Thus, the athletes are prepared, have contingency plans, and are ready for the
potential distractions and obstacles. We practice how to deal with adversity by simulating game situations (crowd noise, bad calls by officials), and the players and coaches must practice coping with them. Even though a simulation cannot replicate the intensity of competition, some aspects of the simulation are very similar to real competition, and participants have to focus on those aspects. This can only help the athletes’ confidence because they have anticipated potential distractions and have practiced coping with them.

Thus, proper preparation involves much more than just visualizing positive thoughts; it includes preparing for adversity. This has been another change in my work. When I started, I was using my work on peak experiences to serve as my foundation (Ravizza, 1977). This concept of being in the zone, or the flow state, drove my work. Then one coach I was working with said to me, “I am tired of hearing about the zone. That type of performance occurs once a season. I want these athletes to know how to cope with adversity.” It took me a few years to truly understand what this coach was telling me. Basically, peak performance is not about performing perfectly or being in the zone; it is about learning to deal with adversity by learning to compensate and adjust. Thus, if you only have 70% of your confidence, then take that 70% and do battle. Stop worrying about the 30% that is not there. When the athletes take what they have and compete with it, they are more likely to perform on a consistent basis.

Development of Awareness

When I work with coaches, I encourage them to ask athletes more questions about their performance instead of always telling them what to do. So rather than telling the tennis player “to get your arm back further,” the coach asks, “How far back is your arm?” Reflection on this question will require that the player become aware of the arm and how far back it is. It will also provide the coach with an opportunity to assess the athlete’s awareness level. This point, made by Galloway (1974), encourages coaches “to say less and notice more” and is very important for sport psychologists who too often use some technique to “fix it.” This is particularly critical for the young consultant who has all the theoretical knowledge and current techniques but tries to help too soon or provides too much information. I remember in my early years when I saw a situation with which I knew I could help. The coach pulled the team together for me to talk with, and once they were close, I started sharing all my wisdom, but they were not paying attention.

D. Wolfe (personal communication, November 11, 1980), the coach, said, “Stop, Ken. Get eye contact.” In a sense, I was out of control, and it took someone else to make me aware of it.

The athlete’s lack of awareness becomes a challenge when a coach informs me that a particular athlete is not being honest with himself or herself about performance. An example of this occurs when the athlete is trying too hard and is in the yellow light zone, but does not even recognize it. I find that such an athlete is not dishonest, just unaware. We can develop this skill, rather than questioning the athlete’s values and ethics. Such an approach makes the situation more manageable.

Thus, the signal-light analogy has been very productive in my work, especially, for elite athletes who know they do not need to be aware when things are going well, but do need to know when they are losing that focus so they can compensate and adjust and get back on track before they really get out of control. I believe this is one of the reasons why athletes are hesitant to become involved in mental training or sport psychology, or both. They are afraid they will think too
much, and some highly educated athletes fear they will overanalyze their performance.

Another tool that has helped me check on the athlete's awareness, and more specifically his or her listening skills, is after talking with an athlete, to ask what he or she has heard me say. I have been shocked at what the individual heard me say. This is why it is important to occasionally ask, "What did you hear me say?" This has helped me to clarify my points and keep the information short and simple. The KISS principle, "Keep It Simple, Smart," is crucial, especially in the mindset of competition (Halliwell et al., 1999).

Quality Practice
When I began my work, I focused the vast majority of my energy on the "The Big Game." Today, 5% of my attention is on "The Big Game," and 95% of it is on today’s practice. I am not certain that I can help the team win the big game because there are so many extraneous factors involved (injuries, the officials, etc.). However, I do know I can help increase the quality of practice. The mental skills can help the athlete by having them be more focused and prepared. In some sports like figure skating, the athletes train on their own for certain practice sessions. I emphasize the need to practice better than their competitors do. This requires setting goals for practice and having a plan or something they are working on when they do the skills. This intention will provide a level of intensity because there is a clear purpose. For example, when soccer players warm up, there is a certain point where each kick has a target and the athlete is not just mindlessly kicking the ball. Rather, they focus on the target, and the kicks are more game like.

Coaches are more excited to learn about methods of enhancing the quality of practice because there is not as much at stake as compared to big games. In addition, they know that quality practice is critical to quality performance. In 1992, the NCAA mandated that college coaches reduce practice time so the student-athletes would have more time to focus on academics. As a result, many coaches said, "Ken, we just don't have the time now for mental training." In contrast, Dave Snow, the head baseball coach at Long Beach State said, "Ken, now I need you to get more involved in our program. Because we have less time, we need the players even more focused in practice" (D. Snow, personal communication, September 12, 1992). Coaches are very interested in what mental training can do to help athletes achieve a higher quality of training. Many people in our field claim they have some secret to winning the big game. Practitioners have to realize that this is an insult to the coaches who have diligently worked with the team to reach their goals. I know that for me, I do not have any secret, but I do know that the mental game has to be practiced on a daily basis if it is going to be effective in the pressure situation.

Segmentation
One way to enhance quality practice is to have the athletes learn methods of segmenting their academic, social, and personal lives from today’s practice. We discuss matters such as practicing at 3:00 p.m., and what the athlete can do to mentally prepare for practice so that when it starts he or she is ready and focused to get the most out of it. When I worked with the coaches at Harvard University, they mentioned that many athletes brought their academic problems to practice. One method or symbol they used to help separate academics from practice was a bridge the student-athletes crossed that separated the academic buildings from the athletic facilities. Athletes were encouraged to leave their academic problems on that side of the bridge and take advantage of practice time to set those problems aside. After practice, with a fresh perspective, they
could re-address those academic issues.

The act of getting dressed for practice is another symbol to segment school, personal, or work activities from sport. On a "yellow-light" day, the athletes can symbolically acknowledge and release their pressures for that day as they get dressed. For example, when they dress for practice, taking off the sweater represents not worrying about a math exam, and shedding the pants may represent setting aside an argument with a friend. Each item of clothing represents something from the day that needs to be "put away." Then as the athletes put on the practice clothing, lace up the spikes, and walk to the venue, they can focus on routines that can be used to set goals for the day, adjust their energy level, and do whatever else is necessary to be ready for practice. There are times that the athlete needs to put meaning into some of the routines that they do—"The time is now; the place is here."—Because each day they choose to take a step forward toward their dreams, remain the same, or take a step back. A step forward is not always being successful, but they can fail and learn from their failure.

Learning to Have Good Bad Days

Practice is also a wonderful place for the athlete to work on their compensation and adjustment skills. The athlete and team have to learn to perform through adversity. So, if practice is not going well, consultants should focus on specific tasks that can be done to turn it around. For example, if the athletes are having a rough practice, they can turn it around for one minute instead of trying to turn it around for the whole practice. Once the athletes turn it around, they need to learn what they did to turn it around, (communicate more, direct their attention on the ball, instead of their worries) because this is what they need to do in the competition to turn it around. Just turning it around is not enough . . . they have to know what they did to turn it around. This will provide them with "something to go to" that is task relevant and that has been effective in the past. Peak performance is about compensation and adjustment. Like everything else that is done in competition, it has to occur in practice. For example, with Coach Snow's baseball team, we have a drill in which the players imagine they just made an error, and they practice turning it around by establishing a routine to recognize the error, release it, refocus on the task, and move to the next pitch. Thus, because errors happen in the game, we practiced compensating and adjusting from the error. As this is practiced, it becomes more refined and simplified so when adversity hits, the athlete knows how to "turn it around" and has practiced it. Thus, the athlete has to learn to have "good bad days" in practice because when the final score or time is posted no one cares how the athlete felt or what distractions there were; the athlete must perform.

Lessons Learned

In the next section, I share some of the lessons I have learned that have helped me negotiate the often turbulent and uncertain waters of consulting in the area of performance enhancement.

Confidentiality

When I work with a team, I do not provide specific information to coaches or management. This is the best way to be unsuccessful because once you break confidence, every player on the team will know about it. I do not want to be involved in team selection or playing time because if the players know my input is considered, they are going to tell me what they think I want to hear. If I am involved in team selection, I have a responsibility to let the athletes know my position. Any informa-
tion that I do share with the coaching staff is general information, unless I obtain the player’s permission to be more specific.

If I believe there is something the player shares with me that I think would help the coach in working with the player, I will ask the player’s permission to share that information with the coach. About 90% of the time, the players are willing to have me share the information. I remember my first year in Major League Baseball. I worked with the team before the game, and then I watched the game with a friend. During the game, I talked with my friend about my work with the team. I spoke in very general terms, no names or specifics. The next day, a player I worked with asked me what I was doing talking about our work together while I was watching the game. His wife, whom I had not met, was sitting behind me and heard me talking. She assumed I was talking about her husband. From this I learned “Be careful when at the venue. You never know who is watching or listening.”

**Helpful Hints for the Young Practitioner**

As young practitioners, you cannot do what I do; it took me 20 years to learn and refine my approach. You have to be yourself, and you have to bring yourself to the consultation process. Be careful of only hearing the athlete’s perspective. Attempt to get the coach’s perspective, or what I call a “reality” check. Sometimes I made the mistake of being too nice so the athlete would like me, but there are times when you have to be strong and assertive and let the athlete know your perspective on the issue. Some athletes will not want to hear it, and you may lose your working relationships with them, but if you are not strong, you are going to have only a limited effect. For example, one coach said to me in the early phases, “I don’t want ‘I’m okay, you’re okay’.” I have found certain athletes respect you more when you are assertive and let them know what you think. This is part of the “art” of doing the work, and it develops over time.

**Keep the Faith**

It is important for young practitioners to realize that they are not going to have an impact on all the players and coaches. This is where the textbooks are misleading. When I read the literature in our field, it sounds as if coaches and athletes are waiting for us with open arms. This is not the case, and not every major team and organization would have mental training and sport psychology consultants working with their teams. On some teams, assistant coaches feel threatened by the presence of a performance-enhancement consultant, and they will actively subvert your work.

In addition, the context of the situation you work in is going to have an impact on what percentage of players is going to get involved. I generally have one third who will get involved, one third who will get involved when they have problems, and one third who will have nothing to do with the process. As mentioned, these percentages will change based on the context of that specific situation (i.e., the amount of demonstrated support you have from the coach). One phenomenon that often occurs is that the player who needs it the most will have the most resistance to the program. Sometimes you have to be patient and wait for the teachable moment. My relationship with teams has varied from being totally accepted and an intricate part of the program to implementing a program from a distance. At times, there is uncertainty in my position, and often it is by design. The best example is Olympic teams where there is a strong likelihood of becoming caught between the different perspectives of coaches, the National Governing Body, and the players. I work with all three
groups as they resolve the natural progression of conflicts that must be overcome.

I have worked diligently with some athletes, and they have not appreciated my efforts. At the time, this hurts when you make a total commitment, develop and implement a program, and receive little recognition or appreciation, but this is where the consultant has to be clear on why he or she is doing the work. If you are expecting athletes or coaches to acknowledge their work with you to the media, you may be waiting a very long time. I attempt to stay out of the media, as I want the athlete and coaching staff to take the credit. Coaches can become irritated after they have done so much of the work, and a consultant steps up to get the credit. This does not help future working relationships. I want the athlete and coaches to receive the credit because they are the ones who have earned it.

As performance-enhancement consultants, we do not attend all the practices and competitions. We are part of the staff and team, but we are often not in the inner circle on a daily basis. I believe this type of working relationship is one of our strengths because we come in and move away, a flexibility that provides us with a fresh and insightful perspective. Many coaches appreciate the information and insights I provide by not being in the midst of the action all the time. The negative side of this orientation is that you often are not an intricate part of the team. There are times you are an outsider, and it takes a while to integrate back into the culture.

**Remember That Patience Is a Virtue**

One aspect of consulting that is not discussed enough is patience. Many consultants make the mistake of trying to do too much. There are times to be almost invisible and not do anything unless it is critical. I remember when I first began working with a gymnastics team. I was invited to accompany the team on a road trip. When the team returned, the coach talked with the team about having me travel with them. The coach said, "I'm not certain it was worth the money to bring Ken with us since he didn't do much." At that point, the team captain said, "That is what we like about Ken—he doesn't do anything unless it is needed."

Sport psychology consultants can be ineffective if they try to do too much too soon. An intricate component of the art of effective consulting is to be patient and I would suggest to the young practitioner to do less rather than trying to do too much. As consultants, we do not want to become stressors to the coaches and athletes. For this reason, I suggest that the practitioner clarify his or her role and the expectations of all parties. Another technique that I have found effective is to let athletes and coaches know that they can say, "Not now, Ken! I can handle it. I do not want them to worry about my feelings; they have enough to focus on. At moments like these, I have had to learn to not take things personally.

**Provide Post competition Support**

Be patient after the competition in talking with coaches and athletes. This is especially the case after poor performances. There is very little we can do to help. All we can do is be there when they are in pain as this demonstrates that we care. I dislike being in the locker room after a tough loss, but we have to do it. I am there, I am available, and I wait for the coaches and athletes to come to me. I also have found that directly after competition, many coaches are so mentally exhausted that it is not a productive time for substantive interaction. Of course, if the coaches want to address certain issues, I am available.

**Establish a Support System**

Another thing that has helped me is having a group of colleagues and coaches to whom I
Performance Enhancement in Various Fields

Throughout my professional career, I have worked with four major groups in the area of performance enhancement: students, athletes, business and community groups, and health-related practitioners. Much of my work has developed from my university position where I have taught stress-management courses for the past 20 years. This has provided me with a broad view of performance issues in many different areas. I have consulted with numerous business groups and community organizations from law enforcement to health administrators and from physicians and nurses to business leaders. My experiences and the knowledge I have gained from my sport consultations have helped me develop methods that are basic and effective. The great thing about sport is the athlete receives immediate feedback on his or her performance. This type of instant feedback has helped me modify and refine my methods and approach.

I remember talking with a group of recreational softball coaches about mental preparation for performance, concentration strategies, playing the game one pitch at a time, and performance evaluation. After my talk, a gentleman came up and said that he was a surgeon and that he was relating everything I said to surgery. He said taking one pitch at a time is similar to taking one stitch at a time during an operation.

When I was a graduate student, I took a tennis class with Tim Gallwey, author of The Inner Game of Tennis (1994), who began the class by asking the group two questions: “How many of you are here to improve your tennis?” (Most people raised their hands.) and “How many of you are here to improve your awareness?” (Very few people raised their hands.) At that point, he went on to explain that the class was going to teach us to improve our awareness because that was...
something we could use in all aspects of life.

If my only concern is helping the athletes perform their sport skills better, that perspective is rather shallow in my opinion. However, if the athlete can understand the role of commitment and passion in performance, set goals and establish a plan to achieve them, develop routines to mentally prepare for performance, learn to focus, regulate his or her intensity level, and learn to evaluate the performance, then that athlete is more likely to use these skills in other aspects of his or her life. These are life skills, not just sport skills.

The advantage of working in the field for years is hearing athletes I worked with 10 years ago say, “Ken, when I was an athlete I used some of the stuff you shared with us, but now I use it even more in my job and with my family.” This is one of the things that truly have made the work worth doing. This particular athlete said, “I wanted to call you because when I was a gymnast and you were working with us, I wasn’t really into it. But today I used it in my job as a firefighter when I went into a burning building and saved three people’s lives.” He continued, “Ken, I could hear your voice as I was in the pressure situation.” These types of reports are why I am proud to be an educator who helps athletes refine and develop their mental skills.

I also think many business people are active in conditioning, playing sport, or following a team. People generally can relate to sport, and sometimes it is more effective and less threatening to use an analogy or example from sport to make a point. For example, an athlete has to deal with poor officiating whereas a salesperson has to cope with a difficult supervisor.

**Closure: Ending the Working Relationship**

The issue of closure has been a difficult thing for me in my work. I personally grow frustrated when I work with an individual athlete, and I think the individual is genuinely committed to working through the issue, but then he or she never arranges the follow-up sessions. At this time, what I do is tell the athlete that after the first session, I want the athlete to decide if he or she thinks it is worthwhile and then make a commitment to at least two follow-up sessions. This enables the athlete to determine if it is worth the time and experience. It helps me, when I know it is the athlete’s last session, to bring closure to the relationship and give the individual some final essential points that he or she can take away.

Closure is an even more difficult issue when I am working with a team. If coaches do not want the program, they often do not provide any feedback on what went wrong from their perspective. They just move on and sometimes won’t even tell a consultant that his or her services are no longer needed. For me, this is very difficult to deal with because when I work with a team, I invest my knowledge and passion into it, and I at least think I deserve to be told why the program was terminated. This feedback is critical if I am going to improve as a consultant. I remember that after working with the Angels for 5 years, I was sent a letter informing me that my services were no longer needed. I was devastated, and I wanted to know why. I called the general manager’s office, but my phone calls were not returned. After many calls, I finally got a response: I was told that the new coach did not place any value in sport psychology.

I have found that this type of honest and open feedback helps me bring closure to my work with the team and allows me to make adjustments in my approach. Sometimes you may be released, not for doing a bad job, but for things that are totally beyond your control (i.e., the new coach’s sister is a sport psychologist). I always tell athletes to learn
from their failures, as we have to do the same thing as consultants, but sometimes it is difficult to get the information. I know this is part of consulting work, but at times, it is difficult for me to deal with.

Confidentiality is important if you desire a long-term relationship with an athlete or a team. Once you break confidentiality, you have lost the trust of the people you are working with. As a young practitioner, be patient, and establish a support system to get input from colleagues you respect. In addition, as a consultant, you must learn to bring closure to your work so that you can learn from each consulting experience and continuously refine and develop your approach.

Summary
In this chapter, I have addressed the background to my approach and methods to gain access to working with athletes and teams. I emphasized the importance of increasing the athlete's awareness and the use of practice as a wonderful place to refine and develop the awareness skills. I also have shared some of the lessons I have learned from working in this volatile environment. My approach, techniques, and philosophy have been in a constant state of evolution, and I know that I will continue to grow as a consultant and person as I continue on my journey.

I want to conclude this paper by thanking all of the coaches and athletes who have shared so much with me for so many years. They have allowed me the extraordinary opportunity to learn from them. I just hope the reader can learn a few valuable insights from this article.

References
