

# Graduate Education in Applied Sport Psychology: *Suggestions for the Training of Sport-Psychology Consultants*



## **Abstract**

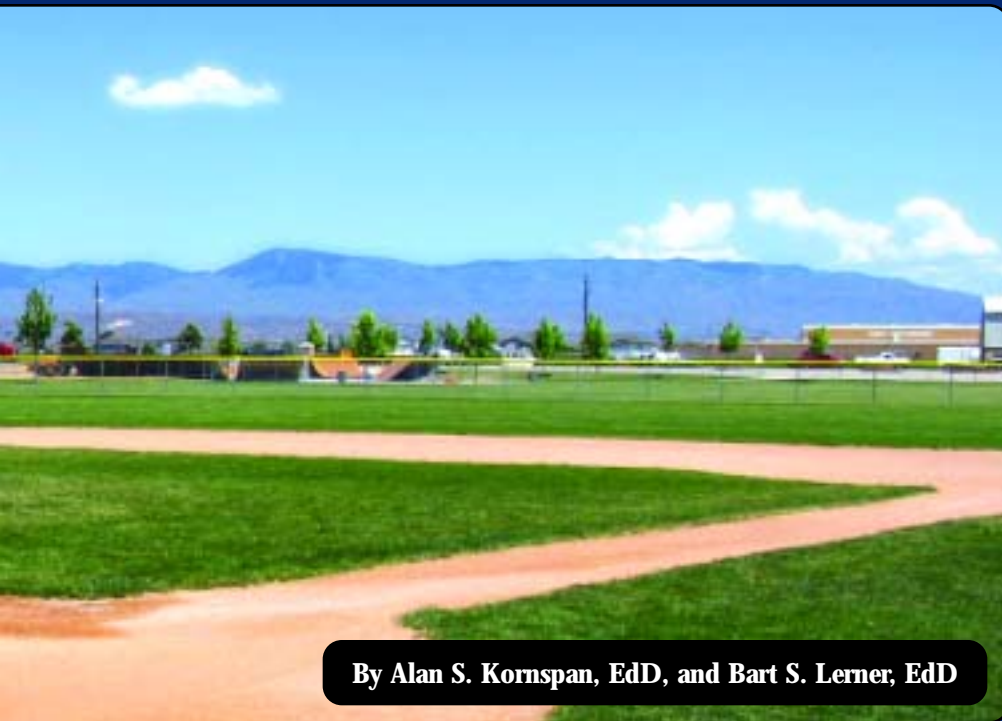
The purpose of this article is to present a rationale for the need to create multidisciplinary graduate training programs in applied sport psychology. First, this article presents information on interventions provided by sport-psychology professionals. Support for training sport-psychology professionals in counseling and sport and exercise science follows. Finally, suggestions for the training of future sport-psychology professionals are suggested.

**Key Words:** multidisciplinary training, sport psychology

The training required to become a sport psychologist continues to receive much attention (Murphy, 1995; Silva, Conroy, & Zizzi, 1999). However, debate continues on what constitutes proper training in applied sport psychology (McCullagh & Noble, 1996). In 1989, Singer proposed that the following question needs to be addressed: "What should the academic preparation of sport psychologists be?" (p.73). Singer suggested developing a standardized curriculum in the field of applied sport psychology to give future sport psychologists the theoretical and applied skills needed to become competent practitioners (Straub & Hinman, 1992; Williams & Straub, 2001).

Until recently, little analysis of sport-psychology curriculums had been undertaken to determine what current applied sport-psychology programs are offering (Van Raalte et al., 2000). Van Raalte et al. analyzed course offerings at universities that offered applied sport-psychology graduate programs and found that there was not a standard applied sport-psychology curriculum. Although a standard curriculum does not seem evident, the literature has suggested a need for sport-psychology graduate students to be trained in multidisciplinary areas (Petrie & Diehl, 1995; Petrie, Diehl, & Watkins, 1995; Petrie & Watkins, 1994; Silva et al., 1999; Weinberg & Gould, 2003). Silva et al. suggested minimal training criteria in order to train sport-psychology students effectively. They stated:

The responsibility for offering breadth and depth in training prospective [students] requires both intra- and inter-departmental cooperation. Intra-departmental coursework should include a core of courses in sport psychology, performance enhancement interventions, exercise and health psychology, and social psychology of sport. In order to properly prepare the student for AAASP [Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology] certification, coursework in motor learning, motor control, information processing, exercise physiology, psychophysiology, clinical psychology, counseling psychology, social psychology, and developmental psychology must be available to the student (p. 302).



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Thus, given that a standard multidisciplinary training curriculum does not seem to exist at universities offering applied sport-psychology graduate programs, a question follows: "Why should multidisciplinary graduate programs in applied sport psychology be created?" The main purpose of this article is to suggest the

content for such a curriculum and to explain the reasons why various content would be necessary in training students to be sport-psychology consultants. Specifically, this article addresses the reasons why specific coursework in sport psychology, sport and exercise science, and counseling/psychology are needed.

First, service-provision literature describing the roles and interventions of sport-psychology consultants is presented. Second, specific suggestions for coursework in sport psychology, counseling, and sport and exercise science are addressed. Finally, a summary and suggestions for continuing to enhance graduate education in applied sport psychology are provided.

### **Service Provision in Sport Psychology**

**Descriptive studies** Many descriptive studies have been conducted in order to determine the type of services that sport-psychology consultants provide. In general, the literature suggests that a wide variety of services are provided. For example, Gould, Tammen, Murphy, and May (1989) indicated that sport psychologists provide a wide range of services for performance enhancement, depression, injury rehabilitation, relationships, substance abuse, and eating disorders. Similarly, Petrie et al.'s (1995) research revealed that the most frequent consultations that counseling psychologists provided to athletes involved the following



issues: "academic/career, performance enhancement, anxiety/stress, interpersonal relationships, and eating disorders" (p. 539). Also, Petrie and Diehl (1995) found that 34% of clinical psychologists' contacts with athletes were related to enhancing sport performance. However, clinical psychologists also had contacts with athletes for nonperformance sport-related issues (e.g., injury, depression, career issues). Sullivan and Nashman (1998) also found that sport-psychology consultants consulted with athletes on individual personal issues, interpersonal relationships, and performance enhancement.

Two recent descriptive studies asked graduate students to describe the types of issues and services they provided to athletes while participating in a sport-psychology practicum. Andersen, Williams, Aldridge, and Taylor (1997) reported that sport psychology masters and doctoral practicum students provide performance enhancement and nonperformance services to athletes. In a follow up study, Williams and Scherzer (2003) found similar results.

**Case studies of on-site service provision.** Sport-psychology consultants are often asked to provide consultation to athletes at competition sites. Descriptive analysis has begun to analyze the services that sport-psychology consultants provide on-site (Kirschenbaum, Parham, & Murphy, 1993; Meyers, 1997; Murphy, 1988; Murphy & Ferrante, 1989). Generally, these analyses reported the number of consultations in a particular area of intervention. Murphy (1988) reported that 76 consultations were conducted at the U.S. Olympic Festival, of which 49 were performance-enhancement related, 10 were interpersonal problems, and 13 were communication-based problems. Murphy and Ferrante, at the 1988 Olympics, provided consulting that included 23 performance issues, 18 team-related issues, and 17 personal issues. Kirschenbaum et al., at the Olympic Festival, addressed 75% performance-related issues while 25% were personal, injury, and counseling issues. Meyers reported that 7 of his 47 contacts with athletes, coaches, and officials were related to performance enhancement. The

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additional contacts were related to issues such as retirement, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, confidence, relationships, communication, and providing information. Meyers stated, "Presenting problems ranged from clearly clinical questions (e.g., depression) to situations where educational issues dominated (e.g., performance enhancement). From these data, one can see that a community as large as the U.S. Olympic Festival, even a temporary one, produces a broad range of presenting problems" (p. 465).

**Sport psychology as viewed by providers.** Many consultants have provided writings on their philosophy of service delivery and the multifaceted services they provide. Neff (1990) described his work as focusing on issues such as performance enhancement, personal problems, and career goals. May and Brown (1989) provided educational services that consisted of lectures on stress management, mental rehearsal, attention, communication, and arousal control. They also provided clinical services such as anxiety management,

depression, personal problems, relationship and retirement counseling, and injury services.

Orlick (1989) suggested that the most common services he provided were educational sport-psychology activities such as mental imagery, mental preparation, commitment, and focusing. Orlick also explained that issues such as family, loss, transition, and injury often arise within sport-psychology consultation. For example, Orlick stated, "non-sport performance items that affect performance such as boyfriends, girlfriends, parents, education, retirement concerns, injuries, or coping with new demands are also likely to be raised by some athletes at one time or another" (p. 363).

Murphy (1995) described types of problems presented in consultations at the United States Olympic Training Center. He stated that more than 60% of 1,000 consultations were related to issues involving performance. Many issues were related to onsite competitive anxiety, concentration, worry, motivation, and coach-athlete communication. Harmison and Peterson (1998) stated that their main purpose at the United States Olympic Training Center was to provide services in order to help athletes and coaches reach goals. Harmison and Peterson indicated that a variety of services are provided even though the athletes are very highly functioning. These services included teaching mental strategies to enhance performance and personal counseling related to issues of depression, eating disorders, sleep, and relationships.

### **The Need for Counseling Training**

In order to provide athletes with a wide range of diverse services, it is clear that sport-psychology consultants should be able to assess each athlete individually and create a positive helping relationship. The following section will explain reasons why counseling training may be helpful for sport-psychology consultants.

**Interpersonal skills.** One important reason why counseling coursework should be part of an applied sport-psychology graduate curriculum is that the development of a positive relationship between the athlete and the consultant is consid-



ered to be important in obtaining successful outcomes (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999). For example, Orlick and Partington (1987) found that sport psychologists who were most effective met individual needs, established rapport, showed empathy, had multiple contacts, and had been working with the team for more than 9 months. Less effective consultants had poor interpersonal skills, did not make use of techniques that applied to sport training or competition, and were inflexible and insensitive. Similarly, Partington and Orlick (1991) suggested that "the most important personal assets for consultants to develop are good communication and interpersonal skills, especially skilled listening" (p. 191).

Hankes (1996) supported the belief that developing interpersonal skills is an integral component of effective sport-psychology consulting. He investigated the influence of academic training, former athletic experience, and interpersonal characteristics on the athlete's ratings of a sport-psychology consultant.

Hankes reported that a sport-psychology consultant's interpersonal skills had a major influence on how well he or she was rated.

***Counseling strategies and individualized assessment.*** Acquiring counseling skills may be helpful to sport-psychology consultants since consulting often takes place in a one-to-one relationship (Smith & Johnson, 1990). This often requires the sport-psychology consultant to tailor interventions and strategies to the individual clients he or she is working with rather than using a packaged preplanned approach. Often, the competence to create an individualized approach is based on the sport-psychology consultant's ability to structure counseling based upon his or her theoretical counseling orientation or applied helping model (e.g., Eagan, 1998; Hackney & Cormier, 1996).

Training in counseling methods and techniques may help the sport psychologist learn how to develop rapport and help clients commit to changing their behavior.

Without counseling training, the process of assessment and planning may be conducted without the needs of the athlete being met. For example, Danish, Petitpas, and Hale (1992) suggested that if the sport-psychology consultant does not assess the client's situation in detail, he or she might try to solve the problem too quickly. Danish et al. stated, "Training in counseling strategies could enable a coach, counselor, teacher, or sport psychologist to better understand the specific life event experienced by the athlete and implement an appropriate strategy or make an appropriate referral" (p. 407).

### **Boundary Issues**

Many authors have suggested that boundary issues often arise when conducting a sport-psychology consulting session. Therefore, it can be difficult to know when a performance-enhancement session has become clinically based or nonperformance-enhancement related (Harmison & Peterson, 1998; Hays & Smith, 2002;

Sachs, 1999; Simons & Andersen, 1995). Porter and Foster (1990) explained how boundaries are often difficult to determine within a sport-psychology session. They suggested that athletes often discuss the presenting problem (sport performance), then the session turns to general counseling issues such as school, life, and personal relationships.

### Summary of the Need for Counseling Training

Graduate students in applied sport psychology need training in counseling for a number of reasons. Petitpas et al. (1999) believed that counseling training was important because it helped counselors develop important interpersonal skills. Sachs (1999), in response to Petitpas et al., summarized the importance of obtaining counseling training in applied sport psychology. Sachs stated:

Whether one anticipates dealing with counseling and clinical issues or not in a relationship, the teaching relationship still involves rapport building and a positive working environment. The qualities necessary for building a solid working allegiance can only be enhanced by training that incorporates the suggestions of Petitpas et al. Indeed the prevailing notion (backed by experience) is that many athletes come for help with a presenting problem, but very often have a counseling or clinical issue underlying the presenting concern. Acknowledging that such dynamics are common makes the need for training as Petitpas et al. have suggested all the more critical (p. 361).

Based on the rationale for counseling training, the following types of coursework are recommended: training in counseling theories, counseling techniques, group counseling, and counseling practicum/internship. This training will help sport-psychology consultants develop effective interpersonal skills, structure the counseling process, assess the athlete, develop effective strategies, implement strategies, and evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment. The next section will provide a rationale for why a sport and exercise science background is an important

part of applied sport-psychology graduate education.

### The Need for Sport Science Training

Sport and exercise science training is an important aspect of applied sport-psychology graduate training. The multifaceted nature of sports (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2002), gaining access (Petitpas, 2002; Ravizza, 1988), and communication (Collins, Doherty, & Talbot, 1993; Collins, Moriss, & Trower, 1999) have been reasons put forth in the literature as to why sport-science training is needed. The following section will detail and explain in more depth reasons why sport-science training is needed in an applied sport-psychology graduate training curriculum.

**Multifaceted nature of sport performance.** Boutcher and Rotella (1987) explained the need to understand the various factors that influence performance outside of the psychological realm. These authors suggested that problems in performance may seem to be psychological, but in reality are related to other sport sciences (e.g., biomechanical). For example, these authors stated five interrelated factors that effect closed skill performance: (1) biomechanics, (2) physiology, (3) psychology, (4) equipment, and (5) strategy. Supporting this similar view, Collins et al. (1993) suggested that seemingly psychological problems, which lead athletes to seek sport psychology consultations, often are not psychological at all. In support of this view, Van Raalte and Andersen (2002) suggested: "Sport psychologists should make every effort to gain knowledge of the technical and physical aspects of sport and exercise activities. Such knowledge helps sport psychologists recognize when a problem is more physical than psychological and make appropriate referrals to coaches and sports medicine personnel" (p. 327).

Loehr (1990) provided an excellent example of how sport science knowledge could help the sport-psychology consultant determine if a seemingly psychological problem was related to concepts of physical training. Loehr was working with a tennis professional whose tennis perform-

ance was declining. The coach believed that her declining performance was due to psychological reasons. Loehr explained that the first few sessions talking with the athlete were not revealing. However, when he observed her training, practices, and workout schedules, he realized why the athlete was experiencing psychological difficulties. When Loehr helped the athlete change her training schedules to follow principles of periodization, the athlete's psychological difficulties improved as well as her performance. Thus, because Loehr understood sport science, he was able to design effective interventions to help the athlete overcome her psychological difficulties and enhance her performance. McCullagh and Noble (1996) provide a similar viewpoint as Loehr. They stated:

For example, to consult with an athlete who is striving to reach optimal performance, understanding the basic mechanisms of physical training is essential. If an athlete has reached an apparent "plateau" in performance, the knowledgeable sport psychologist can discern whether physical over-training or some psychological phenomenon is the issue of concern (p. 380).

**Gaining entry and respect from athletes and coaches** Ravizza (1988) and Petitpas (2002) explained that having knowledge of sports is important in gaining access and entry to work with athletes and coaches. They suggested that in order to gain this knowledge, the sport-psychology consultant could take advanced courses in physical education and sport studies, observe sports, or participate in sports. In relation to the importance of having sport knowledge, Petitpas stated:

To gain access to the sport system, sport and exercise psychology consultants must demonstrate a general understanding of the sport environment and appreciation for what athletes go through during practices and competitions (Danish et al., 1993). Psychology-trained consultants with a basic understanding of the sport sciences and experience as an athlete have clear advantages over their non-sport-oriented colleagues in gaining entry to the sports world (p. 264).



**Communication.** Sport-science knowledge helps the consultant communicate with athletes and coaches by using familiar terminology (Ravizza, 1988). Sport science knowledge can also help consultants communicate with other members of the sports medicine team (Collins et al., 1993; Collins et al., 1999). Collins et al. (1993) and Collins et al. (1999) believed that because sports are very complex, performance-enhancement solutions can be improved through an interdisciplinary team of sports-medicine professionals. Thus, sports-medicine professionals should be able to understand each other's fields so that they can design effective multidisciplinary interventions (Collins et al., 1993). Collins et al. (1993) suggested:

Communication between consultants and coordination of their efforts with the athlete/coach consumers is also a crucial concern, and a working knowledge of each other's fields can only serve to promote this (Collins, 1990). The efficacy of the "team approach" supports the argument for multidisciplinary support packages for athletes and highlights the advantages of a specific sport-science-related body of knowledge for sport psychologists who wish to work effectively in the field (p. 296).

### Summary of the Need for Sport Science Training

This article presented a rationale for why graduate curriculums in applied sport psychology should include coursework in sport and exercise science. The focus of this rationale was that knowledge of sports is needed so that consultants can understand sports multidimensionally. This knowledge would help consultants determine whether a problem was psychological or related to physical training. This knowledge would also help sport-psychology consultants understand sports in order to gain access and respect from coaches and athletes. Finally, sport and exercise science knowledge is needed to improve a sport-psychology consultant's ability to communicate with other sports-medicine professionals so that interdisciplinary interventions can be developed.

In summary, many sport psychologists support the need for sport-science training. Orlick (Straub & Hinman, 1992) stated, "Students should also acquire an understanding of the basic sport sciences and the applied aspects of mental training" (p. 308). Further, Loehr (1990) suggested, "It is my belief that sport psychologists should be required to demonstrate professional competency not only in psychology as it relates to sport but also in all the sport sciences" (p. 407). Because of the reasons proposed in this section, an applied sport-psychology graduate curriculum should offer the student an opportunity to take coursework in exercise physiology, biomechanics, motor behavior, coaching science (theories of training), and sport pedagogy.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide a rationale for multidisciplinary training in applied sport-psychology graduate education. In order to support our rationale, literature was reviewed relating to the services that applied sport psychologists provide. This literature indicated that sport-psychology consultants provide a wide variety of services. These services range from traditional performance-enhancement interventions to clinical/counseling interventions related to the sporting environment. Secondly, literature was presented that supports the need for an applied sport-psychology graduate curriculum to provide counseling training. The importance of interpersonal skills in effective consulting, boundary issues, and the ability to individually assess and structure sport-psychology sessions was delineated. Finally, this article discussed the reasons sport and exercise science should be included in sport-psychology graduate curriculums. Reasons included the need to be able to decipher if a sport-performance problem is psychological, biomechanical, or physiological; the need to have sport-specific knowledge to gain entry and respect from athletes and coaches; and the need to be able to communicate with other members of the sport science team in order to create multifaceted interventions.

Creating multidisciplinary training pro-

grams in sport psychology should help enhance graduate education in applied sport psychology, allowing future sport-psychology consultants to become increasingly more competent and prepared to work effectively with athletes. Based on the suggestions of those who support multidisciplinary training and the rationale of why this type of training is needed, standards setting the minimal criteria to be competent in applied sport psychology should be created within a multidisciplinary conceptual framework. Creating and implementing these standards should enhance the level of training in applied sport psychology. It is the author's hope that putting forth a rationale for training in each area presented will stimulate discussion on the need for specific coursework. Perhaps more quantitative and qualitative studies similar to Hanks' (1996) study will be conducted. Research such as this may determine how specific coursework and training in sport psychology, counseling/psychology, and the sport and exercise sciences influences sport-psychology consulting.

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