What Works When Working With Athletes

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A highly effective method for disseminating knowledge is to observe the most experienced individuals in the field of interest. Although business, teaching, and coaching have been mentoring and apprenticing students for years, the field of applied sport psychology does not have a long formal history of doing so. The purpose of this article is to capture and present the thoughts, theories, and techniques employed by highly experienced applied sport psychology consultants to formally record what they believe “works when working with athletes.” General topics discussed include: gaining entry, techniques of assessment, delivery of information, and approaches for preparing athletes for “major competitions.” Common ideas and practical guidelines are summarized from the authors and discussed in light of current scientific and professional practice knowledge in the field. These consultants do not claim they have all the answers, but rather share their experiences in hopes of providing ideas and facilitating self-reflection concerning consulting effectiveness on the part of the reader.

The field of applied sport psychology has grown, become more specific, and adapted throughout the past quarter of a century. Much has been learned by those working during a significant period of development in the field, however, seldom has it been formally recorded. One way to rectify this state of affairs is to interview highly experienced consultants. This is also constituent with one of the primary objectives of sport psychology outlined by Coleman Griffith, the father of North American sport psychology (Gould, 2005). In particular, one of the objectives of sport psychology is to observe experienced and competent consultants, teachers, coaches, and athletes, understand their psychological principles, record their techniques, and pass on their knowledge to new, inexperienced consultants, teachers, coaches, and athletes. While teachers, coaches, and athletes systemati-
cally pass along their knowledge by mentoring, apprenticeships, and internships, consultants rarely partake in formal experiences and thus have not always been effective at disseminating knowledge to each other. The pedagogy literature is replete with examples of studying expert teachers (e.g., Collins, Brown, & Holm, 1991; Gauthjer & Giber, 2006; Yopp, & Guillaume, 1999). Experienced and successful coaches have also been studied (Bloom, 2006; De Marco & McCullick, 1997; Horton, Baker, & Deakin, 2005). For example, Tharp and Gallimore (1976; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004) observed the coaching behaviors of John Wooden of UCLA basketball and Silva (2006) documented coaching practices of Anson Dorrance of University of North Carolina women’s soccer. Furthermore, we can learn from autobiographical and biographical accounts of coaches and athletes (e.g., Pat Summit, Lance Armstrong, and Phil Jackson).

Experiential knowledge is of great importance in teaching fields (i.e., coaching, teaching, and consulting) because of individual differences, teaching styles, and various situations. According to Martens (1987), experiential knowledge is vital in sport psychology to forming relationships, understanding the human experience, and introspection of self. There is no substitute for the knowledge that is gained by experiencing the world yourself, but learning directly from those who have gained valuable expertise is the next best option. Beyond the experience of understanding others, the importance of discovering and understanding oneself is of great significance. For a consultant, one must be able to know and trust his or her judgment and intuition in any given situation to be truly effective. The current problem lies in the inherent issue that intuition, experiential knowledge, and developing relationships cannot be taught only in a classroom or by reading a book. These intangible characteristics must be experienced, both in failure and success, to most effectively teach others. Although sport psychology training requires a specified amount of practical hours, many young practitioners do not have the opportunity to learn from those who have experienced a wide range of experiences in the field.

Part of knowing oneself is understanding and adopting a theoretical perspective or a combination of multiple perspectives, within which one frames a psychological skills program or intervention. While each sport psychology consultant represented in this article has a unique theoretical perspective from which they base their performance enhancement practices upon, all of the authors approach applied sport psychology from a humanistic or person-centered philosophical perspective. Hill (2001) provided a variety of philosophical perspectives related to sport psychology, and described the basic components of the humanistic model to include: establishing a client-practitioner relationship, genuineness, nonjudgmental caring, empathy, and particular attention to the human experience. According to humanistic philosophy, the sport psychology consultant pays close attention to the relationships they build with the athletes and coaches they work with and constantly build upon this relationship while also developing a psychological skill repertoire. Furthermore, Ravizza (2002) discussed the importance of dealing with an athlete as a whole person in terms of his or her identity, since sport often encompasses many areas of an athlete’s life. According to Ravizza, athletes must know and understand that their sport psychology consultant cares about them as a person, rather than solely an athlete. This philosophy is so critical to today’s athlete because they have to “know you care before they care what you know.” Once this type of relationship is established, an athlete will be much more willing to commit to the skills taught by
the practitioner. Therefore, the following sport psychology consultation techniques are framed around a humanistic perspective.

The last three authors have worked as applied sport psychology consultants for over two decades with a variety of successes and failures. Success of a sport psychology practitioner can be determined by, for example, the length one works with a team, how many teams seek out consultation services, and how much money a program is willing to spend on your services (Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza, & Rotella, 2003; Ravizza, 1988). In this article, three successful consultants shared their experiences, thoughts, and beliefs concerning general areas of working with athletes. Similarities existed in the theoretical perspectives, approaches, and viewpoints presented, but there will also be distinct differences, illustrating that there is no one absolute framework when working with athletes. Rather, a large part of the effectiveness of these three applied sport psychology consultants lies in the uniqueness of each individual and their comfort with both themselves and their unique approach. One must be confident in their presentation and delivery style within the consulting process to have the best opportunity to be effective.

The following topics are addressed by these experienced consultants: gaining entry, techniques of assessment, delivery of information, and approach to dealing with “major competitions.” The four sections were chosen based on usefulness to the new practitioner and guidelines presented in The Consultants Guide to Excellence for Sport and Performance Enhancement (Halliwell et al., 2003). More specifically, when working with a team, a beginning consultant must find a way to gain entry with the team in terms of the coaches’ interest and access granted to the team, but also developing meaningful relationships with the athletes. Then, assessment is key to understanding what that particular team needs in terms of psychological skills, as well as determining the context of the situation you will be working within. Next, program delivery is essential to the success of a consultant because both the method of delivery and the content described will be the “meat” of what coaches and athletes remember about sport psychology. Finally, the authors felt that the new era of sport psychology focuses more on quality practice and performance excellence rather than emphasizing the big competition. Of course, a national championship, an intense rivalry, or ranked team games carry more weight and excitement; however, from the mental perspective an athlete should be able to treat that competition similar to any other competitive event. For instance, the 1996 men’s Olympic baseball coach said, “keep the pleasure of competition greater than the pressure.” The consultants also wish to emphasize that all four sections presented are interrelated. As a practitioner, you are constantly earning respect and assessing the situation because the sports world and consulting process is filled with adjustments, set backs, and barriers. It is imperative to remember the importance of flexibility and ongoing creativity because each consulting experience has a life of its own.

The remainder of the article will include a summary of the last three author’s common ideas, guidelines, and lessons learned through their experiences as applied sport psychology practitioners, followed by a parting thoughts section. It should be of poignant interest that none of the authors feel that they have all the answers or that their approach is the only way; rather each is attempting to share and discuss what has worked for them when working with athletes. The consultants views presented in this article were written individually by each author in a narrative form. This methodology allowed the authors to describe their techniques and perspectives for each of the four sections in their own style and words.
Gaining Entry

Gaining entry as an applied sport psychology consultant is multifaceted. A practitioner must establish respect, credibility, and trust with the coaching staff, athletes, and sport personnel (Ravizza, 1988). Achieving this challenges the practitioner to consistently demonstrate his or her knowledge of sport psychology, ability to maintain confidentiality, and the effectiveness of the mental skills intervention. The authors will highlight various aspects of gaining entry, including initial meetings and interviews, building relationships with athletes, coaches, and support staff, understanding and respecting the specific sport, and preparing for an evaluation by the athletes and coaches of your approach and general fit with the team.

Keith Henschen

I received a telephone call from a head coach inquiring if I would be interested in working with a professional team in the capacity as their sport psychology consultant. I responded in the affirmative and requested that a meeting time be set to meet with the coaches to discuss the specifics of my employment. A time was agreed upon and I was looking forward to the meeting. When I arrived at the appointed time, I was amazed and a little overwhelmed. Not only were the coaches there, but also the owner, legal counsel, head trainer, vice president, and the director of player personnel. This was not an informal discussion, it was an important interview. General questions were asked about my background in terms of academia as well as experiences in working with professional athletes. As the interview appeared to be coming to a close, the owner asked what my objectives for the first year were going to be. I responded by stating that my primary objectives would be to establish rapport with the players, get to know them, have them feel comfortable with me, and to lay the foundation for a trusting relationship. The owner then asked if “I expected to be compensated for this.” I said absolutely! The owner was taken back that I would take so much time to establish rapport—he wanted immediate results for his money. To date, I have worked with this team for the last 19 years.

It is probably the dream of almost everyone who works in the area of applied sport psychology to eventually have the opportunity to “show their skills” at the professional level of sports. While this is an admirable objective, most practitioners will take a long time, if ever, to achieve it. Gaining entry at the elite level is normally dependent upon what type of foundation (reputation) you have developed early in your career. I know of no one in applied sport psychology who has at the beginning of their career worked at the elite level and been successful. My graduate students frequently state that they want to do what I do. I respect their ambition, but explain to them that it has taken me over 20 years to establish my reputation and to be offered such opportunities that I currently enjoy. I believe that young professionals should enjoy where they are working now and not worry about getting somewhere else.

The initial years of my career were spent working pro bono with young athletes (age groups), some high school performers, and once in a while a college athlete. I enjoyed the opportunity to learn from the coaches and athletes and greatly enjoyed helping young athletes develop into successful performers. As I worked with individuals and teams during these earlier years, word of mouth sent a number of people in my direction. Realizing that the expertise I was dispensing was of
some worth, I decided to charge for my services. From these humble beginnings, I eventually moved to working with elite and professional level competitors. A number of the young athletes I have been fortunate enough to work with have become Olympic and eventually professional performers. Needless to say, this has definitely enhanced my credibility. Having had these opportunities was probably a combination of luck or just a case of being in the right place at the right time and not necessarily due to my expertise.

Gaining entry can happen for a variety of reasons: special circumstances, location, luck, expertise, or a combination of the above. I do believe though that the keys to gaining entry are hard work, knowledge of applied psychology research, being creative/innovative in your applications, being genuine, having a willingness to continue to learn, and totally enjoying your work. These characteristics are essential to a young sport psychology consultant because it takes years of observing, building relationships, and making mistakes before a practitioner finishes their education and apprenticeship and is ready to charge for their services. Gaining entry is not something you can logically plan for; rather, it is something that happens as your reputation increases and your expertise gains recognition. A solid foundation is essential before gaining entry to the highest levels of competition. I might be strange, but I have never applied for a consulting position in sport psychology; nor have I used my consulting opportunities to advertise my expertise. Simply put, gaining entry is determined by your being genuine, working hard, and establishing a credible reputation that is carried by word of mouth throughout the local community and sports world.

Dan Gould

Gaining entry is a key issue facing anyone interested in conducting mental training programs for athletes and coaches. This important task functions on a number of levels. First, at the most basic level, one needs to gain initial entry into the particular athletic setting or with a particular team. To do this you must establish your credentials and this does not come from having PhD or “sport psychologist” on your business card. It comes from paying your dues by working with athletes and teams, developing strong performance enhancement skills, and establishing a reputation as an effective sport psychology consultant who quietly knows how to help athletes and teams achieve their goals, while staying in the background, maintaining confidentiality, and being a team player. It is during this initial background or sport development work where consultants also pick up numerous examples of how mental skills work for athletes and the consultant skills that allow them to customize their approach to working with each individual athlete or team.

In the sport world who you know and what they think of you is much more important than fancy brochures, direct mailings, or cold calls. It is important to network and meet coaches and show a genuine interest and love of sport. You also need to pass the good guy or gal test. Athletes and coaches will make a quick assessment of whether you are a down to earth person who respects other people. As Orlick and Partington (1988) found in their study of effective sport psychology consultants, sport personnel do not want someone who appears to be overly academic, cannot speak in down to earth terms, and cannot offer concrete and practical advice. You must also be careful not to appear as a know it all (even with
your specialized training when know more than then client) or someone who does not listen and does not respect what athletes and coaches say. Lastly, athletes like support staff, who are professional but fun loving, do not mind being teased, are flexible and adapt to changes without complaint, and respect athletic accomplishments but are not enamored with famous athletes or teams.

While having the knowledge and experience to help athletes and teams is necessary, alone it is not enough to gain entry. A consultant needs to learn some self-promotion skills, which can be uncomfortable for some of us. For example, you should have a biosketch or introductory paragraph that positively indicates or “sells” what experiences you have had as a consultant and your effectiveness, the type of services you provide, and references from athletes and coaches who can attest to your effectiveness. Moreover, many times you do not get a great set-up or introduction from your local contact when being introduced to a team or group of coaches so during initial meetings you need to understand how to subtly build your credibility by relaying past experiences of the types of performers you have worked with and how mental training has helped them. My experience, however, shows that this is best done with a subtle low-key approach using examples versus sounding like a braggard. Most importantly, do not exaggerate or make it sound like you had a bigger effect or worked with someone more than you did. Nothing will kill your credibility more than having someone find out that you did not do something to the degree or effectiveness you said.

Second, once your services are secured you must gain entry or acceptance with the players, coaches, and sport personnel. Again, passing the good gal or guy approach previously mentioned is important. You also need to show that you understand and appreciate their sport (so if you are unfamiliar with it do your homework by reading books, watching DVD’s, or going to clinics). You do not need to be an expert, but must show that you understand sport in general and key elements of their sport in particular. At the same time don’t try to appear as an expert in a sport you are not. Lastly, part of fitting in is helping out when needed, whether it is lending a hand when the bus is being loaded, running back to the locker room for a forgotten item, or video taping practice. It is also important to show commitment and persistence by regularly attending practice and competitions despite inclement weather, early mornings, or long hours.

Finally, establishing strong consultant-coach or consultant-athlete trust goes beyond gaining initial entry. Trust takes time to develop and must be earned. That is, athletes and coaches will test your commitment and trust. They will watch to see if you follow through on what you say, maintain the confidentiality you promised, practice what you preach (e.g., if you preach working hard they will watch to see if you are hard working) and most importantly will monitor whether your suggestions help them play better. Coaches and athletes will even watch to see how you handle pressure and unexpected events. As a consultant you must constantly work to earn and enhance client trust and you must be patient in not pushing too hard before trust is established. For example, getting the team star to buy into your mental training might be critical for success, but prematurely pushing your program on him or her often results in negative feelings and lack of involvement in sport psychology. It is better to let him or her see your good work and approach you when he or she is comfortable doing so.
To gain entry as a sport psychology consultant, you have to earn the trust and respect at all levels whether that is with the coach, administration, support staff, or athletes (Ravizza, 1988). Sometimes as professionals we forget that coaches have performed quite well without our expertise for many years and all we are doing is complimenting what they have been doing without us. We are one small part of the performance issues they are contending with (Halliwell, et al., 2003). We must respect their world, earn their confidence, and know our role. To do this we must know the sport and psychological demands of that sport. For example, understanding the differences between open (e.g., field hockey) versus closed (e.g., golf), subjective (e.g., gymnastics) versus objective (e.g., swimming) sports (Ravizza, 1988, 2001). It is essential to learn distinctions between different sports because there will be different physical, emotional, and mental demands that the athlete must deal with in each sport. The mental skills used in golf are very different than the mental skills needed for rugby. With golf we have to remember the game is designed to drive the performer crazy and test his/her ability to focus and remain patient, while the rugby player must be able to compensate and adjust as quickly as the game is changing.

It is important to know the vocabulary, basic skills, and strategy of the sport. I find a solid understanding of the technical skills is critical because the sport psychology skills must be integrated into the task-relevant performance cues. For example, basic relaxation skills are important but eventually they must be applied in the act of performance. I had a softball coach early in my career after a relaxation session say, “I am tired of all this relaxation in a quiet, comfortable place, I want them to relax in the moment they must produce when the game is on the line.” By understanding the basic demands of the sport, it will assist you in integrating the sport psych skills in a manner that is effective in the pressure situations.

It is also important to know what previous experience the team had with sport psychology and also understanding what their perceptions and expectations might be. For example, it is important to know if the previous consultant did something to upset the coaches, players, and/or organization. I remember one consultant to a professional baseball team saying to a group of assistant coaches that there was no research data to support the way the head coach was teaching a basic fundamental skill. It may have been accurate but one has to be tactful or, like that particular person, your association with the team will be short-lived. Also it is important to know the coach’s philosophy and basic approach so that you can collaborate effectively with him or her.

The most important part of the entry phase is building relationships with everyone involved with the program: the coaches, athletic trainers, sport medicine team, the players, and all the support staff (Halliwell, et al., 2003). Learn from them and be patient as you observe and enter their culture. At some point the coaching staff will check you out and determine if your approach is appropriate for their team. Do not be afraid of this evaluation because if they are going to give you access to their team they are going to check you out at some point. Often times you will be required to present your approach and potential contributions to the team. During this presentation, you have to explain why your program is critical to the team and you will need both the coaches and athletes to support it. You also need to capture
their attention, make it practical, and demonstrate that it will be worth their time and energy. I want coaches leaving that session to be saying, “That was worth my time”. You need to demonstrate that you are knowledgeable and can express yourself in a language that they understand. They will be checking you out and this is part of the consulting process because if you do not gain their trust and respect you will not be able to deliver and/or have the opportunity to deliver an effective program.

Summary and Integration

All three consultants highlighted the importance of effectively gaining entry through demonstrating competence and earning the trust and respect of the sport organization one becomes involved with. Authors were in agreement with building a strong foundation and education in sport psychology, proving oneself through interviews, and understanding and appreciating the sport. Authors differed slightly in how to get their name out to the public. Keith and Ken talked about creating a reputation and letting teams and athletes come to them, while Dan also felt that developing public relation skills without bragging or over promoting oneself was appropriate.

Techniques of Assessment

When beginning any mental skills program with a team or individual athlete, the sport psychology consultant must assess the needs of that specific team or individual. Since each sport, team, and athlete are unique, each mental skills program must be tailored specifically for the needs of that group. Although all three authors assess a team or individual in their own way, all three of them use some combination of psychometric testing, interviews, and/or observation. Furthermore, Ken also provides an assessment of the context of situation he will be working in.

Keith Henschen

Why is the area of assessment so important when working with athletes? Athletes in general are very unique individuals. They are definitely physically gifted, and for the most part, have been treated as very special people from the societies in which they have resided. This point is presented to remind the reader that elite athletes are frequently considered celebrities (by society and often by themselves) and thus must be worked with accordingly. Therefore, techniques of assessment should be applied with consideration since some athletes would rather focus on their celebrity status than work the mental game. My comments and suggestions will center around two areas: team techniques of assessment and individual techniques of assessment.

Team Techniques. The various levels of competition (i.e., age group, high school, college, professional) require different strategies for collecting assessment information. Up through the college level, teams are usually receptive to collective profiling or psychometric testing (Moreno, 1960) because the coaches have control and demand such information. Personally, I feel psychometric tests have limited utility and applications. The data will indicate a general framework or parameters of a team, but will not take us very far in identifying issues or rectifying problem
areas. I must say, according to my experiences, rarely at the elite levels will the sport psychology consultant be called upon to assess an entire team. Many Olympic and professional teams collect psychological or team information but rarely use it to their advantage. Psychological profiling for example is in vogue, but frequently the results are not used in any meaningful manner. Other assessment techniques that provide information about a team include: interviews, informal conversations, and formal team meetings (Halliwell et al., 2003). To me, informal conversations with selected team members and support staff (i.e., athletic trainers, medical personnel, coaches) can provide the richest source of information concerning team issues. The one type of assessment that I have found to be of great benefit to secure team data are called a Sociometric Test (Moreno, 1960). A sociometric assessment looks at team attitudes, communication channels, and relationships between team members. It is easily analyzed and reported by either a sociograph (a frequency distribution of responses) or a sociogram (a diagram of responses). Coaches as well as athletes appreciate this kind of feedback because it is so practical.

**Individual Techniques.** I depend on three sources of assessment when working with individual athletes: (a) psychometrics, (b) interviewing, and (c) observation. Currently, the employment of psychological assessments in the applied sport psychology field is not well accepted. However, because of my training and background I feel very comfortable in using psychological tests as one of my primary sources of information. I find that by using these tests I can quickly establish credibility and subsequently rapport with an athlete. Appropriate psychological testing saves me countless hours of observation in most situations. For example, when I am interviewing perspective draftees after the NBA combine camp, I will also have each player complete two psychometric assessments (a competitive profile; Oliglvie & Green, 1997a and a learning styles inventory; Oliglvie & Green, 1997b). The interviewing process follows the testing and finally the observation (of practices and competitions) ensues (Sparkes & Douglas, 2007). This sequence and subsequent triangulation of data has been a foundational skill of my practice, but it all begins with psychological assessment (psychometrics).

A number of years ago I wrote a chapter in *Case Studies in Applied Sport Psychology: An Educational Approach* titled “Issues Behind the Issues” (Henschen, 1998) and I explained that the triangulation of data were essential to procure the most accurate data concerning an individual. After all these years I remain convinced that information about athletes needs to come from a number of sources to provide a true picture. For example, an athlete may be experiencing interpersonal difficulties with their coach and from their perspective they are the victim. However, by both talking with the coach and observing practice, you might discover that the athlete is not receptive to feedback and is emotionally reacting to his/her mistakes and how the coach is trying to help him/her through the mistakes.

**Dan Gould**

There are a number of ways to assess the consulting situation you are going to be involved with, ranging from using psychometrically validated psychological tests to informal observations. For me, the initial interview is most often used where I meet with the athletes and ask a series of questions to learn more about them.
(e.g., what they like best about their sport, motives for playing, strengths and limitations) and the situation they are facing (e.g., how they have been playing, changes in starting status, why they came to see you). Of course, I supplement their responses with what coaches, parents, and other interested parties may have told me. Whenever possible I also like to watch the athlete practice and compete to observe how they react in pressure situations, how well they play at their best, and how they interact and respond to coaching. It is especially helpful to see how they respond to adversity and failure. Lastly, I have found Butler and Hardy’s (1992) performance profiling technique to be particularly effective. In its simplest form the performance profile involves asking the athlete or team to identify the mental skills and attributes (e.g., focus, confidence, determination) needed to be a top performer in their sport. Once these skills and attributes are identified I have the athlete or athletes rate themselves (e.g., on a 1 = poor to 10 = strong scale) on each attribute. The profile provides a good assessment of the performers psychological strengths and areas needing improvement and has the advantage of being athlete generated versus consultant generated.

Ken Ravizza

To make the commitment to work with a team I have to clarify their needs. Throughout my career I have moved further away from psychometric testing to focus more on interviews, informal meetings, and observation. Sometimes coaches want someone to address clinical issues, such as eating disorders or depression. I am not qualified but I can refer them to someone who has that expertise and understands the world of athletics. On the other hand, many times the coaching staff is not sure what they want, so I present them a menu or list of services I can provide and they can choose what they want. I also try to triangulate what I learn from informal discussions and observing practice with what the team may benefit most from. Once I determine I can meet their needs, I must decide where to begin and who should be addressed.

Another aspect of assessment for me is the context of the situation that I will be working in. For example, will you be able to attend practices, do some individuals traveling with the team (e.g., publicist, agent), or have access to individuals? The context is going to impact if you want to work with the team and coaching staff. In my early years of sport psychology consulting, I would work with anyone who would listen, because I was so excited, I had so much to learn, and thought I had so much to offer. Today, I use the context to assess if I am the best person to work with the team and if I want to work with the team. Because once I make a commitment to work with a team I will totally immerse myself in it.

Some of the things I have to assess are the subculture of the sport, the politics of the organization, the team and staff dynamics, and the amount of support that I will have. The subculture of the sport and the politics overlap, I must learn who the decision makers are, who the leaders are, and who the “gatekeepers” are. Frequently the people who have a major impact are difficult to determine until you are immersed in the environment for some time. For example, at one major university where I worked with an American football team, the second most powerful person to the head coach was a veteran athletic trainer. It became obvious on my first trip with the team because he was the one who sat right next to the head coach for the
past 20 years. At the professional and Olympic level, you have to look at the politics of the organization (Ravizza, 1990). How much influence do the administrators or the sports medicine team have? With the athletes you need to assess who are the leaders; which players are going to have the most influence on the impact of your program. In some cases, I may not gain everyone’s total support but at least there won’t be anyone sabotaging the program.

There is a need to assess the amount of support you will receive from the staff. The coaches’ support will be demonstrated by the amount of time and when you get to meet with the athletes. For example, the ideal coach wants me to meet with the players at the beginning of practice when the players are fresh and can give their attention. The meeting time also sends an indirect message to the team that sport psychology is important. If you are speaking with the team at the end of practice when the athletes are exhausted that also sends a message. Another way to determine your support is to observe how fast your phones calls are returned by the coach and/or administration. If they value your program your calls will generally be responded to quickly.

Summary and Integration

In summary, assessment techniques are focused mainly on the needs of the team and/or individual. All three authors describe the importance of interviews and observation, while Keith also uses meaningful psychometric instruments to assess a programs needs. Ken describes the importance of the unique context of each team and how to assess the team subculture, team dynamics, and support you will have as a consultant.

Delivery of Information

Program delivery is the meat of any mental skills training program and includes a planning or strategy phase as well as the implementation phase (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Henschen, 1998). Based on the assessment findings, consultants must tailor a psychological skills program based on the needs of the particular team that has requested their services, and then present the program in their own creative and artistic style. All three consultants deliver both team (group) and individual services, and provide general, skill specific, and maintenance sessions. The delivery of information section focuses on the importance of face-to-face interactions where the consultants build rapport and establish their credibility, brief interventions between competitions or while on the road, coach and peer-modeling, and nuances between collegiate, professional, and Olympic athletes. Each author provides a unique description of the various delivery techniques and observations that they typically use with teams and individuals.

Keith Henschen

The area of program delivery can be subdivided into three general categories, which include: how, when, and where.

How. I am probably too traditional but I am adamant that the most effective way to deliver sport psychology information is face-to-face with the client. Today, many
sport psychologists use the internet to dispense their expertise; however I think online consulting takes away from the meaningful personal interaction and knowledge you gain from studying a client’s body language. In my mind, delivering sport psychology services via the Internet is analogous to playing poker online. In both situations the intimate, face-to-face nuances of communication are nonexistent. Without direct communication so many subtle pieces of information are not available. I need (at least initially) to establish a strong bond and a trusting relationship with those with whom I am working. They need to feel and see my compassion, care, empathy, and sincerity to learn to trust what I am asking them to do. I have used web cam, but only after I really felt I knew the client and distance made it necessary. Other forms of media (i.e., cds, cassettes, or video tapes) can be useful in certain circumstances but only as supplements to the face-to-face interactions. For instance, you may create relaxation tapes for your athletes to supplement their precompetitive routine while they are traveling.

Another aspect of my “How” to deliver services is demonstration, followed by homework (Corey, 2004). I view delivery as a teaching and rapport building opportunity. Just as in the classroom or performance circumstances, after a skill is presented it must be practiced repeatedly until it becomes an automatic response. Automaticity only occurs after considerable repetitions, thus there is a need for homework on mental practice every day. During our initial sessions I explain to each athlete that they must commit to performing homework daily. If they will not make this commitment then I will refrain from being employed by them or refer them to someone else. After all, we only deliver two things: knowledge and/or skill, of which both entities can only be maintained and improved through practice (homework).

Once I begin to work with a person, it normally takes four-six months (meeting every other week) to accomplish the necessary knowledge or skill training. Of course, each individual is unique as to how long the training will take but beyond the intervention duration, follow through is essential. With every person that I have counseled, I will be available to them if they need me in the future. I would estimate that 75–85% of the people who use my services will require a “booster shot” sometime in the future. Frequently, athletes will back step and need additional advice and reinforcement. I am only too happy to oblige because of the relationship we have developed.

From a more practical perspective, I deliver services in primarily two ways, to individuals and to groups. For individuals, I usually have an initial meeting to listen to what they believe the issues are and to start to establish a rapport. For clients under the age of 18, I have at least one parent and preferably both, attend this “get to know you meeting”. I explain during this meeting what I expect to do and how I will proceed. Then, I advise them to take a few days to think about what we have just discussed and decide if they want to work with me. I follow this procedure because I do not want a quick decision, rather a well thought-out commitment. In addition, I want the person to be absolutely sure that they feel comfortable with my style, personality, and knowledge.

With groups or teams the delivery of information is pretty much standard. Initially, the issue is to develop credibility (mine) with the team members and to convince them of the necessity of the services to be provided. The buy-in process needs to be enhanced by the group leader or coach for the best results. I will not work with groups (or teams) if the coach is not fully supportive of applied sport
psychology. Once we have begun the sessions it is up to my personality and expertise to keep the sessions interesting, lively, informative, and stimulating.

When. If I am working with a team or group, I always try to integrate mental skills training into their practice sessions. By doing the teaching during practice, it sends a message as to the importance of this training. I also encourage all athletic teams to regularly and consistently devote a portion of each practice session specifically to mental training. Many of the teams, which I have worked with for a long time, and who have performed well, have bought into the idea that mental practice is just as important as the physical practice. A quality practice contains both mental and physical skills.

With individuals, my cardinal rule of operation is to be available night and day (anytime) for the convenience of the athlete. I have even met an athlete at 3:00 in the morning at an all night restaurant to do some counseling. Although this philosophy is not consistent with previous literature on the importance of taking care of oneself and setting boundaries with one’s time (Poczwardowski et al., 1998) I care about my athletes and want to be available when they need me.

Where. Services should be delivered wherever is convenient. Normally, I like a quiet and private area to dispense services; but where is not the important issue. Home, office, sports venue, and on the field of play are examples of where services can be delivered. Naturally, I would prefer my office for delivery, but frequently it is not feasible to use. For example, when traveling with a team, the hotel lobby, coffee shop, or practice arena may be the only option for psychological skills delivery. If an athlete realizes that you will help them at any time and at any place, your credibility and trust are greatly enhanced.

Dan Gould
I use any number of approaches to deliver services to athletes and coaches. For example, when initially meeting with teams I often conduct group general sessions to explain what sport psychology and mental training involve and how it can help participants. At other times during a program, group sessions may focus on topics such as creating a team vision, principles of goal setting, or what it takes to move from good to great. I try to make these group sessions highly interactive and include a healthy dose of exercises and group discussions. While I may use handouts to provide take home notes and information for players, it has been my experience that formal sessions that seem like a university class are not well received. In fact, I now try to incorporate relevant movie video clips (e.g., a scene from the Legend of Bagger Vance to depict the use of imagery by an athlete) to make sport psychology come alive for athletes and coaches. Be sure to include copyright information for video clips used during sport psychology presentations.

Based on Collins (2001) business book Good to Great, I sometimes begin sessions by asking the athletes to answer the question of why good is the enemy of great. After soliciting responses from them, I indicate that in studying great corporations that moved from being good to being great it was found that when one is good they are very comfortable. However, to reach their full potential and become great an individual or team has to push him or herself to be uncomfortable.
I follow up by asking the implications of these good to great lessons for their team and what it takes to move from being a good to great athlete or team.

While group sessions are sometimes used, the workhorse of educational sport psychology as I implement it involves one-on-one sessions with athletes and coaches. The individual sessions allow us to assess athlete specific needs in a confidential setting and customize strategies for each athlete and his or her particular situation. Typically, these sessions are voluntary with some athletes taking advantage of every opportunity to meet, others choosing to meet when they have a particular problem and some participants opting never to meet. It is particularly hard to watch an athlete struggle and choose not to meet, but this sometimes happens and must be accepted by any consultant. As the old adage goes, you can lead a horse to water but you cannot force the horse to drink! Finally, these sessions sometimes take place in my office, but equally often might occur in the bleachers after practice, on a bus ride or at a meal function. Regardless of the location care is taken to meet in a place where the conversation will remain private.

As the sport psychology consultant with the U.S. freestyle ski team leading up to the Nagano Olympic Games, I chronicled how many athletes took part in one-on-one sessions, the topics discussed, and how the sessions were received (Gould, 2001). Specifically, the topics that most often were discussed included goal setting, coach-athlete relationships, and communication, mental preparation routines, confidence, stress management, how to have fun when sport is so serious, frustration, jet lag/travel planning, thought stopping/dealing with distractions, dealing with pressure to make the team, the decision whether to attend opening ceremonies at the Olympics, fatigue/burnout, focus, and mental preparation. Interviews with several athletes and their coaches involved discussion of their perceptions of the program’s overall effectiveness and emphasized the importance of consistent and long-term consultant contact and the consultant offering practical hands on advice.

In addition to athlete sessions, I often hold one-on-one or small group sessions with team coaches for the purpose of discussing psychological strategies that can be used with the entire team or with particular players. It is important to note, however, that in these sessions (through preagreements with the coaching staff) I do not convey confidential information conveyed to me by athletes. These sessions are also not one-sided conversations where I serve as an expert telling coaches the mental strategies to use with their teams and players. In contrast, they are two-sided discussions where we bounce ideas off one another, make suggestions, and critically examine possible ideas. Often I have learned as much from the coaches as they have learned from me.

Other strategies I have employed include peer-coaching sessions where athletes coach one another on their mental games. For example, I have found peer modeling to be an effective way to help injured athletes work through rehabilitation resulting from major injuries (a recovered injured athlete emotionally mentors one currently coming back from rehab) or interviewing a small group of veteran athletes on how they mentally prepare in front of less experienced team members. The secret of effective consulting in this latter situation is to ask good questions that keep the conversation focused and from time to time provide summaries highlighting important guidelines and effective practices.
Ken Ravizza

Once you have assessed who your target group is and understand the context of the team you will be working with, you must then develop how you will deliver your program. When I worked in the National Football League, most of my work was with the coaching staff in enhancing their ability to coach the mental game and communicate with the players, based on what the organization wanted. In professional baseball however, I generally had a group meeting at the beginning of the season and then it was on an individual basis after that. In the professional baseball culture meetings are not encouraged and generally the whole team meets only if there is a problem (Hanson & Ravizza, 2003). At the Olympic and university levels there is a balance between group and individual sessions, because of the time it takes to meet with each athlete. When meeting with players on a group basis I generally try to keep my presentations to 15–30 min with the goal of a stimulating discussion and interaction, but occasionally when traveling with the team I will go for longer periods of time. I want the players to share their experiences and learn from each other. If I can get that experienced veteran player sharing, then the younger players will listen and more likely get involved in the program.

With one university football staff I did a session with the coaches’ wives. The session worked out great because then the wives knew what was going on and it could be reinforced at home. Like many things in the consulting process, it was not my original plan, but when one of the wives suggested it, I took advantage of the opportunity.

In regards to delivery, you have to determine if you can attend coaches’ meetings, team meetings, practice sessions, and competitions. Another major issue is if you will be able to travel with the team on occasion. When you are on the road with a team, there will be many brief and informal encounters with both coaches and athletes. Brief encounters may take place in a hotel lobby, on a bus, in the training room, or at a meal. I have found these informal interactions have been profound and where I have done some great work. Of course I would like more time, but often brief interventions can help build rapport and increase an athlete’s likelihood of setting up a formal meeting later. These brief interactions can provide a safe context where the athlete can work within his/her comfort zone (Giges & Petitpas, 2000). In addition, if we are on the road the athletes have more free time, are thinking about their performance, and may see an opportunity to meet with you.

Working with Olympic teams provides even further challenges. In the past I have been the primary sport psychology consultant for a team leading up to the Olympics and gaining full access credentials for the Games. I have also worked with teams where I knew I would not travel to the Olympics, but rather I prepare them for the event and refer any direct services they need while at the Games to the USOC Sport Psychologists. I also am available via phone contact to the coaching staff and players if they would like to speak directly to me. Again, focusing on the context of the situation you will be working in will help you do everything you can to deliver effective services.

In the delivery process it is critical to be patient in your interactions with the coaches and athletes. You need to gradually build trust and respect by being around and helping out (carrying bags, chasing balls, getting water). At times you have to wait for that “teachable moment.” It is critical to clarify any potential issues (i.e.,
discussing a poor reaction with an athlete or calling an athlete out when they are not accountable for their actions) with the coaching staff so you know what you can and can’t do. It is also important to be patient with both the coaching staff and athletes, since psychological skills require consistent practice and trust to someone new to the program. There will be many times you work with a team where you will not do much in terms of interventions but just being around is important. For the young practitioner, there are times when you are doing nothing, but you are showing your support and that you care. I think back to my first road trip with a men’s gymnastics team where I did very little as nothing needed to be done.

**Summary and Integration**

Program delivery is a dynamic process that is continuously changing and adapting to the team, individual, and situation. Although all three authors have many similarities in their delivery approach, each offers an individualistic method to providing services for coaches, teams, and athletes. The authors discussed a fairly standard team presentation approach that is short, interactive, and discussion or exercise based. Furthermore, the authors related that one-on-one sessions provide a more specific, education-based intervention relative to team presentations. Keith discussed the importance of including homework for athletes, Dan works intensely with coaches on how to reinforce mental skills during practice and competition, and Ken describes the differences between working with various athletic levels.

**Approach to Major Competitions**

Major competitions are part of sport at all levels, and are typically surrounded by increased pressure to succeed, multiple distracters, and performance anxiety for both athletes and coaches. From a psychological perspective, although the perceived importance and extrinsic rewards are different for major competitions, the equipment, rules, and game itself remain the same. The three authors present their perspective on how major competitions should be treated the same as any other competition. Ideas on perceived importance, distractions, reduced self-confidence, sticking with normal routines, focusing skills, and attuning or preparing for unexpected events are presented.

**Keith Henschen**

Many coaches seek out sport psychology services to help their team reach the pinnacle of their sport by reaching and succeeding at major competitions. How should we prepare someone to perform at their optimum during the crucial and incredibly stressful event of major competitions? The “Big Game” challenge is one that continually haunts the applied sport psychology community. Nothing really changes during “Big Games” except one thing, the athletes’ perception of the challenge and importance of the competition. The playing fields are the same, the rules remain consistent, and all the playing conditions are equal, but perception does change and the environment, crowd, and media change. In working with athletes I attempt to convince them that in reality, there is no such thing as a big game. Athletes need
to know that as perception is altered, three areas become magnified: importance, distractions, and disruptions.

The perceived importance of a contest or competition causes pressure, which in turn affects an athletes’ decision making. As pressure increases most athletes experience difficulty in controlling their emotions and cognitive abilities. Subsequently, even small distractions become magnified and are allowed to occupy more attention than normal. Normal distractions (i.e., weather, the media, spectators) are focused upon instead of handled as everyday occurrences. The athlete attends to something that should be irrelevant or at least miniscule to the outcome of the performance. In addition, in this state of mind a very small disruption quickly becomes a catastrophe (or is perceived as such) in the mind of the athlete.

To counteract the change of perception and thus eliminate the “Big Game” syndrome, an athlete must be taught to become absorbed in their performance. “Analyzation” must be switched (replaced) with enjoyment. Getting caught-up in the “Big Game” syndrome is really the result of having a loss of self-confidence. Confidence is the key to good performances and is also the cure for not being able to perform when the competition is at the highest level (Henschen & Newton, 2004). Athletes need to believe that they, and only they, are in control of their own performances at all times.

Dan Gould

Big games like the World Cup matches in soccer, the NCAA Championships in basketball, or the Olympics test an athlete’s or team’s mental and physical skill. And, it does not have to be a national or international event. For developing athletes league championships or state playoffs are “big” games. What is difficult about big games is that it is very easy for teams and athletes to get out of their normal routines or because of the importance of the event they feel that they need to prepare or psyche up in some special way. They also need to effectively cope with the increased stress resulting from the importance placed on the event. Research with Olympic athletes (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001) showed that successful performers, while excited about the special opportunity before them and drawing energy from it, work hard to mentally prepare themselves in the same way they normally do. Olympians are encouraged to adhere to their normal routines and focus on achieving their individual specific optimal zone of emotional functioning needed for peak performance.

Adhering to one’s normal routine is no easy task in big games; it is something akin to putting a million dollars in front of a group of athletes and saying they can have all the money if they do not think about it in the next hour. As a mental training consultant you counsel the coach and athletes to do everything possible to create as normal of an environment as possible, recognizing that it cannot be completely normal because of the unique nature of the event. You also do not wait until the big game to begin preparing your athletes for it. From day one of your mental training programs you help athletes learn focusing skills, while reminding them that someday they will use these skills to mentally prepare as they normally do at big games. Then when the big game comes, you remind athletes that they have prepared to play well and need to trust and follow their mental training plans and routines.
As a mental training consultant, it is essential that you stay calm in big events. Keep things simple and limit questioning from the athletes because even if the questions can be answered it detracts from an atmosphere of certainty and confidence. Try to keep things positive and help athletes stay relaxed but focused. As the great U.S. Olympic champion Bonnie Blair said, the key to doing well in big events is like being a child in a candy store. Taste the candy (enjoy and draw energy from the excitement of the event) but be careful not to eat so much that you get a stomach ache (become worn out and overly distracted from all the excitement of the event).

It is also important to recognize that as a consultant you may not be needed much of the time, so stay available but in the background and do not fall into the trap of thinking that you must do something special because it is a big event and that is your role. You can unknowingly be a distraction and performance disrupter by trying to be too helpful (when little help is actually needed).

Finally, a big part of optimal mental preparation for big games is to anticipate and be ready to deal with distractions whether it would be friends and relatives hounding that athlete to help them get event tickets, excited family members talking too much about the event outcome, or agents over scheduling star athletes for media events. The proactive approach is to acknowledge all of the potential distracters and prepare strategies to cope effectively with them. A key is to help the athlete stay positive, relaxed, and in a normal like routine. While at the same time, helping athletes recognize that at big events things don’t always go as planned and when unexpected events occur they must not panic, but stay flexible and go with the flow.

Ken Ravizza

It is important for athletes to prepare everyday with purpose and intensity. Of course, just by human nature, each athlete will perceive certain competitions as being more important than others. The danger is that if the importance is escalated, then many athletes have a tendency to try harder. A good technique to use at a so called “Big Competition” is attuning. Attune the athlete to the environment, the competition venue, the practice fields, locker rooms, media areas, drug testing facilities, etc. The athlete must feel comfortable and secure so that they are ready to compete well.

I frequently counsel the athlete to trust their training and technique. They have been successful up to this point by performing in a consistent way, so they need to just repeat their consistency in the next performance. I have a phrase that I use: “Do what you do, don’t bring it up a level.” If you have to bring it up a level then the athlete was not performing to potential in practice and there will be cracks in his or her confidence as a result. I want athletes to do what they do, because that is what is familiar and where they draw their confidence from. In big games it is critical to keep the pleasure of competition greater than the pressure of competition. There will always be pressure, so remember to have the athlete embrace it and use it to their advantage. Confidence is the key at this point in time. I try to model for the athlete a calm demeanor and a confidence in their ability to perform. Championship qualifiers have performed well all year and that is why they are competing in the championship game. I emphasize the idea that the athlete needs to anticipate and be ready to deal with distractions. In fact, I have encouraged coaches to provide distractions in practice so that the athlete is prepared to deal with such events.
Summary and Integration

Although coaches, athletes, and sport psychology consultants alike know that big games and big competitions have more pressure, pride, and accolades riding on them, the role of the practitioner is to help the athlete relax, remain focused, and perform to their potential. All three consultants identified changing characteristics of “big games” as the perceived importance of the game and a decrease in confidence many athletes experience when they think about their performance. They all emphasized the importance of following one’s normal routine and mental preparation procedures and not falling into the trap that they need to mentally prepare in some new and special way in this pressure situation. In addition, Dan and Ken recommended the practitioner themselves to maintain a calm, relaxed, and simplistic demeanor to model the “just another game” attitude to athletes before and during competition. Ken also described a process of attuning, or preparing for all potential scenarios at the big event which was similar to Dan’s recommendation for being prepared to deal with distractions.

Parting Thoughts

As can be readily deducted, each of the three consultants works in his own unique way, which is consistent with their personalities. But in actuality they all maintain a similar humanistic philosophy and many times do similar things. As sport psychology consultants, they have learned that collaboration with the coaching staff, athletic trainers, administrators, other support staff, and athletes is critical. They thoroughly enjoy the challenges that accompany the uncertainty of each consulting experience. It is crucial to compensate, adjust, and be flexible to work as effectively as one can in that particular situation.

A lot of the information and insights were shared in this article have come from mistakes which the three consultants have made. They do not want you (the reader) to make the same mistakes they have made in learning the art and craft of sport psychology consulting. They all agree that this pursuit has been wonderful and that they will always continue to learn, refocus, and develop our expertise. When it is no longer meaningful and fulfilling, then it will be time to stop working as a sport psychology consultant.

In writing this article we assume that you (the practitioner) have done the preparation to engage in this pursuit. Some of the critical components of this preparation being excellent academic training in sport psychology skills, understanding the mental game of performance, knowing the applied psychology research, having a sports studies background, understanding basic counseling principles, employing effective communication skills, and most importantly time spent learning from coaches and athletes. Also see Table 1: Common Ideas and Guidelines for additional suggestions on how to become the most effective sport psychology consultant you can. We can’t emphasize enough the importance of information gained from coaches and athletes concerning the practical realities of putting theory into practice.
Table 1  Common Ideas and Guidelines

1. Young sport psychology consultants should enjoy where they are now and work to establish a solid reputation. You can’t compare yourself to someone who has been doing the work for 20 years. The young consultant hasn’t failed enough to gain the wisdom that comes with experience.
2. Keys to gaining entry are: hard work, knowledge of applied sport psychology, being creative and innovative in applications, willingness to continue to learn, and being genuine.
3. Build a network and establish relationships with coaches.
4. Pay your dues by working with many athletes and teams, developing strong performance enhancement skills, and slowly develop a solid reputation.
5. Perfect the following assessment skills: interviewing, observing, and use of psychometric assessment instruments.
6. Learn some self-promotion skills.
7. Determine the context in which you will be working by assessing the subculture of the sporting situation: learn the politics of the organization, determine the team and staff dynamics, understand the amount of support you will have, determine who the leaders and decision makers are, and finally, identify the “gate keepers”.
8. Recognize your personal style of consulting and especially be cognizant of the type of athletes you do not work well with.
10. Do not base your performance evaluation on competition results.
11. To be effective you must establish a strong bond and a trusting relationship with the athletes, coaches, and leaders of the organization.
12. Be prepared to deliver services whenever and wherever they are needed. Athletes appreciate you being readily available.
13. The only factor that changes in “Major Competitions” is the athletes’ perception.
14. As perception is altered concerning a competition, three areas become magnified: importance, distractions, and disruptions.
15. Perceived pressure decreases decision making ability.
16. To counteract the “Big Game Syndrome” teach the athlete to become absorbed in their performance and “work the process”.
17. Successful performers work hard to mentally prepare the same way for all competitions.
18. It is important at major competitions for the sport psychology consultant to model calmness.
19. Attuning is a technique that works well with athletes for major competitions.

References


*Manuscript submitted*: February 21, 2007

*Revision received*: February 26, 2008