

IMPORTANCE OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY CONSULTING IN COLLEGE
ATHLETES

Importance of Sport Psychology Consulting in College Athletes

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The world of sports has grown considerably over the years, and therefore the interest in people to practice a particular sport. Both the marketing of sports products, as well as the great broadcasting of different sports, has made people create a closer bond with sports. The sports requirement has therefore progressively increased as the personal level of athletes in a given sport has also increased. Although the human body is an almost perfectly designed machine capable of adapting to many scenarios, there are situations in which both, the human body and mind, can no longer cope. As a result of this, athletes carry different problems, mostly mental, due to the excessive pressure exerted by society, coaches, or family members. Due to the increase of cases of sports exploitation, sports counseling has gained more and more attention. Speaking from my own experience, in Spain there have been in the last decade a large number of people who have decided to turn their lives around and go to the United States to study and dedicate themselves to their sport at the same time. The experience of participating in intercollegiate sport while studying can be frustrating. The athletic demands, as well as the academic demands, can be very challenging for student-athletes. Sport psychologist counselors can be quite beneficial for these athletes who may be dealing with stress, demotivation, or more ethical issues such as gender discrimination, or racism. As Hinkle J. Scott (1999) notes, "Approximately ten percent of American college athletes suffer from problems appropriate for counseling". The choice of this particular topic comes from my own experience of seeking counseling help, as well as my poor dietary relationship, which I discussed in an early paper. My interest in sport psychology counseling is also rooted in the fact that with the additional year offered to students due to the pandemic, plus the next two semesters I have left of senior year, I am thinking of additionally doing psychology as a major. My idea is to dedicate myself to nutrition and sports, and having biology and psychology as a major, can give me the necessary knowledge to practice a career as a

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nutritionist as well as being able to help those people who struggle with any dietary problem, whether it is a frustration for not losing weight, or eating disorders such as binge eating, anorexia, or bulimia.

Seeking help should be something natural among human beings. As individuals who live in a society and community, who support each other, it should be normal to seek help, especially, help from professionals who are dedicated to it, such as psychologists. In the sports environment, the struggles that athletes may be going through are more specific, and that is why the branch of the psychology of sports was born. As noted in the book "Sports Psychology" by Jarvis (2006), "Sport psychology has existed in some form for almost as long as psychology itself," but sports psychology became an official organized discipline in the 1960s in the Western World (psychology.iresearchnet.com). One of the first associations created was the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) created in 1985 and the Division of Exercise and Sport Psychology created by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1986. (psychology.iresearchnet.com). To become a sport's psychologist requires a "combination of medical and psychological competencies" (psychology.org), and a "master's or doctoral degree in clinical, counseling or sports psychology. In Addition, classes such as kinesiology, physiology, sports medicine, business, and marketing are required." (apa.org).

Many athletes today are under great pressure, and it is becoming common for one to experience emotional difficulties such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and low self-confidence. Sports psychologist counselors are knowledgeable and well-prepared to offer great help to athletes in need. "Counselors are well prepared for the provision of educational and clinical services designed for student-athletes, including lifestyle consultation, developmental programming, career development, and stress management." (Hinkle J. Scott, 1999) Counseling psychologists focus on improving the mental and

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internal strength of athletes so that they are able to give the best version of themselves on the field. For maximum effectiveness, according to Hinkle J. Scott (1999), sports counselors should be familiar with the sport. But this sporting interest should not influence the athlete's improvement process. For example, if this athlete is the best in his team, the sports counselor should not put the success of the team before the internal improvement of the player, since this, in the long run, will harm both the athlete and the team. Sports counselors not only focus on the athlete's performance but on him or her as a person, his or her individual and internal growth, which can affect his or her sports performance. To help the athlete in his or her performance, sometimes it is not necessary to focus on training and repeating an exercise a thousand times, but the problem that this athlete is doing poorly is due to stress, anxiety, fear of failure, or low self-esteem, being increased perhaps due to external factors such as teammates, coaches, or parents. "Counseling psychologists can also assist with problem prevention, coping skills, relaxation training, decision-making, life management and career planning, therapeutic strategies, and crisis intervention." (Hinkle J. Scott, 1999).

Each person is different, people have different roots, different cultures, different mindsets, different likes, and personalities, among other characteristics. Therefore, counseling psychologists must take into account certain factors when dealing with patients. One of the most direct factors is whether or not the athlete being treated has had experience in sports counseling before. Those athletes who have already experienced this type of counseling seem to have a greater tendency to seek help again.

Culture is one of the major factors that build a person's behavior and personality. This approach is referred to as a "multicultural perspective" and has nationality, ethnicity, and ethnological tradition as very important data (Pedersen, 1994). Some of the assumptions that have been taken as universal due to the "Euro-American" imposition of

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predetermined cultural values have defined mental health counseling" (Hinkle J. Scott, 1999) sometimes leading to ineffective diagnoses in the long run. However, the importance embraced by sports psychologists for the multicultural perspective has demonstrated positive advantages since more effective and lasting mental health counseling has been generalized. (Hinkle J. Scott, 1999)

Another factor that counseling psychologists must take into account is the gender of the athlete. It has been shown that women have a greater tendency and willingness to seek professional help compared to men (Martin et al., 2004). This may be due to the social image of what is feminine and what is masculine. Although it is sometimes thought that women are the most subject to complexes, and the weakest, the male gender is also subject to complexes. The image that a man has to be strong, hide his emotions, and not talk about vulnerability may have kept men from seeking professional help. "Males competing in sports often develop the belief that to be a man and an athlete requires them to learn to accept pain, physical risk, and injury in stoic silence whereas, female athletes gradually learn to accept pain and adversity as part of athletics but do not necessarily associate this with their identities as women (Messner, 1992; Nixon, 1996)" (Martin et al., 2004).

The type of sport is also another factor to take into account, because in addition to influencing the willingness to seek professional help, the needs and problems that these athletes may have, can vary depending on the sport. As already seen, athletes who play in individual sports seem to show a greater tendency to exhibit signs of anxiety, stress, or low self-esteem, compared to those players who are involved in team sports. One of the distinctions found in the article by Martin et al. (2004) is to discern between contact sports and non-contact sports. It has been shown that those athletes involved in contact sports have a lower tendency to seek help, because they may have intrinsic values of acceptance

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and coping with pain, physical risk, and injury development than those involved in non-contact sports. Non-contact sports athletes such as, tennis players or gymnasts are more receptive to search for sports counseling as opposed to those athletes who participate in contact sports, such as rugby or soccer players (Martin et al., 2004).

Sports psychology consulting is something that has proven to be necessary to help athletes mentally with various problems, such as emotional issues, too much pressure and demands from coaches, stress, and anxiety, or burnout. One of the clear examples where counseling psychologist intervention is needed is in collegiate sports (Hinkle J. Scott, 1999). The demands placed on collegiate sport are quite intense, and athletes often find themselves struggling to balance academics and sports. "Collegiate athletes rarely make it to the pro ranks or to the Olympics. In fact, the majority do not make it to graduation." (Hinkle J. Scott, 1999) This is a clear example of the need to implement counseling psychologists as well as to promote seeking their help. One of the most common factors inducing mental health and emotional issues is the combination of academics and sports. However, sports counselors help student-athletes evaluate their academic performance and its important relationship to achieving athletic goals." (Hinkle J. Scott, 1999). I have to say that on numerous occasions I have been told that the best athletes are those who are also good at academics, because of the great sacrifice, commitment, and dedication they put forth to bring both athletics and academics forward.

Another example where sports psychology consulting is important in collegiate sports comes from the article by Brustad & Ritter-Taylor (1997). In this article, they use the example of a Division I men's basketball team, in which they describe how athletes experience changes in commitment to educational goals. Players found difficulties in maintaining a balance between athletic and academic roles. Due to not knowing how to balance both tasks, the athletes found that over time they prioritized their athletic role

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more than their academic role. Furthermore, "as their careers progressed, however, role conflict was replaced by role engulfment, in which the athletic role dominated the identity of the players." (Brustad & Ritter-Taylor, 1997). As a result, their academic performance fell below average and below their individual abilities. His article concludes that, "from an applied sport psychology perspective, we believe that this research provides an excellent example of the need to develop interventions in a manner that addresses group processes. The typical approach to academic counseling of athletes is to deal individually with athletes and to provide individually based strategies (e.g., developing time management skills) reflecting a cognitive-behavioral approach." (Brustad & Ritter-Taylor).

When athletes are highly motivated, they can put their health at risk due to high social, collective as well as individual goals and expectations. Pathological motivation is considered when athletes overtrain and experience burnout (Jarvis, 2016). The tendency to overtrain may be due to poor communication between coach and athlete. "In many cases, athletes may be reluctant to disclose symptoms of overtraining to their coaches due to concerns about losing playing time or losing their coaches' respect" (Brustad & Ritter-Taylor, 1997). To this problem, Brustad & Ritter-Taylor add that, "the sport psychology consultant can take a "personal issues" approach to these problems. Certainly, information gained at the individual level can be very helpful in addressing the problem. However, a full understanding of the problem is unlikely unless attention is similarly directed to social dimensions of influence".

Dealing with my personal experience, the words of a particular coach affected me considerably. This coach said that if we missed one day of training, it was as if the previous two days of training had been wasted. These words resonated with me in a significant way and affected my perception of health and fitness. I was so motivated to

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get in shape for pre-season that I may have experienced burnout. On top of this, I was eating a diet that was very low in calories, so in addition to over-exercising, I did not have enough energy to be able to endure another day of training. Looking at what I learned in psychology of sports, and the importance of consulting, I would have benefited more if I had had the help of a counseling psychologist.

Sport psychology consulting is a very important profession when it comes to ensuring the good mental and individual health of athletes so that they can improve their athletic performance. These sport counseling psychologists must take into account many factors when creating an effective and long-lasting strategy for the patient. As we have seen, collegiate athletes are one of the groups that suffer the most from the clash between academic and athletic dedication, and numerous studies have concluded that with the intervention of a sport psychology counselor, the problems could have been both solved and prevented in the future.

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