

Trusting Your Sport Psychologist

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parents will know “in a general way” what is going on in the sport psychology consultations. Again, the parents and the child athlete must understand that the SPC “can’t be spying on their child and at the same time, the child needs to understand that the parents might have to be de-briefed.” If done in a tactful manner, the child athlete will respond favorably to hearing how his/her privacy will be preserved and the parent(s) will recognize the importance of allowing their child to talk privately with the SPC.

In sum, Dr. Gould believes that whether you’re an athlete, coach, or parent, “the principle of confidentiality rules everything” when it comes to developing an effective sport

psychology consulting relationship. If you are an individual athlete looking to incorporate sport psychology services into your training regimen, establish early on that all of your communication(s) with the SPC will remain confidential, unless that information is detrimental to your and/or someone else’s health or you have given the SPC permission to talk with specific people, such as your coach or nutritionist. If you are a coach seeking services for your team, discuss how “team” and “individual athlete” information will and will not be shared. In general, know that you will be made aware of relevant general information about how the team is doing, but specific information about each athlete will not be shared unless otherwise specified by that particular athlete. Finally, if

you are the parent(s) of an athlete who is a minor, talk with the SPC about your comfort in only being told generally what is occurring during the course of the consultations. It is understandable that you want to be involved in your child’s life, but for the consultation to be effective, the child must know that he/she can talk freely with the SPC without information automatically being relayed back to you.

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Emotional Profiling and Athletic Performance: An Interview with Dr. Bob Harmison

By Jon Wildman, B.S., & Trent A. Petrie, Ph.D.

Bob Harmison has quickly established himself as an effective sport psychology consultant. While earning his Masters degree in Exercise and Sport Science from the University of Arizona in 1994 and his Doctorate in Counseling Psychology from the University of North Texas in 2000, Bob has worked with many different athletic teams, including men’s baseball, women’s golf, women’s rowing, and women’s basketball to name a few. Currently, Bob is the sport consultant for the U.S. Snowboard Team, accompanying the athletes and coaches to the 2002 Winter Olympic Games. Bob was interviewed about his applied experience and specifically his use of emotional profiling to help athletes achieve peak performance.

JW: What is the biggest difference between college athletes and Olympic athletes?

BH: The number one difference is obviously the ability level. National and International level athletes can do things that just a small percentage of athletes can do. Not that college athletes aren’t good at what they do and many college athletes compete on the international level. But, I think [international athletes] are better, not just physically, but mentally as well. Their skills are just a little more developed. My experience with college athletes now is that they are aware of and have heard of sport psychology and such things as goal setting and imagery, but with elite athletes, they spend a little more time training themselves in these areas.

JW: In your work with athletes, what do think are the 3 key mental skills/strategies that lead to success?

BH: Number one is confidence. In fact, often times when I work with an athlete, I’ll teach them skills that are all geared toward enhancing their self-confidence, whether that is self-talk, relaxation, goal setting, or imagery. I try to tie all these into the concept of confidence. In my experience, if an athlete has enough confidence, they can deal with anything that comes his/her way. The second most important skill is the ability to focus and concentrate. Helping an athlete get into the proper mind-set and the proper focus is something I spend a lot of time with as well. The third skill is probably a “catch all” category but I would call it mental toughness. When I think of mental toughness, I think of athletes’ ability to prepare themselves for competition and for anything that may come their way, whether it be distraction, adversity, or changes in the schedule, and then to cope effectively.

JW: Out of these three, confidence, focus, and mental toughness, do you think there is one area in which athletes seem to need a little more work?

BH: Mental toughness is the area in which athletes seem to need a little more help, especially with mentally preparing themselves to perform to their potential. Many athletes more or less know what [mental toughness] means, however, they may lack the ability to consistently put themselves into that state of mind. I probably spend most of my time helping athletes get ready to perform and I would label part of this process “mental toughness.”

JW: What is emotional profiling?

BH: The basic philosophy, from a mental standpoint, concerns what an athlete needs to do to perform to their potential by

getting into the ideal mental and emotional state. We talk about that as being “in the zone,” or “in flow,” but I like to call it the “ideal mental and emotional state.” The idea is that if [athletes] can get themselves into this ideal mental and emotional state then they have the best chance to achieve a peak performance or to perform at their potential. So when I work with an athlete, my goal is to help them get themselves into that zone.

Before I can help them get into this [ideal mental and emotional state], they have to have a good understanding of what that mental and emotional zone is for them and it’s different for every athlete. We have a general idea of what that zone actually looks like and some studies cite certain characteristics that help an athlete get into the zone but essentially it is different for every athlete. So that’s why I think developing an emotional profile can help an athlete individualize that zone and understand what their zone is. So the whole idea is to help athletes understand what their ideal mental-emotional state is.

JW: Do certain emotions play a bigger role than others and how do these emotions contribute to athletic success?

BH: That’s what I really like about emotional profiling. It is so individualized that it is difficult to say this emotion is more important or that emotion is more important. What it comes down to is what is the most helpful emotion and what is the least helpful emotion for that athlete. Having said that I will say that I have noticed that the one emotion that I do see a lot is confidence/feelings of certainty, which seems to be consistent across the board. The other major one would

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An Interview with Dr. Bob Harmison cont.

probably be feelings of anxiety whether that would be bodily feelings of nervousness or worry. Those two seem to be the key emotions that I have seen in my experience.

JW: How do you help an athlete become more emotionally aware?

BH: I mainly accomplish this goal is by using the profile. What the profile does is take the athlete through a series of steps that begins with self-reflection and ends with a graph that visually displays their emotions. Basically how the profile works is the athletes first think of their 3 best performances, those that stand out in their mind as being above and beyond how they usually perform. This could be when the athlete won something or it could be when the athlete finished in last place but it just felt like his or her best performance. Then I have them think about the emotions they remember feeling before that performance. They also receive paperwork that helps them choose labels for the various feelings that they remember. What they wind up getting is both a set of positive emotions, emotions that feel good like confidence, excitement, happiness, and fun, and a set of emotions that are more negative, emotions that are more unpleasant like irritation, aggressiveness, anger, or frustration. This is the first step - they get a list of emotions that both feel good to them and don't feel good to them that are associated with their best performances. Secondly, I have them do the same thing with their worst performances. Athletes then label emotions that may have felt good before these performances, like overconfidence, contentment, or satisfaction, and again label unpleasant emotions as well, such as panicky, fearful, or scared.

JW: Ok, so how do you help athletes translate these emotions into successes on the field, court, or ice?

BH: The goal of emotional profiling is again to get athletes to identify what their ideal emotional state is. By having athletes identify both their worst and best performances, you end up getting

information about their extremes. Hopefully the athlete wants to experience emotions more toward the best performance.

The next step is then to work with that athlete to develop some specific strategies that they can employ, as they prepare themselves for competition, to bring about those feelings [associated with their best performance]. This is related to the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behavior. What an athlete thinks about will determine how they feel and how they feel will determine how they perform. By knowing how we want to feel, we can figure out what we need to think about, focus on or imagine to bring about these feelings of confidence, aggressiveness or those emotions that are associated with your best performance. This will hopefully then lead to you performing your best.

JW: On average, how much of a difference do you think emotional profiling can make for an athlete in terms of athletic success?

BH: That's a tough one because it's hard to quantify improvements when you're talking about elite athletes who are already performing close to their ceiling. There are two ways, however, to evaluate the effectiveness of a mental skill. First does it increase performance or does the skill help you perform your sport better? Secondly, does the mental skill allow an athlete to perform more consistently? So the goal of a mental skill is not only to increase performance but to also make performance more consistent at that level. My feeling is that if every athlete had a better understanding of their ideal mental-emotional state, then they could expect either to perform a little bit better and/or a little more consistently. In my experience, every athlete that I have introduced [emotional profiling] to has felt like it had some positive impact on their performance, either by making it better or by making it more consistent.

Currently, Dr. Harmison is the Department Head of Sport-Exercise Psychology at Argosy University/Phoenix. He can be reached at rharmison@argosyu.edu



Trusting Your Sport Psychologist

By Eric Rosmith, M.S., & Trent A. Petrie, Ph.D.

Getting yourself "up" for competition, helping your team "come together" at just the right time in the season, motivating yourself or your players, maintaining confidence in yourself and your abilities despite performance setbacks, or managing a personal life while handling the pressures of competing represent just a few of the situations you may have experienced as a coach or an athlete. To cope with situations such as these and ultimately be successful it helps to have someone to talk to - a confidante with whom you can discuss your performances, your ideas, your goals and even your doubts. Although this role is often filled by teammates, other coaches, or family and friends, sometimes these individuals are just not able to offer the needed assistance. Sometimes having someone who understands the issues, strategies and rules of sport, yet is one step removed from the daily pressures of practices and competitions is helpful. For many coaches and athletes, a sport psychology consultant (SPC) is the ideal professional to fill this role. The SPC has "insider" knowledge, yet is able to objectively listen and then supportively discuss how performances can be improved.

But how do coaches and athletes establish successful relationships with SPCs? Such relationships are based on trust, which comes from talking openly and honestly with one another and from knowing that what you say will be respected and kept private. In essence, trust implies putting yourself (and perhaps your athletic success) into the SPC's hands, to count on them for help. For many athletes and coaches, though, relying on someone else for help and sharing personal information can be difficult things to do. Most athletes and coaches have a "do it myself" attitude that has helped them overcome obstacles and achieve success in their sport. Further, in the high publicity world of sport, athletes and coaches know that what they say (or do) can appear on the front page of the sport section or end up on someone's website. As a result, they may be very selective in whom they talk to and what they say, if they talk to anyone at all.

For example, if an athlete does not believe that what she is telling the SPC will remain private, then she may be less willing to disclose important information, such as the fact that she is in a stressful romantic

relationship or she is struggling with her confidence on the court. On the other hand, a coach may be unwilling to have an SPC work with his team if he believes that he is not going to be told anything about what the SPC is doing with the athletes or what the team talks about at their meetings - few coaches are willing to give up that much control of their teams. Thus, the issues of privacy and confidentiality take center stage when establishing a relationship with an SPC.

To learn more about what you as an athlete, coach or parent of a minor (under 18) athlete need to know about these important issues as they apply to sport psychology consultations, we spoke with Dr. Dan Gould, Bank of America Excellence (Endowed) Professor in the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro (UNCG). Dr. Gould serves as Director of the Applied Sport and Exercise Psychology Lab at UNCG and is an active researcher in the field of sport psychology. Along with teaching and research, Dr. Gould has been involved in coaching education from the youth to Olympic levels and has served as an SPC for Olympic and other world-class athletes.

Individual Athletes

According to Dr. Gould, at the beginning of any consultation, the athlete involved needs to know the "confidentiality rules." Athletes must be made aware that what is discussed in the context of a sport psychology consultation "won't go beyond the two of us, provided it's not a risk to the athlete's or someone else's health." Further, it is imperative that athletes understand that confidentiality "doesn't mean everything is confidential, because sometimes you may need to de-brief coaches and let them know what's going on." If SPCs believe they need to share some important information about the athlete with the coach(es), then they need to do two things before they proceed. First, the SPCs should ask for permission from the athlete to speak with the coach(es). Ideally, and in many situations legally, this permission should be obtained in writing. Second, the SPCs should discuss with the athlete what they intend to tell the coach(es) and why they believe disclosing this information will benefit the athlete and his/her

performance. Being up front about what information is and is not going to be shared goes a long way toward establishing a trusting relationship.

Coaches/Teams

When hired by a coach and/or team to work with a group of athletes, the SPC needs to let the team members know that to be effective he/she will "need to let the coaches know what's going on." According to Dr. Gould, though, both the coach(es) and athlete(s) need to understand that not all information discussed between team members and the SPC will be shared with the coach. Here, Dr. Gould suggests that you get "conditional permission" from each athlete on the team, letting them know that the coach will be made aware of what's going on with the team "in a general way." For example, the SPC might let the coach know that the team is frustrated and struggling, but not identify which athletes said what. If the athletes are going to work with the SPC, they need to know that the SPC is not simply a conduit to the coaching staff. On the other hand, the coaches need to know that they will be apprised of the issues that exist on their team. Establishing with the coaches and athletes that there will be a balance between keeping information private and keeping the "team" informed allows a clear, trusting and open relationship to develop among the team members, the coaching staff and the SPC, something that is necessary to improve team cohesion and athletic performance.

Parents

When working with athletes who are minors, confidentiality laws vary from state to state. However, before working with a child athlete and his/her parent(s) Dr. Gould tells them, "I'm not going to tell you everything your child tells me or I'm going to be ineffective." At the same time, the child athlete needs to understand that the SPC "needs to talk with the parent(s) or it isn't going to work." Just as when working with an athlete and his/her coach(es), the child athlete and his/her parents must be aware that the

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