

How to Choose a Sport Psychology Consultant

The Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP), founded in 1986, is currently the largest applied sport psychology organization of its kind in the world (www.aaasponline.org). Given the growing interest in applied sport psychology and the use of sport psychology consultants, we feel it is important for athletes, coaches, athletic officials, sport organizations and the general public to be informed about the various competencies possessed by professionals who provide consulting services. The intent of this document is to present a brief overview of the different models of training that qualify one to practice applied sport psychology and then provide some guidelines athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators can use when choosing a consultant.

Training Models

Training in applied sport psychology varies considerably from individual to individual and from academic program to academic program. Professionals who provide sport psychology services generally take one of two academic routes to obtain their credentials: the sport science route (through physical education or kinesiology programs) or the psychology route (through clinical or counseling psychology programs). The route one chooses will determine not only the emphasis of that individual's training but very likely the types and levels of consulting he or she can offer.

The sport science route follows a physical education/kinesiology-based track of coursework and practicum experiences, which normally include sport psychology, exercise physiology, motor learning, sport sociology, and direct contact with athletes in performance situations. While individuals who choose this option often take a number of traditional psychology courses during their programs of study, they do not usually become licensed psychologists. Sport-science trained professionals are qualified to conduct mental skills training with athletes in a variety of areas of performance enhancement—such as goal setting, motivation, focus and concentration, energy management, confidence building—as well as life skills. Many hold positions as professors of sport psychology and some have had prior experience as competitive athletes and coaches.

The psychology route includes standard psychology coursework—such as counseling, psychological evaluation, psychopathology, therapy techniques—as well as clinical or counseling internship experiences. Individuals who choose this

route most often become licensed psychologists. Each state has its own licensure requirements, and professionals must meet those requirements before practicing in that state. Licensed psychologists provide clinical or counseling assistance for individuals in areas such as depression, grief or loss, life management, and dysfunctional behaviors such as alcoholism, drug abuse, anger management, and eating disorders. Many clinical and counseling psychologists hold positions in private practice and serve a broad range of clientele as well as athletes.

Guidelines for Choosing a Consultant

In addition to having a particular type of academic training each sport psychology consultant possesses a specific set of skills that defines the scope of his or her competencies. Thus, when choosing a consultant, it is important for athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators to consider the following guidelines:

- 1. Identify the types of sport psychology services you wish to receive.** Are you looking for someone who can develop a performance enhancement program and assist athletes during the injury rehabilitation process? Are you looking for someone to help athletes with drug and alcohol abuse problems or eating disorders? The answers to questions like these and others dealing with the types of services you are looking for will help you decide what type of sport psychology consultant to interview and the competencies that person should have.
- 2. Determine whether a prospective consultant has the appropriate training and possesses the necessary competencies (i.e., skill sets) to deliver those services.** Professional competencies also include the amount and type of experience the consultant has had in working with athletes. Taken together (i.e., academic training, skill set, and applied experience), a consultant's competencies will usually lie along a continuum that runs from Performance Enhancement to Clinical Consulting. In general consultants trained in the sport sciences who possess skills sets and applied experiences in mental training with athletes will have competencies that put them closer to the Performance Enhancement end of the continuum. Those trained and licensed in psychology with applied experience providing assistance with problems like drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, and anger

management will generally possess competencies that place them closer to the Clinical Consulting end of the continuum. In some cases, professionals with academic training in one area will obtain additional training or supervised applied experiences in the other, enabling them to provide a wider variety of services for athletes.

- 3. *Require supporting documentation of a prospective consultant's credentials before making a final decision.*** Check with colleagues who have employed the consultant as well as with some coaches and athletes who have worked with him or her. Ask people whose opinion you respect and who will be honest with you to tell you about their experience with the consultant—just like you would if you were looking for a good doctor or dentist. If you are interested in hiring a performance enhancement specialist, look for AAASP Certification (www.aaasponline.org) or USOC Registry membership. If you intend to hire a licensed psychologist, obtain verification that the person is licensed (or in the

process of obtaining a license) to practice in your state. Any clinical or counseling psychologist who describes him or herself as a sport psychologist should have specific training in sport psychology. If you are looking for an individual with a particular competency (e.g., treatment of eating disorders) find out what coursework, training, and/or certification the prospective consultant has had or currently possesses that indicates competence in that area.

As a consumer, it is up to you to decide what type of sport psychology services you are interested in receiving and then determine whether a prospective consultant has the training and competencies necessary to provide those services. Sport psychology is a rapidly growing field that offers athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators a variety of forms of assistance. By knowing what services you want and finding out who is qualified to provide them you will be ensured of the best possible consulting experience.

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