

Sport Psychology: A Primer for Educators

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Student participation in sports in schools is an integral part of their educational experience in both private and public school systems in North America. Sports in schools can be justified on educational grounds with respect to educational philosophy and educational outcomes. Most educational leaders believe students who participate in school sports benefit developmentally in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Developmental benefits include: developing individual and team goals, meeting deadlines, working as a team, learning to perform under pressure, dealing with adversity, handling success and failure, developing self-confidence, developing decision making strategies, learning communication skills, valuing physical fitness, and numerous others. These positive benefits for student-athletes, however, require proper leadership. In the absence of strong educational leadership from administrators, teachers, and coaches, student-athletes may encounter experiences that limit their development. For instance they may experience increased stress and anxiety, ridicule, and develop a negative attitude about the importance of fitness and exercise in their lives. The emerging field of sport psychology has much to offer schools, particularly in providing the necessary expertise to enhance the possibility that sport and exercise will be a positive experience in the lives of school children.

THE EMERGENCE OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY AND ITS PLACE IN SCHOOLS

Sport psychology is a relatively new field world-wide, and has the potential to provide valuable services to coaches, teachers, and student-athletes in schools, beginning as early as elementary school. Broadly defined, sport psychology is a science-based specialization

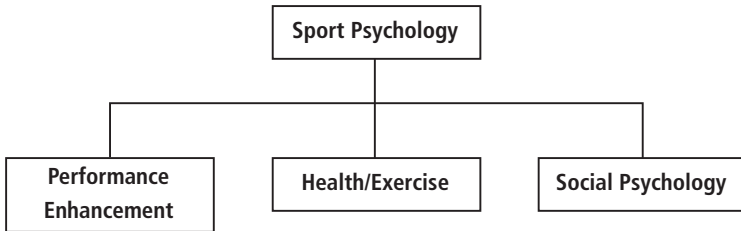
with a body of knowledge that provides professional services to children, adolescents, and adults interested in improving their quality of life through exercise and sport. Since its inception, but particularly during the past decade, sport psychology services have primarily been utilized at the professional, Olympic, and collegiate levels to help athletes and coaches enhance performance and personal development. However, Maher (2005) recently co-published a special edition of the *Journal of Applied School Psychology* and a book entitled *School Sport Psychology: Perspectives, Programs, and Procedures* where he argues for bringing sport psychology to the schools, in particular, asking school psychologists to expand their horizons and work with student-athletes, applying the knowledge base from sport psychology. To my knowledge this is the first publication that makes a case for bringing sport psychology to the schools of America. The series of articles in this special edition of the *Journal of Education* are likewise focused on educating school administrators, counselors, teachers, and coaches about sport psychology, what it is, who can deliver what kind of services, and examples of the type of research and services that are provided.

The School of Education at Boston University was one of the first schools in the country to offer courses in sport psychology, and to subsequently develop a graduate training program that has become internationally acclaimed. Space in this edition precludes a detailed description of the history of sport psychology, internationally, nationally, and at Boston University; however, I have described this brief history in several recent publications (Zaichkowsky and Naylor, 2005; Zaichkowsky, Perna, and Baltzell, 2005)

WHAT IS SPORT PSYCHOLOGY?

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the broad field of sport psychology. Essentially, sport psychology utilizes theory and research to educate and counsel coaches, athletes, and parents with the goal of facilitating optimal sport involvement and performance. In general, there are three often overlapping areas that make up the field of sport psychol-

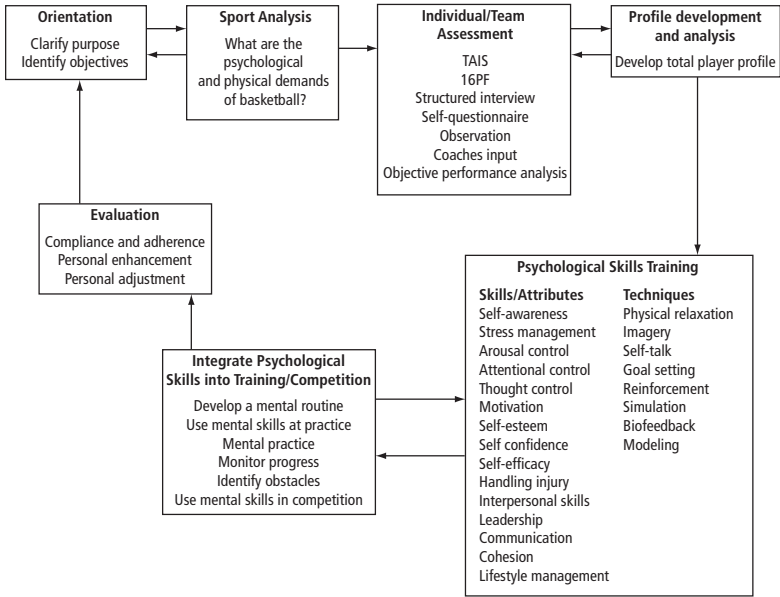
Figure 1
Sport Psychology: A Summary of the Focus Areas



ogy. The largest interest relates to the first focus category called “performance enhancement.” Here, sport psychologists, who are either trained in sport science or are psychologists who have expertise in sport, counsel their clients using empirically validated methods to enhance their client’s performance. Figure 2 is a model that I use in consulting with sport organizations to help enhance individual athlete and team performance. The “skills and techniques” box is a listing of many of the skills sport psychologists could teach student-athletes to enhance their sport performance. Coaches and school psychologists can introduce student-athletes to many concepts that will help them not only with sport performance but transfer as well to general “life skills.” The most useful skills to be learned by student-athletes include: goal-setting, imagery, relaxation, self-talk, attention/concentration, and commitment to rigorous practice. See the excellent article by Gilbert et al. in this volume, which describes how these skills are introduced into a high school curriculum. For thorough descriptions of these skills I refer you to texts such as Dosil (2006) and Weinberg and Gould (2007, forthcoming).

The second area of focus is referred to as health and exercise psychology. The issue of health and exercise has become quite prominent in sport psychology, so much so that the title “sport psychology” has become “*sport and exercise psychology*” in professional organizations (e.g., American Psychological Association, Division 47) and journals (*Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*). Our graduate program at

Figure 2
A Model for Integrating Mental Skills into Sport Performance



Boston University recently instituted this name change as well. Not everyone in the field is solely interested in sport benefiting human development; rather their interests are more with general exercise and how exercise contributes to the prevention of disease, coping with stress, and overall health promotion. A major role sport and exercise psychologists could have in schools is helping deal with the problem of childhood obesity. Childhood obesity is one of today's major public health challenges (Hedley et al., 2004). Consequences of this epidemic include increased risk for chronic diseases, and social and psychological problems among the school-age population. Physical inactivity and poor eating behaviors play a major role in childhood obesity, and while schools cannot solve this problem alone, they could play a major role in addressing childhood obesity. Sport and exercise psychologists can bring a great deal of expertise to help deal with the

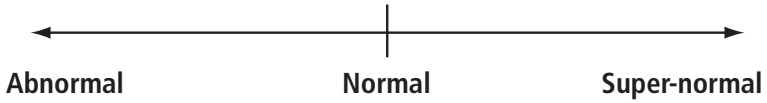
problem. A recent issue of the *Research Digest* (Lee, Wechsler, and Balling, 2006) published by the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports provides an excellent summary of the problem as well as ten evidence-based strategies schools can use to improve student health and exercise habits.

The third area of focus is referred to as social psychology. Here sport psychologists research and teach about topics such as gender and diversity, moral development, athlete career transition, youth sport, fan behavior, leadership, and motivation, which also overlaps with performance enhancement and health psychology.

Graduate students at Boston University have produced a number of outstanding, in fact, award-winning dissertations that cut across all three areas of sport psychology. Frank Perna's dissertation on "Life satisfaction, psychosocial development and perceived mentoring at career termination of collegiate male athletes" won an award through the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology as did Toshi Tsutsumi's dissertation entitled, "Effects of strength training on the elderly: Stress reactivity, mood, self-efficacy, and quality of life." MaryAnn Kane's study, "The metagonic transition: A study of career transition, marital stress and identity transformation in former professional athletes," was a runner-up award winner. Marie Dacey's work entitled "Physical activity motivation across stages of change in older adults" won a dissertation award from the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance. An example of a performance enhancement study is the dissertation written by Peter Haberl, now a senior sport psychologist with the United States Olympic Committee, entitled, "Peak performance at the Olympics: An in-depth psycho-social case study of the 1998 U.S. Women's Olympic Ice Hockey Team."

Looking at the breadth of the field of sport and exercise psychology that is depicted in Figure 1 and elaborated on in Figure 2, one can begin to appreciate the complicated issue of training necessary to deliver the wide range of services needed by student-athletes. As Figure 3 illustrates, within the field of sport psychology we can have a

Figure 3
Breadth of Applied Sport Psychology Services



broad range of clients, most being student-athletes that can be called “normal,” or in some cases the exceptional, highly skilled student-athlete we can call “super-normal.” At the other end of the continuum, however, are student-athletes that may be experiencing “abnormal,” emotional and mental health. In the case of normal and super-normal student-athletes many of the sport psychology/life skills listed in Figure 2 can be taught by teachers and coaches, but they should be mindful that they cannot refer to themselves as sport psychologists because there are professional certification standards associated with being a sport psychology consultant. If student-athletes present with clinical issues such as performance anxiety, depression, disordered eating, and substance abuse issues, they need mental health services from credentialed professionals. Most schools have access to licensed mental health counselors and if so, such student-athletes should be referred to these professionals—a point I can not emphasize enough.

Martin Seligman, noted psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania and former president of the American Psychological Association, along with social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, spearheaded a movement in the late 1990s they called “positive psychology,” a concept that intersects well with sport psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The aim of the positive psychology movement is to promote the positive aspects of human experience rather than pathology, and emphasize human strengths that lead to improved performance, improved quality of life, and the prevention of disease. Positive human strengths include, but are not limited to: hope, wisdom, creativity, courage, spirituality, responsibility, perseverance, laughter, and mental toughness. Student-athletes in schools

would benefit greatly from learning about these positive attributes from their teachers, coaches, and sport psychologists.

At Boston University we have developed a graduate training program in sport and exercise psychology that effectively integrates the concepts of positive psychology with sport science, research, counseling, and school counseling, as well as mental health and behavioral medicine. The program is truly interdisciplinary. Our program also includes supervised practicum and internship experiences in applied sport psychology sites such as local area schools, academies, and colleges. In addition we have established a “Sport Psychology Laboratory and Clinic” in the Department of Athletics where graduate students can obtain supervised experience in counseling Division I student-athletes that are experiencing a broad range of issues related to their sport and personal lives. This training clinic is one of the few in North America.

Recently we established a unique joint training program with the program in mental health and behavioral medicine, housed in the Division of Graduate Medical Sciences at the Boston University School of Medicine. Master’s students study in the School of Education during their first year and experience what we term a developmental or positive psychology curriculum. During their second year they study more traditional mental health issues based on a medical or pathology model. Students also experience a year-long internship in a mental health center. The result of this collaborative training between the School of Education and the School of Medicine is a student who is license-eligible as a “mental health counselor” and is well-prepared to promote sport and exercise psychology in a broad range of environments.

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