

## So You'd Like a Sport Psychology Consultant to Work With Your Team? Three Key Lessons Learned from Olympic Teams

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I first started working for the United States Olympic Committee's (USOC) sport psychology department in 1988, and I've been working with the organization full time since 1991. Over this quarter-century, I've watched sport psychology grow from an esoteric concept into a vital service used by the majority of Team USA. I've gotten used to working with Olympic athletes who went on to become national team coaches and are now sophisticated consumers of sport psychology. These coaches and their teams are very easy to work with, as the coaches already know exactly how sport psychology services can be used. On the other hand, as sport psychology becomes better known, there are an increasing number of coaches who are newly interested in sport psychology, but have never actually worked with a sport psychology consultant. For these coaches, there are often concerns and questions about the process of bringing a sport psychology consultant in to work with their team. In this article, I'll discuss three keys that make a big difference in helping a sport psychology consultant make a positive impact on coaches and their teams.

### **First key: Hire the right sport psychology consultant.**

The single most important decision a coach will make about bringing in a sport psychology consultant is selecting the consultant. Even a perfect team environment can't help the wrong consultant, but the right consultant can prove effective even in a very difficult team environment. Of course, the "right" sport psychology consultant will be different for each coach and each team, and the definition of a good fit can vary dramatically. There is a very wide range for defining a good fit, but here are some good rules of thumb for selecting the appropriate candidate:

- 1. Look for people with the proper training and credentials.** The field of sport psychology combines expertise from two areas: traditional psychology and sport science. The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP), the world's largest sport psychology organization, has a listing of certified sport psychology consultants with graduate coursework, supervision, and training in both sport sciences and psychology. The USOC has worked with AASP and the American Psychological Association (APA) to develop its own USOC-endorsed sport psychology registry. The USOC Registry is used by the USOC staff sport psychologists to identify consultants for coaches and athletes around the country.

Both AASP and APA have annual conferences where the latest developments in applied sport psychology are presented. Make sure that the consultant you select is connected with other professionals in the field and invests the time to keep up with the latest knowledge. Unfortunately, some individuals claim to be sport psychologists or mental training experts with little to no formal training in sport psychology - without proper credentials, these



individuals are not qualified to provide services. As a coach, it makes sense to ensure your consultant is trained in sport psychology and continues to develop their skills by attending conferences and workshops on the latest science in performance psychology.

- 2. Determine if the sport psychology consultant has a model of high performance.** As a coach, it can be very helpful to understand what the consultant believes will lead to great performances and what leads to performance problems. This can be discussed on a phone call or through an introductory talk with your team. A well-trained sport psychology consultant will be able to explain these ideas simply and with connections to published research to support these ideas.

Be very careful if the consultant uses phrases like “secret,” “proprietary,” or “unique in the field.” Sport psychology is a science, not a magic act. Think about how you choose other professionals who impact your life. Would you want a pediatrician to have secret medicine that no one else would prescribe to your child? Would a dentist who tells you “I pull your wisdom teeth in a different way than anyone in the world,” make you feel more or less confident? Your consultant’s model of high performance should be based on sound science recognized by the field. The best science-based consultants can be uniquely talented at applying the science, but they don’t create a new science!

- 3. Charisma is not enough.** Many coaches believe they need a “motivational speaker” to “fire up” their team. While the ability to motivate and entertain a group of athletes is a very useful skill, it’s a very small part of what a sport psychologist might offer. Some terrific and charismatic speakers are actually pretty bad at the less exciting but more important work of analyzing specific performance challenges and consulting with individual coaches and athletes to help develop solutions to the challenges. While it isn’t a bad idea for a coach to ask a potential consultant to explain their sport psychology philosophy, the question and answer period after the talk may be the best measure of potential effectiveness. Speaking of questions and answers...
- 4. Ratio of questions to answers.** Effective sport psychology consultants know that they must understand the specifics of your team, your athletes, and your coaching staff to be effective. A good consultant will begin a relationship by spending far more time asking questions than giving answers. You and your team are unique, and if a consultant starts the relationship by telling all about his or her accomplishments and how those methods will work for the team, the consultant may not be listening to your unique challenges. Certainly, the effective consultant must get to answers eventually, but a capable consultant usually begins with a lot of questions.

**Second key: Once you choose a consultant, help them succeed with you.**

I’m always struck by coaches who are very hesitant about bringing in a sport psychology consultant, who then often completely turn over the mental aspect of their team to the consultant. Early



in my career, I was pleased - and complimented - when a coach trusted me enough to let me have free reign to do whatever I thought best. Later, I realized that any impact I could have would be much greater if I became a working partner with the coach. I learned that I wouldn't truly succeed unless the coach helped me succeed. Over the years, I have discovered some things a coach can do that are a tremendous benefit to the sport psychology consultant:

1. **Let her know what you want, and what you don't want.** Even if you have never worked with a consultant before, it is helpful to have a discussion about the coach's vision for the program. What would help you? What are you worried about? Are there things you definitely don't want your consultants to do? How much time, access, and availability do you want? If the consultant has worked with other teams, it may help to ask her what she has found works best to build a good working relationship with the coach.
2. **Figure out how to stay connected to the mental work being done.** It can be tempting to let the sport psychology consultant take care of the mental side of things and for you to focus on the physical, technical, and tactical aspects of your sport. I have learned that it is important for the consultant to have a communication system in place that can give coaches critical information they need on the mental aspects of their team. It can be as simple as having the coach sit in on group sessions and sometimes sitting in on sessions between the consultant and an individual athlete. Hearing consultant and athlete talk about performance using specific language can help the coach weave the same language into their discussions with the athletes. If time or other factors prevent a coach from occasionally sitting in, one of the things I do is encourage athletes to talk to the coach about the work we are doing.
3. **Have clarity about how confidentiality will work.** Even though sport psychology is very different from the work of a typical psychologist, one of the most useful tools of psychology is confidentiality. There are some times and some topics when an athlete will not speak unless they know that the conversation will not be repeated. On the other hand, there are times when a coach would benefit a great deal from information that the athlete might share only with a sport psychology consultant.

The "conflict" between the benefits of confidentiality versus the benefits of sharing information can be managed in many ways to protect everyone's interest. Especially in sport, where the work is often literally on display, coaches, athletes, and consultants benefit from a clear understanding of how information will be shared. These discussions are best addressed at the beginning of a consulting relationship.

For an example of how this might play out, take the common occurrence of an athlete telling the sport psychologist that he or she gets very anxious before a competition. Sometimes pre-competition anxiety can get so bad that athletes can barely track what their coach is saying before the start. The sport psychologist will often work on skills to help manage and reduce the anxiety, but it may also be useful for the coach to know when the athlete is anxious. In these situations, when a sport psychologist knows something that could help a



coach do a better job coaching, a sport psychologist usually strongly encourages the athlete to begin talking to the coach about these issues. If an athlete agrees this would help, but is afraid or unable to do this, the sport psychologist can ask the athlete if it would help to schedule a meeting for the athlete to talk about the issue together with the coach and sport psychologist. Alternatively, the athlete may ask a sport psychologist to meet with the coach separately about the issue. In these situations, confidentiality creates an environment where the athlete can develop new skills to deal with issues that are otherwise never discussed. Frequently, these skills give athletes the confidence to work on these issues directly with coaches, which helps coaches be better at their jobs.

- 4. Learn more about the mental game of your athletes, not less.** I believe that bringing in a sport psychology consultant is very important and helps coaches get even more engaged – not less engaged - in the mental side of performance. If you develop a true working partnership with your consultant, this increased knowledge about the mental lives of your athletes happens fairly easily. I have found that a coach who communicates the desire for the consultant to stay involved and learn as much as possible, really helps the consultant succeed. In addition, most athletes quickly learn that it is ok to talk to the coach more about their mental game, and this is a big factor in improving performances.

### **Third Key: Help the consultant succeed with your team.**

Over the years, I have found the greatest success with teams that have coaches who strongly encourage their athletes to work on improving their mental game. Athletes generally respect and trust their coaches' judgment on the value of sport science and support services. Even when a coach has no personal experience or background in sport psychology, there are a number of very important steps a coach can take to help the consultant succeed with your team.

- 1. Sell the importance to your team.** In the dark ages when I began doing this work, I had coaches tell their team: "If you are having problems, you should talk to Sean, and it might help." That introduction helped insure that working with the sport psychologist meant that something was "wrong with you." These days that hardly ever happens, but many athletes might mistakenly believe that sport psychology is only for when things are going wrong.

One of the best introductions to sport psychology I have ever heard was given by a coach who was a former long-time professional and Hall of Fame player. He introduced the consultant to his team by saying, "I almost washed out of the pros at the beginning, but I made it to the Hall of Fame by realizing the mental part of our game is the most important and by realizing it was my responsibility to get as strong mentally as I was skilled on the field. We brought this consultant in because I believe that working with him can extend your career and help you be better. I expect any player of mine who wants to get better to do this mental work!" As you can imagine, the consultant had plenty of business from that team. Starting off well usually means that the coach has helped make that happen.



2. **Warn the consultant about the minefields on the team.** Every team has specific team challenges, certain athletes who require a specific approach, and certain areas that everyone talks about but nobody ever addresses. As a coach, hopefully you are aware of all the potential obstacles that can trip up an unknowing consultant. Giving the consultant a map on how to cross dangerous ground is very helpful for the first few days of contact to prevent a major miscalculation that requires effort or time to correct.
3. **Give the consultant enough time.** In today's busy world, time is our most valuable resource. A truth of sport psychology consulting is that it takes time for a consultant to make an impact. It takes time to collect data and to let athletes get comfortable. It takes time to conduct individual and group sessions. Although I am a big believer in keeping sport psychology services as a voluntary option, I am also quite comfortable with scheduling brief individual meetings at the very beginning with all athletes so that athletes get comfortable with the consultant. I have found that 15- or 30-minute individual meetings can serve the purpose of beginning a working relationship, and can be a valuable door-opener for athletes who wouldn't be comfortable talking in a group session. Group sessions can also be a useful introduction, and can save time overall. However you structure the introduction, you need to give time and space for athletes and the consultant to get to know each other. If you don't schedule it early, some key opportunities will be lost.
4. **Bring the consultant to practice and competitions.** A good sport psychologist needs to see athletes in action to really understand how best to be an asset to the team. If a consultant never attends practice or competitions, they have to rely on the athlete's self-report of what happened. It is far more efficient for a consultant to be there to see the good, the bad, and the ugly of a team in action. There is much that can be learned by attending training sessions, but there are some things that can only be understood by attending competitions in which pressure produces new behaviors. When I work with sports at the USOC, I will often attend five or six competitions a year. Witnessing a team either working together perfectly or breaking down provides vital information that enables consultants to do their work. In addition, when a consultant is on the road with your team, they become integrated with the rest of your coaching and performance staff.

I recently worked with a very successful coach who said, "I really see the difference that sport psychology makes, but I was always a little cautious about introducing it when things were going pretty well. In the past, I used to wait for problems before bringing in a consultant. Now, I see that this is just something we need to do all the time. And when things are going well, this work can help take us from good to great results." I am very pleased to see that coaches at all levels are embracing sport psychology, but understand that it can be intimidating to start the process of actually working with a consultant. Since coaches are the key to making sport psychology successful, I hope more coaches understand that by following the guidelines in this article, the process of bringing in a consultant can be straightforward and quickly useful for them. Please feel free to reach out to the USOC Sport Psychology staff to help you begin this process for your team.

