The Development of Consulting Practice in Applied Sport Psychology: Some Personal Perspectives

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The history and development of applied sport psychology practice has not received the same attention and documentation as that of academic sport psychology. After a brief introduction to the literature on the history and professional development of applied sport psychology, some personal perspectives from consultants who have been practicing “in the field” over the last two to four decades are provided. Eleven well-known practitioners discuss how they got started, how their consulting has developed, what significant experiences they have had, and what lessons they have learned along the way. They relate their views on the progression of professional practice and what the future may hold. Finally, they offer some encouragement, cautions, and words of wisdom for fellow and future colleagues in sport psychology consulting.

This special issue of The Sport Psychologist (TSP) provides a solid historical background for understanding where the field is today. The quality of the articles should make this issue standard reading for first-year graduate courses in sport psychology. The present article is somewhat different from the others in this volume. We were asked to write a history of sport psychology consulting in North America. Beyond the work of Coleman Griffith, which Dan Gould and Sean Pick (1995) have covered, applied consulting became a distinct practice only over the last 30 to 40 years. The official history of applied sport psychology has already been well documented. Therefore, we will provide only a brief overview of that literature, referencing sources for the interested reader.

The history and development of applied sport psychology has consistently received attention in the major sport psychology texts (e.g., Cox, 1994; Gill, 1986; Murphy, 1995; Weinberg & Gould, 1995; Wiggins, 1984; Williams, 1993). Much of the content of these historical accounts concerns academic issues and professional organizations, tracing milestones in the field. These histories only occasionally touch on what professionals were actually doing as consultants in applied sport psychology.

The sport psychology journals have supplied another forum for discussing the development of applied sport psychology. Singer (1989) detailed a comprehensive history of

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applied sport psychology in the United States. Danish and Hale (1981, 1982) began a discussion of the scope of sport psychology practice. The related issue of professionalization of applied practice has generated substantial controversy, resulting in several articles (e.g., Gardner, 1991; Harrison & Feltz, 1979; Silva, 1989; Smith, 1989).

In the history of sport psychology organizations, the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) and Division 47 (Sport and Exercise Psychology) of the American Psychological Association (APA) are the two groups most concerned with professional practice. Both were formed in 1985. More recently, AAASP developed a process for certifying sport psychology consultants (AAASP, 1991), and in 1994 adopted an ethics code similar to the six General Principles of the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists (APA, 1992). Many would consider these important steps toward professionalization and significant markers in the development of the field.

The literature in applied sport psychology has generally followed two tracks: (a) the effectiveness of the techniques and interventions used in service delivery (e.g., Greenspan & Feltz, 1989; Strean & Roberts, 1992; Vealey, 1988, 1994), and (b) the behavior, training, experiences, and ethics of sport psychologists (e.g., Partington & Orlick, 1991; Sachs, 1993). Both of these large areas of inquiry are growing, and reviewing the published work is well beyond the scope of this paper. Interested readers can check the Reference section for a sampling of literature on the history, research, and professional development of the field.

Part of sport psychology is about observing and reflecting upon the richness of the sport experience. Following this flow, we thought it would be educational and enjoyable to get some “lived” history from sport psychology consultants who have experienced the maturing of the field. We wanted to let some of those who have been delivering services for the past 15 to 40 years tell us how they became involved, how they view past developments and the future of the field, what experiences had most influenced them, and what were some of the important lessons they have learned. We also hoped that in this process of recalling their experiences and offering their views, they would drop a few pearls of wisdom on us. We were not disappointed.

Before continuing, we wish to be clear about our approach to this article. We are not trying to be qualitative researchers. This is not in-depth interviewing, grounded theory, or even life histories. This is journalism. We have endeavored to be true to the voices we sampled, and hope this is entertaining, as well as informative, journalism. It certainly was fun for us.

Method
Participants
The focus for this paper was on sport psychology professionals who consult with athletes and coaches. We will use terms such as applied sport psychologist, consultant, and practitioner interchangeably throughout this article to refer to these professionals. This is not to deny that there are applied sport psychology researchers or teachers (academic sport psychologists), or that some sport psychology
professionals work with other groups (e.g., exercise participants). Rather, the emphasis here is expressly on the practice of sport psychology consulting in its most traditional form.

We attempted to choose practitioners who had worked with athletes from the beginnings of applied sport psychology, and not necessarily those who were involved early in academic sport psychology. We brainstormed and networked to come up with about 20 names of people who would be well known to readers of TSP, who had extensive experience in consulting over the last 15 to 40 years, and who would represent the diversity found in the population of experienced consultants. Due to availability and other practical constraints, we ended up interviewing 11 consultants (see Table 1). We are quite aware that some outstanding consultants have been left out of this article, and we apologize to anyone who might feel slighted by our selection. We feel confident, however, that our resulting consultant sample well represents the relatively small population of highly experienced practitioners in North America.

The breakdown of the list into parent disciplines reveals that the majority of the people we interviewed with extensive and long-term service delivery histories had psychology backgrounds. Of our interviewed consultants, seven were trained in psychology, three in physical education (PE)/exercise science, and one in psychiatry. This split may seem odd given that the discipline of sport psychology finds its home primarily in PE/exercise science departments. Nonetheless, from our personal experience and knowledge, we believe the division to be representative of the numbers in practice since the 1960s and 1970s. Among the other professionals we considered for interviews, a similar majority came from psychology and counseling disciplines. Although the vast majority of academic/research sport psychology occurred, and still occurs, in PE/exercise science, it appears that consultants with primary backgrounds in psychology have played major roles in early service delivery.

**Interview Format**

Jeff Simons conducted the 11 phone interviews with the participants. Prior to these taped discussions, each consultant received a description of the project and a list of the general
### Table 1 Background Information on Consultants Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consultant</th>
<th>Training background</th>
<th>Approx. year of first consulting</th>
<th>Current affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gloria Balague, PhD</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>University of Illinois-Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burt Giges, MD</td>
<td>Psychiatry</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Springfield College (MA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Gould, PhD</td>
<td>Physical education/exercise science</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>University of North Carolina, Greensboro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Loehr, EdD</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>LGE Sport Science, Inc. (FL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shane Murphy, PhD</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Gold Medal Psychological Consultants (NY)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Nideffer, PhD</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Enhanced Performance Systems (CA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Ogilvie, PhD</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>ProMind Institute (CA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Ravizza, PhD</td>
<td>Physical education/exercise science</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>California State University, Fullerton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Rotella, PhD</td>
<td>Physical education/exercise science</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>University of Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron Smith, PhD</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>University of Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty Wenz, PhD</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>John F. Kennedy University (CA)</td>
</tr>
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topics of interest. The interviews were designed to be relatively open and free-flowing. The result was II unique interactions, but in one way or another, all the participants responded to questions in six basic areas: (a) academic and professional background prior to sport psychology consulting, (b) entrance into the practice, (c) first consulting experiences, (d) influential consulting experiences and lessons learned, (e) perceptions of the growth in applied practice, and (f) suggestions for the field and professional insights.

Taped interviews were transcribed verbatim. Our analysis and selection of material for this article is based on considerable reading and rereading of the transcripts for unique content and common themes appropriate for historical and developmental perspectives. From a wealth of experiences and insights, we have endeavored to select comments and views that provide an accurate sense of the paths of seasoned sport psychology consultants. The main regret we feel is that we can only share small fragments of these fascinating interviews.

Because such reporting cannot avoid reflecting biases of the authors, we would like to present a brief summary of our backgrounds. We believe we two represent, as well as a sample of two can, a cross-section of academic and practitioner backgrounds and interests. Jeff Simons comes from a physical education/exercise science background.
and is primarily interested in performance enhancement and excellence at the coaching, team, and individual levels. He has been in academics and consulting for 10 years and is now a full-time practitioner. Mark Andersen is a licensed psychologist whose main background is in psychophysiology, injury, and counseling, with primary interests in supervision and the training of future sport psychologists. In terms of general areas of interest in sport and exercise psychology, we seem to have a lot of the field covered (i.e., performance enhancement/intervention, health, professional practice). It is interesting how much we agree with each other on a wide range of consulting issues. Our differences, however, helped keep us on track as we decided who and what to include and exclude in this report.

**Stepping Into Practice**

We asked our respondents to talk about how they made their first steps into service delivery with athletes and what motivated them to pursue sport psychology consulting. The consultants had a wide variety of first experiences, but all of them shared a love of sport, exercise, and human performance. Their introductions into the practice were broad and varied. Several of our respondents openly admitted that their backgrounds were limited when they did their first sport psychology consulting. For example, Dan Gould had a kind of babe-in-the-woods entry into service delivery, fortunately emerging from his initial experience quite well:

I did a lot of coaching clinics, so I was doing a lot of applied work that way, but not one-on-one individual consults that we do today. A clinical psychologist at Michigan State (where I taught at the time) referred a young figure skater [who would get physically sick from anxiety] over to me. I didn’t have any [applied training], and it was funny, but it was a clinical psychologist who referred her over because he didn’t know anything about sport. So I thought “OK, we’ll do relaxation training,” because that’s about all I knew, and so we gave it a whirl, and we tried it for about 2 minutes, and then she said, “I don’t like feeling like rubber.” So we had to throw all the physical relaxation techniques out, and I didn’t know anything else, other than try to reduce importance and uncertainty. It wasn’t like I had an arsenal of techniques. But then we really ended up talking about working with her school teacher and her skating coach and her parents to reduce importance and increasing confidence via encouragement, so everybody kind of did everything on the same wavelength. And she was able to work through it. At the time, it was real appropriate, but today, by today’s standards, it would be pretty shaky.

Although he does not claim to be a sport psychologist, but rather works “in the field of sport psychology,” psychiatrist Burt Giges’s work with athletes can be traced back to the late 1950s. Like Dan Gould, he told of an innocent start to performance consulting:
An early one was a marathon runner, whose first marathon led to anxiety about being able to finish. I look back on that time now with a kind of fondness. Without having had any formal training in sport psych, I was able to help him with focusing, visualization, and positive thinking. And he did finish, so he was happy, and I felt satisfied. Then periodically I would work with patients, several of whom brought in problems with their golf game. Either a lot of patients play golf or maybe a lot of golf players go to psychiatrists.

Others among our respondents took very directed and goal-oriented actions to begin work with athletes. Shane Murphy and some enterprising graduate students at Rutgers went to a professor who we knew was interested [in sport and psychology] and had a lot of expertise in methods like visualization, relaxation, meditation, and so on, and we said “Why don’t you teach a sport psychology class?” My consulting started right then. He went to the track and field coach, whom he was good friends with, and said, “Look, I’ve got these people who would like to work with the athletes. How about if we introduce them and use them as consultants?” So my first work was within a university setting consulting with members of the track and field team.

Jim Loehr had a dream of working with athletes, and he relates a story of high risk taking to fulfill that dream:

I was very young, and I was heavily involved in the delivery of mental health services. I had a staff of about 60 with over a million dollar budget and a very chronically disturbed patient population—a lot of alcoholism, drug abuse. I became involved during that time with an exercise physiologist, an internationally renowned track and field coach. He got me involved with running and got me involved with his runners and really turned the light on inside my head about the application of psychology to sport, and I just started working with some of his athletes . . . After many months of intense deliberation, I resigned from the center, moved to Denver, and opened up a private practice at University Park Psychological Center, specializing in performance problems of athletes and opening a kind of a general clinical practice . . . I almost starved to death.

Two of our respondents actually were pursued by coaches to work with athletes and fell into service delivery that way. Bob Nideffer was on the tenure track and took the position on the faculty of the University of Rochester and basically started doing traditional clinical research, and then got back into the sport end when the public relations people at the University of Rochester found the old publications [early work on performance and attention I and sent out some press releases. Those releases generated a lot of interest, and so suddenly I was getting calls from coaches.
and athletes asking for me to start working with them. So I kind of got pulled back in that way.

Bruce Ogilvie got pulled into sport psychology service delivery by coaches because he was a jock:

I was an unusual faculty member because the coaches hadn’t experienced men who were as devoted to fitness and sport as I had been all of my life. So my identification was as a member of the counseling center staff and a jock. Coaches began asking me about problems they were having with their athletes. They were open to me, and they would ask me about issues and problems and crises. I was absolutely fascinated, and then, this was in the mid-1950s, they and other coaches started bringing athletes to sit with me to see if, through my training and background, I could provide any insight into performance decrements and performance problems.

Each of our respondents has practiced in one manner or another for over 15 years. Their consulting styles have nearly all changed, dramatically in some cases. In the next section, we trace some of those changes.

**Development of Personal Consulting Skills**

We asked our consultants about how their consulting has changed over the course of their careers. We heard about significant experiences that affected their approaches, and we gleaned a selection of valuable lessons learned along the way.

**Evolution of Consulting**

Several consultants discussed the gradual transition from early consulting styles that were largely technique oriented, to approaches that have become more athlete centered and experiential. Gloria Balague expressed a common theme:

I think my consulting has changed. When one begins, you need concrete things to teach. As you become more experienced, you realize that maybe you don’t have to teach all the same things to everybody. I have moved very much away from having a set of skills that I think everybody should have. I realize that it’s a question of using whatever strengths an athlete has, and using those to help him or her improve in whatever areas the deficit may be.

Ken Ravizza has also found himself moving away from mental skills techniques as the basis for applied practice:

I’m really finding myself now doing more philosophy in terms of why do you participate, what’s your mission, what’s your goal, what are you after, what do you enjoy about this, and
finding out if the person can stay in touch with some of those things. Earlier I would approach it like, “Well, you got this problem. Let’s do relaxation and imagery. Let’s visualize.” Well, sometimes, if you straighten out their thinking a little bit or let them talk through it, you can get a clarity where you may not even have to do the relaxation.

Similar changes in approach were also reflected in statements such as these from Shane Murphy:

I’m a lot more experiential in my approach today, whereas I used to be very didactic. I think initially we often tend to use the academic model because we have lots of experience with it. You know, talking down to people, sort of acting as the expert where you have the knowledge and they don’t, giving lectures as a way of communicating. Nowadays, I get right away from that. I get into the mindset that the athlete has the expertise—it’s a matter of drawing it out, getting them to think about their own experiences, and applying the lessons that they’ve learned. I act much more as a facilitator and a motivator in that process.

Several consultants echoed Shane’s evolution away from being the authority who does sport psychology to athletes. Ron Smith took this point further:

I’ve come to see myself much more as a facilitator of that person’s growth than as someone who is going to do something for the athlete. I’ve come to put much greater responsibility, explicit responsibility, on athletes and really emphasize to them that their careers are in their hands. Basically, I can provide them with things that I think will be helpful to them, but they really need to take responsibility for doing the work, and I am not going to be able to monitor everything they do and whether they comply with the training program and so forth.

The issue of compliance that Ron Smith mentioned has become a central one for Bob Rotella:

I’m much more interested in compliance nowadays, because I don’t have any more questions about what works. I mean whether anyone agrees with me or not, in my mind. I have an absolutely totally clear picture of what I have to get a person to do. Of course there’s a lot of individual differences, but I’m not interested any more in what you have to do to get someone to play great. I know what you have to do. Now how to get them to do the stuff I know they need to do continues to fascinate me.

Most of the consultants mentioned the effect that the expanding field of knowledge in sport psychology has had on the range and depth of their
consulting. Several discussed specific changes in their knowledge base. For example, Jim Loehr stated the following:

> When I came into sport psychology, particularly with my training as a psychologist, I tended to view the world from the very narrow eyes of a psychologist, and I tended to look for a mental problem to everything. The mind—body dichotomy, looking at things from a mental or psychological perspective is a very limiting way to view the athlete. I didn’t have a background in a lot of the sport sciences, and I had to go out and really try to understand the integration of all the sport sciences. I’m much more effective in my work today, and I think it’s largely because I tend to see things much more integrated, as kind of a mental, physical, and emotional whole.

Finally, another change expressed by several consultants was neatly summarized by Bob Nideffer’s statement, “I’ve moved from working with the individual athletes to doing more in the way of trying to provide some skills for coaches to work with their athletes.”

The changes in consulting style that our informants described came about through years of experience. In the process of discussing these changes, we inquired about any particularly influential experiences and the lessons that such experiences had taught.

**Significant Experiences and Lessons Learned**

The stories our consultants related to us were rich and insightful. Many described lessons acquired through their involvement with organizations, especially in professional and national team sports. Others spoke of specific consultation situations—both great and disastrous—that had taught them something valuable. Many of the lessons, however, came from the more general, long-term experience of being a consultant in a variety of situations.

According to our consultants, working with professional sports or large organizations takes understanding and great perseverance. Betty Wenz gained acceptance with one national governing body (NGB) by “learning how to roll with the punches and be persistent, but low key.” Relating some of the obstacles in working with national programs, Dan Gould remarked, “there’s a lot of stuff out of your control. You can put a really good program together and really have effects, but many times the social and political environment of the NGB can really screw you up.” As one who has been “sent to the minors, released, rehired, and brought back up to the majors,” Ken Ravizza has learned that a career in professional baseball can be as rocky for a consultant as for players and coaches. Remarkng on the pressure situations of big-time sports, Bruce Ogilvie stated that “they send them to me, and in 2 days, 3 days, they want this athlete back on the slopes, back on the court, back on the field, so it’s very important that I move as quickly as I possibly can.” Lastly, several consultants made it clear that gaining entrance into big-time sport does not automatically mean a full appointment book. A more realistic expectation can be found in Ken Ravizza’s statement that “I may have
a really good working relationship with a third of the players, a third of
the players are not into it, and a third of the players can swing either
way with it.” Bob Rotella set that expectation even lower:

The truth of the matter is that if you work with most
professional teams, you aren’t working with many people. If
you’ve got 10% of the players on the team to work with you—
I mean working on performance and really into it—that would
be a lot. We shouldn’t feel bad about that. The truth of the
matter is a lot of them don’t want or need a whole lot. It’s just
the way it is.

All of our consultants mentioned the importance of interacting with
colleagues (even though, as Jim Loehr pointed out, it was very difficult
to find colleagues to interact with in the early years). When asked about
the greatest influence on his consulting, Shane Murphy stated without
hesitation,

I think working with other people and having the opportunity
for them to observe my consultation and getting feedback
from them. That had a huge influence on my style. And
watching others. I learned so much from seeing people like
Charlie Hardy, Bob McKelvain, and Al Petitpas in action. I
was very lucky being at the Olympic Training Center. It’s a
crossroads in terms of people always visiting. I saw a
tremendous cross-section of the sport psychology commu

ity, and so I was able to get training, of an informal nature, from
many people, and I owe great debt of thanks to all of them.

Although few consultants have had the rich opportunity for interaction
that Shane describes, every one of our interviewees cited special
occasions when they were able to collaborate or communicate with
colleagues. Perhaps not surprising, they often named each other as
important contacts.

Among the challenges related by our consultants, the issue of
boundaries came up several times. This has been particularly difficult
when service providers could or did wear several hats at once. Ron
Smith relates,

I think that one of the challenges for me has been role
boundaries, because I’m a licensed clinical psychologist as
well. It’s been important in my work in professional baseball
to dispel myths about what a sport psychologist is. I’m
interested in doing performance enhancement, so I’ve found it
very important to maintain strict boundaries between what I do
clinically and what I do with performance enhancement. Sometimes those role boundaries are rather difficult.

For example, a lot of the personal counseling issues that I
come to grips with involve relationships between players and
their wives. Numerous times in my work in professional
baseball, a player will report relationship difficulties, and I’ll
see the player and his spouse, and we’ll try to get the
information I need to make the most appropriate referral.
What often happens is that they will want to work with me in a
more permanent kind of counseling relationship. I might like
to work with them, but if I’m to be effective in my primary job. I want to be identified as a performance enhancement consultant and work at that level. So these boundary issues have been quite challenging and, in some instances, quite frustrating for me.

Boundary issues other than the classic clinical/educational ones were also raised. For example, Betty Wenz discussed difficulties she faced in being involved in other aspects of a sport (synchronized swimming) while also serving as a sport psychology consultant:

How can I as an official sitting up on the judges’ stand get up there and here’s some kid who comes out on the deck, sees me in the judges’ chair and says, “Oops. I’d better do this right, because I’ve been in her training program.” It didn’t even occur to me at first, because I was just there being helpful, but it can create some major conflicts. I did have to move out of some areas of the sport in order to be more functional.

Among the unique influential experiences related by our consultants, Jim Loehr attributed much of his growth to the practical demands in his work. After taking a position at a major U.S. tennis academy, Jim explains,

I suddenly found myself with 200 kids who would come in, and every week they would have an opportunity to go through this segment of learning, and I had all these kids, hot, sweaty, sticky coming in off the courts, and I had to find a way somehow to communicate and to effectively engage these kids emotionally in this learning. This really got me practical. It got me thinking about how this can be translated into real learning, that has immediate relevance to these kids . . . It had a profound effect on my ability to deliver this information.

Jim also described that writing a monthly magazine column for 10 years had forced him to regularly “take sport psychology and translate it into language of everyday people.” These experiences “were very powerful events in terms of the evolution of who I am and what I’ve come to understand in my approach to sport psychology.”

Gloria Balague relates a general experience in working with highly talented athletes that many consultants have encountered and learned from:

Many of us do bring a little bit of an awe for that superelite performer who can do this great physical thing. . . . That’s happened to me on a couple of occasions. There is a risk of treating them a little bit unidimensionally and saying, “OK, so I am going to talk to this marvelous athlete.” And it really hit me that no, “I am going to talk to this person, and I am going to see what part of this person is the athlete.” If I just go talk to the athlete, I don’t do a good job. But if I’m talking to the
person, that’s when we can work from the inside out and then help the athlete part.

A number of people discussed how experiences had helped them clarify the nature of who a consultant is and what a consultant does. Bob Nideffer has concluded from his years of experience where his role lies as a sport psychology consultant:

I know a lot of sport psychologists have been called in by coaches or administrators to act as motivators for teams. “Get these guys psyched up,” or whatever, and you know my feeling is that coaches are far better suited to do that than sport psychologists. My role isn’t as a motivator. That’s the coach’s role. Coaches are really good at motivating athletes, providing reinforcement.

Furthermore, Bob Rotella was emphatic that “our business is selling athletes on themselves. It’s not selling them on us. It’s not selling them on sport psychology. It’s not selling them on psychological techniques.”

After tracing the general changes in the consulting styles of our consultants, we asked them about their current consulting and about issues that they thought were particularly important in applied practice today.

**Current Consulting Practices and Issues**

It is not too surprising that our group of sport psychologists, despite their varied training and unique skills, shared many similar views on effective approaches to consulting. None of our consultants endorsed a “cookbook” approach to mental skills training, and none of them claimed to hold the “one true method.” Everyone felt that there are many possible ways to handle any given issue effectively. Several consultants discussed a clear approach that they take into nearly all situations, but others expressed a looser style. For example, Dan Gould was quite candid when discussing his consulting style:

I’m pretty eclectic, I don’t work from one approach. Shane Murphy calls me the “Columbo of sport psychology.” I kind of come in, my hair’s messed up, and I’ve got a wrinkled shirt on (so you know Shane’s pretty accurate), and then I ask these sort of bumbling around but pointed questions, and by the time I get done, I kind of get to the bottom of it. Then I’ll basically use anything I think will work that’s ethical to help the athlete.

A clear message from the interviews was that not every consultant can deal with every athlete and every issue. Several of our interviewees emphasized the need for a match between the consultant and client, and the importance of discovering one’s own abilities to connect. For example, Gloria Balague feels she works most effectively with “people
who have very good knowledge of their bodies... who can really discriminate between minute sensations in their body and their performance.” Relating his strengths and weaknesses, Dan Gould says he is best with people who are highly motivated. They’re intelligent, and they tell you the truth. Then I can come up with a large number of “here’s what you can do” strategies. The area that I’ve had to improve on (it’s also not my forte, and I think clinicians are better trained in this) is helping people tell themselves the truth when they are confused.

Bob Rotella emphasized the importance of “working with highly committed people,” both for the immediate effectiveness of one’s consulting and the long-term promotion of the sport psychology field.

Ken Ravizza added that beyond the type of client, “the issue becomes figuring out what it is that the consultant can do. I don’t think we can do everything.” Sticking to individual competencies and referring out was endorsed by everyone. Several practitioners went further, discussing their caution even in using the many techniques available in their repertoires. Burt Giges made the point clearly in saying, “Just because you can do something, it doesn’t mean that’s what’s indicated, and because there is psychopathology doesn’t mean that that needs to be the focus of the work.” Echoing the sentiment of several others, Burt’s point is that if an athlete comes for performance enhancement, then that is what the sport psychology consultant should endeavor to deliver.

Finding ways to make sport psychology work in the real world was a strong theme in the discussions of consulting style. Bob Nideffer discussed “staying away from psychological jargon and focusing in on relevant issues for people.” Shane Murphy emphasized that “you’ve got to get hands-on, be very educational, get people involved in direct experience and learning for themselves.” Several consultants mentioned the practical time constraints in the real world of sport and competition. Ken Ravizza related the following:

The ideal situation is to be in your office and have the athlete come in, and you’ve got 2 hours together, and you really get into it. But a lot of the work is when you’re traveling with a team. It’s in a hotel lobby, it’s on a bus, it’s 5 minutes here, 6 minutes there, and in these little blocks of time you can do a lot. I’ve really seen that in 5 minutes you can impact a person by getting them thinking and getting their thought process going so then they can think clearly about things.

Part of making the mental training “real” according to many of the consultants is integrating it with physical training and keeping things simple. The approach needs to make sense to coaches and athletes. Cleaning up the “KISS principle,” Ken Ravizza advised, “Keep it simple and smart.” Bob Nideffer summed up how highly educated sport psychologists may unintentionally end up hurting, rather than helping, the situation through needless complication:
It’s just very easy for people with our background to overcomplicate issues and to get athletes thinking about too many things. It’s also very easy to want them to be sport psychologists or to be able to generalize what we teach them to virtually every other situation. It’s an unreasonable expectation; it’s not going to happen. Athletes don’t have time for that.

Bob Rotella reinforced the notion that applications be kept simple, claiming, “Everything I know that works, and is good, is logical and makes common sense, and has been around for a long time. It’s just a matter of whether you can get people to do it.”

From these accounts of personal consulting styles, we move to reflections on the field of applied sport psychology as a whole.

**Views on Development of the Field**

We were interested in the impressions of our respondents on how they saw the progress (or lack thereof) and development of the field over the past 20 to 40 years. On the question of progression, there was probably the most agreement among our respondents. In general, they agreed that the field had grown in size, with higher quality service delivery, and greater public acceptance. Gloria Balague, who started her work in Spain and has been practicing in the United States for the last 14 years, gives a reply typical of many of the respondents:

I think it’s starting to be accepted as a legitimate field. I think that 15 years ago if you were to tell people you work in sport psychology, or ask them. “What do sport psychologists do?” they would say they work with athletes who have problems. I think if you were to ask now, perhaps a small percentage would still say that. But I think that a big number of people would acknowledge that it has to do with performance enhancement, and people have more of a knowledge that that is a viable option. I think this has been a positive development. The public has a better knowledge of it, the general public as well as athletes and coaches at different levels. I see that from high schools to the elite level, including professional sports. It is still a small percentage of those who actually use it and those who have access to it, but I think it’s much more available.

Ron Smith echoes Gloria Balague’s positive appraisal:

I don’t think there’s any question that there’s been a tremendous upsurge of interest in this, and it’s been gratifying to see the organizations grow. I think AAASP played an important role in the development of the field. We’ve become much more aware of ways in which we can offer services more effectively. We’ve looked into and established certification. We now have ethical guidelines, and I think that
those are very, very positive developments. I’m sure that the level of consultation that’s being offered today is far better than it was 10 years ago. We’ve developed a cadre of outstanding people from both psychology and sport sciences, but I see sport psychology as being in a similar place that strength training was 10 or 15 years ago. That is, the more progressive programs are using it, and they’re using good people who know what they’re doing.

Many of our respondents felt similarly, but most also offered some warnings about the current state, descriptions of errors made in the past, and current deficits. The concerns include scope of services, definitions of who sport psychologists are, the “bastardization” of the field, and the quality of training and service delivery. Shane Murphy, although optimistic, stated,

I think we’re getting there, there’s certainly been an explosion of interest in applied stuff, and the interest today on the part of students in college programs is enormous compared to even what it was 10 years ago. I think we still have a fair way to go in terms of making the knowledge that we have about consulting concrete. There’s still not a heck of a lot that’s real accessible for people. If you want to say what’s a good textbook to read on consulting, nothing really springs to mind just yet. We still tend to think of our knowledge in terms of the research that’s been done and which techniques are effective, and which aren’t which issues and problems are serious, and how do you tackle them? Don’t get me wrong, all that stuff is important, but I think that there’s a lot of skills that you need in order to be an effective consultant that are not dealt with in that whole area I hope we see a lot more emphasis on being able to teach, pass along, and hand down these sort of skills.

Bob Nideffer voiced some serious concerns about what he sees as the bimodal distribution of the quality of individuals and the services they deliver to athletes:

I’ve been really impressed with some people that I’ve run into who I think are done a super job. So I think that there are some people out there who are getting some pretty good training. But I also still see, and I think we’re going to see this for a long time, people who are claiming to be sport psychologists or in the area or whatever, who don’t know that there is a professional association, who don’t know that there are any books in the field or publications, people who are incredibly naive. I’m not real happy with where we’ve gotten with our educational reforms or processes.

Bruce Ogilvie recalled a rather distressing encounter that is probably a direct result of the problems Bob Nideffer is talking about:
I think the field is still having a tough time with credibility. I just met with the director of a tennis school. I’d never met him before, and he’s a very prominent man, and we were talking about some of the things that we do in our work, and what we really wanted to do was to put on a mental training program. (We were doing research and gathering data, too.) So we put the clinic on as we always do and for the service we would collect some data. And he said right up front, “I thought you people were all horseshit.” He said. “Everyone I’ve met in your field is horseshit,” and he went on and on and on. I almost died. Oh my God, I don’t want to hear that. That’s why I’ve wondered sometimes why I allow myself to be called a sport psychologist. So I think we’re fighting a tremendous credibility problem because I think many people profess to be able to offer services that they have no right [to offer].

Bob Rotella presented some of the strongest concerns about organization, ethics, professional definitions, and scope of services. In commenting on the field’s growth and progress, he stated.

Well first of all, it’s clearly grown. One of the things I’ve always wanted to do with the profession is make sport psychology way more acceptable to people in sport, and I think it’s come a long way in that regard. But my biggest concerns all are a result of AAASP really. My personal feeling is that we made a huge mistake opening up AAASP to people from other areas of specialization before we really, really put everything together. I’ve been on such a mission to convince the world that what we do is performance enhancement, and it’s about the psychology of excellence and highly efficient, effective thinking. If we do something that allows other people to come in and use the words *sport psychology* and have it be associated with sport psychology when they’re into psychiatry or abnormal stuff, or giving inventories designed for people with clinical problems and saying it’s sport psychology, this is the kind of stuff that will kill the profession. In other words, I think we just need so much to separate it. The more people associate what we do with the other stuff, my perception is, it’ll kill it.

None of the consultants intended their criticisms as a condemnation of the field or of sport psychology practice. Rather, their views were offered to highlight areas that they felt need attention within the profession. Furthermore, Bruce Ogilvie urged us not to be too hard on ourselves as an applied field:

> It is an innocent growing, we’re not even in our adolescence in terms of a science. And that’s OK, you know, that’s where we are. But, we shouldn’t feel defensive about that. . . . It’s an endless pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and also the refinement of our skills.
Advice for Newcomers to the Field

Our consultants were cautiously optimistic that new practitioners in the field could create careers for themselves, despite the lack of job listings in the marketplace. Shane Murphy felt that opportunities would be available to those who found diverse paths:

The ideal sport psychology career is not going to be something that you apply for in a newspaper advertisement. It will never happen. It’s not the same sort of career as being a doctor or lawyer. It’s an interesting lifestyle. It’s very fulfilling and satisfying. But you’re going to have to create it for yourself. I think it’s a field pretty much for people who are self-motivated and are go-getters.

Jim Loehr, who among our consultants has the most experience with a career exclusively based in applied practice, cautions that to be successful requires a tremendous amount of creativity and determination and persistence. The career path is not out there, and people still are not willing to pay lots of money. Sometimes it’s a very difficult sell, and you have to be very careful how you sell your services. [To be a successful consultant in sport], you have to become a very effective team member and an integrated partner on a sport science continuum. You can’t just be a person who knows only psychology. You have to understand the science of the whole equation. You have to be creative, and you’re going to have to have a lot of business acumen to carve out a good lifestyle.

At a more basic level, Dan Gould advises newcomers that:

You really need to like it. You really need to enjoy it and have fun with it. You’ll be a lot happier if you just love sport and you’re not entering the field because you want to work with the New York Yankees or something. But instead, it’s because you’re in love with sport, in love with being with people and helping people. It’s like coaching.

In terms of becoming an effective consultant, all of the interviewees stressed becoming part of the sport environment. They mentioned being at early or late practices, being there at difficult times, and working to understand the sport so that consulting can be tailored to specific individuals, groups, and situations. Making an effort commensurate with the efforts of those you are servicing was reported as one of the best ways to earn the respect of coaches and athletes. Furthermore, as Bob Nideffer commented, those consultants he has “been impressed with have just been people who’ve been able to be a part of a team. Nothing is above them or beneath them. They are right there, and they communicate that very effectively.”
Another emergent theme was to start consulting work at an appropriate level. Bob Rotella’s recommendation to aspiring sport psychologists was to “spend lots of hours doing voluntary work with athletes—as much as you can while you’re in grad school. Be willing to start with lower level athletes.” Ken Ravizza emphasized an even more basic start:

Number I is work on yourself. You should never be taking a group through any activity, exercise, or technique that you really haven’t gone through yourself. Because the one thing we bring to any group is, we bring ourselves. I can’t be Brace Ogilvie; young people in the field can’t be Ken Ravizza. Each person’s got to learn who they are and know what they can and can’t do. They’ve got to bring themselves to the dance.

Some Cautions and Suggestions for the Future

For this section, we bring together the major points that respondents considered important for the future of sport psychology consulting. The most common theme that emerged from all the suggestions was that practitioners need to have a better awareness and understanding of themselves, of why they want to be involved with sport psychology service delivery, and of what they bring to the consulting relationship. At the risk of putting words in the mouths of our interviewees, we will first provide a few synopses of the ideas they conveyed.

Bruce Ogilvie expressed grave concerns over how all the young people coming into the field were going to get adequate training.¹ He made an appeal for setting up training programs where young practitioners could get more experience.

Gloria Balague suggested that sport psychologists should work with junior level athletes far more often and become better integrated into community life. She believed that sport psychologists need to write and talk much more with the coaches, as well as the parents.

Although supportive of professional group efforts, Dan Gould questioned the effective power of AAASP certification outside of the small organization. He felt, for example, that one is not likely to see an advertisement for a sport psychology position that requires AAASP certification anytime in the near future. Until sport psychologists hook up with more powerful organizations, those with more clout (e.g., the American College of Sports Medicine), Dan believes certification will have questionable impact on professional practice.

Some of our respondents suggested moving into performance enhancement for business and looking to industrial/organizational psychology to help us understand sports organizations. Betty Wenz, offered a strong note of caution about such moves. Just as

¹AAASP Graduate Tracking Committee has collected over 700 names of doctoral or masters program graduates with an emphasis in sport psychology since 1989.
many unqualified, naive practitioners have worked with athletes and called themselves sport psychologists, so, too, have so-called sport psychologists taken their services and presented them to business with scant knowledge of the business world. Betty suggested that some of the industrial/organizational psychologists she knows are quite angry about unqualified sport psychologists selling their programs to business.

Bob Nideffer was not optimistic about the chances of success of a private practitioner without clinical or counseling background. He made the important point that, at least in professional sports, psychologists are most likely to be employed as employee assistance program (EAP) directors. Such positions are usually filled by PhDs in counseling or clinical psychology. Bob Rotella, in contrast, was confident that if one was skilled at helping athletes perform better, then there would be plenty of work for such a person in the future.

Ron Smith emphasized the need to sharpen assessment instruments and to conduct a science of applied sport psychology. He suggested sport psychologists move away from asking naive questions such as “Does this technique work?” and begin to ask questions such as “What type of person, with what type of problem, profits most from what kind of approach?” His major hope for the future was that as applied sport psychology moves ahead, it will inform, and will be informed by, a science of sport psychology.

Our respondents had several suggestions for future training. Jim Loehr placed strong emphasis on a solid background in physiology and biochemistry. Shane Murphy placed great importance on learning how to “do consulting.” That is, what are the metaskills we need to be effective consultants, and how can we share them with our graduate students and our peers? Betty Wenz made a strong appeal for continuing education, especially in the area of applied ethics.

Finally, our philosopher, Ken Ravizza suggested that sport is getting more and more “technologized,” with everyone having computers and making “analyses.” Ken suggested that a current and future role for the sport psychologist might be to help humanize the technology of sport. He also made the strong appeal for the mental trainer to become a fully integrated member of the training staff.

We return now to more of our respondents’ own voices and hear some final words of wisdom about our field and about ourselves. Many of our consultants cautioned against “working without a net.” That is, it is important to have colleagues with whom to consult about athlete or coach clients. Gloria Balague emphasized the crucial role of collegial consultation:

What I would really caution people not to do (and sometimes it’s hard not to do) is to work somewhat by yourself or on your own. What I have found most important again and again in my work has been having a group of people who talk the same language and do kind of the same things, with whom I can really consult. I think we tend, because of the nature of our work, to work too much in isolation, and sometimes you can really lose perspective.
Bruce Ogilvie and Bob Rotella both cautioned about the hubris that may accompany having a PhD and how credibility is earned, not automatically conferred:

Bruce: Just because you have a PhD in sport psychology or whatever doesn’t mean that you necessarily have the training and the background and the skills to walk into a zillion dollar complex organization and function effectively.

Bob: Another thing I see in sport psychology that intrigues me is people thinking they’re supposed to have credibility because they’ve got a PhD. You know, you’ve got to understand all the people you’re working with are brought up on a coaching model. The coaching model’s based on loyalty, it’s based on volunteering and spending hours and hours.

This theme of “putting in your time,” “paying your dues,” and “doing the work” emerged again and again in a variety of forms. Shane Murphy gave us a concrete example of “paying dues”:

I think what bridges the barrier is just being there for the athletes. Going to practices, letting them know that you care, talking to them, talking to the coach, being available, you know, making the effort to go along to competitions, making the effort to go along to a 6:00 am. practice. Those sort of things are hard work, but they make a huge difference in the long run. I remember working last year with the white water canoe kayak team, getting up early in the morning, going out on the river, not being afraid to get wet, getting cold, and then coming back and talking about what the runs were like. You’re not one of the athletes. They [the athletes] know that you’re not there in anything like the same role that they are or even their coaches, but they do want to see you making the effort. They respect that.

Ken Ravizza emphasized another type of “paying dues”—working on oneself and really knowing one’s skills:

I see people picking up relaxation in 3 months, and then they feel they’re ready to go out and teach it or whatever, and I think there needs to be more work on oneself before you run and share these activities with others. I think if you’re in it for ego reasons, you’re going to run into a lot of problems. . . Another thing is what you can and can’t do. What’s your agenda? What’s your mission? I think that needs to really be clear, and you have to be honest with yourself, can you do what they want? And if you can’t, you’re going to be frustrated, and if you’re working with elite athletes, they’ll see through you so quick.
Ron Smith also placed great importance on knowing oneself and how one may get in his or her own way in either wanting to help and “save” athletes too much or in fostering athlete dependency on the sport psychologist:

I think there’s a tendency to want to be a savior when you first get into this business, and you take a great deal of personal responsibility for what happens when you’re working with an athlete. I think any sport psychologist who gets into this business is likely to experience the same thing. You really want to help these people, and if it doesn’t work, you say “Gosh, maybe I’m not doing this right, or maybe I didn’t do the right thing, or why couldn’t I get this guy to practice his relaxation?” I have found that it’s very important to keep in mind the limits of one’s own personal responsibility and personal capabilities...I’ve also seen lots of instances where athletes have formed tremendous dependency relationships with sport consultants, and they can’t make a move without that person. That’s one thing I think is a negative rather than a positive.

Many of our consultants emphasized the need for continual learning. Betty Wenz stated, “Continue to learn, and learn from your clientele as well. Continue to upgrade, continue to consult with colleagues back and forth on what it is you’re doing—but colleagues who are appropriate, not always a sport psychologist.” Shane Murphy also suggested “keep improving as a consultant, develop those general consulting skills, such as speaking in front of people, writing, coaching, training people, and developing your own area of expertise.” Ron Smith summed up this important point succinctly “Become as competent as you can. Learn as much as you can. You’re no different than an athlete; you never stop developing competencies.”

The controversies in sport psychology over boundaries, titles, certification, turf, and so forth received some mention by most of our consultants. A couple transcended the usual arguments and set the practice of sport psychology in a different light. Burt Giges repeated words he had formerly written for the AAASP community:

What we know and what we do, need not be limited by what we call ourselves. Is helping someone learn a new behavior, change a belief, or change thinking considered education, counseling, or therapy? I believe it is a part of each and all three, therefore it can be done by an educator, counselor, or therapist who has acquired the necessary knowledge, skill, and experience to do so.

Dan Gould made an appeal from his experience at all levels of practice and professional associations:

I guess this point’s more political, but God, maybe cut people some slack before you put them down. I think sometimes we’re too quick to judge. We jump on people’s cases before
we give them a fair chance to speak. Recognize there’s a lot of different ways to be [a consultant].

A final word from Bob Rotella simplifies the issues of sport psychology consulting down to one fundamental point:

I’m absolutely convinced people who help athletes perform better will have plenty of work and have marvelous careers, and if you don’t help athletes perform better, whether it’s because you don’t know how to do it or because you can’t communicate with them or whatever, well you won’t have a lot of work.

Summary

The breadth and variety of experiences, the insights and observations, and the thoughtful advice of our informants make summarizing the content of the interviews difficult. The consultants in this study came into applied sport psychology from diverse backgrounds and via a number of different routes. Despite the differences in training and experience, they all concur when talking about quality service delivery. The one piece of advice that consistently came through was the same one that Socrates gave 2,500 years ago: “Know thyself.” As consultants, we need to ask ourselves, who are we, what are our strengths and weaknesses, why are we in the field, what are our needs, and what are we getting out of working with athletes? All our consultants made an appeal for rigorous self-examination and appraisal.

Athletes and athlete behavior have always been the focus of applied sport psychology and will always be. Knowing sport and the sport context, awareness of the inseparable interactions of thought, body, and emotion, and understanding the demands of learning and performance were endorsed by all as crucial to credible service delivery. It becomes essential to bring ourselves as sport psychologists into focus as well. Many of the interviewees emphasized the need to keep learning and developing our consulting skills. A valuable source for this knowledge is our professional colleagues, and it was repeatedly suggested that consultants maintain regular communication with one another.

This paper itself could be considered a type of collegial consultation. The advice, cautions, suggestions, and insights of the practitioners interviewed may be helpful to students and practitioners alike who are struggling with issues like the scope of practice, reasons to be in the field, and where one can go with sport psychology. We hope we have offered the readers of TSP a glimpse into the world of sport psychology consultation as seen from the eyes of those who have “been around.” As the authors of this paper, we know that we have learned more about the practice of sport psychology consulting from these interviews than we ever learned from a textbook. Without doubt, there is a great need for practitioner knowledge to be recorded for the benefit of the field. We encourage others to document the practice of consulting in the applied sport psychology literature.
It seems appropriate to end this article with some advice from the father of North American applied sport psychology, Bruce Ogilvie, on quality sport psychology consulting:

The extent to which you can lose your ego as a consultant in this field is going to determine the extent to which you are truly a contributor in the lives of the athletes you seek to serve.

References


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