Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology
A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners
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Purposes and processes

Jack C. Watson II and Vanessa Shannon

You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.
Plato, The Republic

Assuming this statement of Plato’s is at least partly true, one might also believe that by watching how athletes behave during practice and competition, psychologists may be able to gain valuable information from these observations in addition to talking with the athletes in counseling sessions. Although traditional discussion and assessment strategies can be excellent ways to learn about clients, observations can also be useful components of the information-gathering process. This chapter will focus on the role of observation in consultation and provide the reader with an overview of the techniques and strategies that can be used to make informative observations.

What is observational assessment?

Why are observations important for sport psychologists, and in what ways can they help consultations? Observational assessment is an out-of-session opportunity for practitioners to monitor clients in their sport environments where they may be less guarded and act more naturally. These observations may provide practitioners with information beyond what they can glean from clients during one-on-one sessions. This information can be used to facilitate relationship building, inform consulting, and track effectiveness.

Face time: building rapport and trust

Effective sport psychology consulting relationships are often built on a foundation of trust and rapport (Ravizza, 1988). Early interactions between consultants and clients provide professionals with opportunities to make connections with athletes and develop rapport and trust by communicating understanding and commitment. Conducting practice and game observations can also be excellent ways to develop rapport with individual clients or teams. By putting in “face time” at team events and demonstrating commitment, consultants may
be able to engage athletes in the consulting process by reducing resistance to sport psychology and facilitating the development of trust.

Observational assessment may afford consultants an opportunity to peak the curiosity of team members and foster interest in how the psychologist might function within the team. In settings with existing relationships, observations may provide opportunities for bonding between professionals and athletes/teams. In situations where consultants have been hired without team knowledge, observations may provide the first face-time exposure with the team. Often a sport psychologist, new to a team, may be introduced by the coach saying, “We have a new member of the team, she’s a sport psychologist, and she’ll be observing the team. I want you all to get to know her better.” When the psychologist is regularly seen at practices and games, athletes begin to interact with him/her and rapport and trust (may) develop naturally. These early interactions can pay dividends later in consulting relationships.

**Holistic understanding: how observations can inform consulting**

Successful consultations often start with the development of rapport between athletes and consultants. Nevertheless, it is important not to overlook the value of developing a thorough assessment of the athletes and the social environments influencing their behaviors. Assessment facilitates successful consultations because it informs psychologists about the clients’ backgrounds and underlying issues that may affect their sport behaviors and their lives. These issues may be related to factors that clients are unwilling to discuss, or may even be outside of the clients’ awareness. In either case, proper assessment of clients can facilitate the efficacy of the consultation process.

Assessing athletes and their successes and failures related to sport and other aspects of their lives can be accomplished using two forms of assessment information: pre-assessment and corroborating assessment. Pre-assessment information is collected prior to consulting and provides the benefit of allowing the consultants to develop tentative understandings of individuals and teams. Corroborating assessment occurs after consulting relationships have begun and allows the psychologists to triangulate information gathered from athletes or teams during treatment sessions.

One may ask, beyond watching athletes and how they perform and interact with teammates and coaches, what other value can come from observing clients in their natural environments? To answer this question, one must consider that all individuals have their own perceived realities. Every person views life and situations differently (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). For example, when police officers interview witnesses of a crime, they likely get different accounts. These accounts differ based upon the physical perspective of the witnesses as well as the factors to which the witnesses paid attention, which were affected by personal biases and experiences. Similarly, athletes view themselves through biased lenses. Clients may believe they are being “objective” in one-on-one sessions, but their accounts are likely biased by their past experiences and self-perceptions. Even though it is the clients’ perceptions of reality that matter, the clients’ perceptions may not be completely accurate. Consultants will benefit from determining whether or not their clients view situations with particular biases. When bias is observed, it should be used as a caveat for future observations and interpretations and may be a beneficial topic of discussion.

Sport psychology consultants would benefit from having a thorough understanding of the ways in which athletes act and react during both minimally and highly competitive situations. Although many of the mental and psychological barriers athletes encounter may be related to previous experiences in their lives, it is helpful to consider the current social
factors that could affect athletes’ mental states or performances. Observational assessment is another way to gain perspective on the social factors affecting life and performance. Athletes and their concerns do not develop in a vacuum. Observational assessment, along with questioning, can facilitate the understanding of the social environments in which athletes live and compete. Factors that may be observed and assessed include the athletic subculture, athletic and team identities, social networks, and leadership styles (Brustad & Ritter-Taylor, 1997).

**Tracking learning**

Although observations can be a central component of an initial assessment, it should not take the place of a traditional intake interview. If done effectively, observational assessments can supplement information gathered during traditional intakes (Gardner & Moore, 2005). Observations can be used as a feedback loop that provides information about client change throughout the consultation. Consultants can observe client behaviors, such as the use of anger-reducing strategies and routine implementation, to help quantify behavior change. Such knowledge can inform the consultation process. In addition, observations may be informative later in the consultation process by helping professionals learn how clients use the skills taught during individual sessions. Observational assessment should be seen as something that takes place throughout the consultation process.

**When and where to observe?**

Initial observations are often started from a distance, which can help provide a perspective of the entire field, gym, or practice venue by allowing consultants to observe the entire team. From this distance, consultants may be less likely to focus their attention on specific individuals and skills; instead, their attention is focused on the overall process. Observations of teams at a distance may help professionals develop an idea of normal interactions, cliques, coaches’ interactions with each other, and coach–player communication.

After observing the general processes of the team (i.e., 1–2 observations), and learning more specifics about presenting problems, consultants might observe practice from a closer vantage point. Such observations allow psychologists to hear specific interactions between players, coaches, and support staff, and to observe specific personal responses to success and failure through comments, facial expressions, and other reactions. These observations become purposeful, and with more knowledge about the team, consultants will start observing players and teams with specific ideas in mind. The goal of these observations should no longer be to soak in information to better understand the client, but should progress to using this information to assess and confirm (or reject) previous speculations and perceptions.

In time, observations may progress to where consultants are observing from the playing field (or pool deck, or golf links). Observations at such close proximity serve two needs. First, personal observations can be made about team and individual reactions to situations. Second, information can be made quickly available to athletes, and with permission could even lead to immediate interventions. Nevertheless, during these observations, psychologists should not spend a significant amount of time talking with or standing beside the coaches. It is important to balance consulting time between coaches and athletes (Jowett, Paull, Pensgaard, Hoegmo, & Riise, 2005); if players view consultants as extensions of the coaching staff, the relationship between them may change.
Coaches may, at times, ask consultants to help with practice. Consultants should use their best judgment with regard to helping, because they do not want to be seen as coaches. Roles that would be perceived by players to help the team and are not likely to be seen as coaching roles can have positive consequences and help to decrease distance between players and consultants. For example, while working with a volleyball team, one of the authors would frequently help collect balls during practice. Collecting balls was done in situations when team members were in a rush to gather balls. Such a small action was viewed positively by the players.

**Practice settings**

A great deal can be learned about athletes, their presenting problems, environmental factors that may trigger negative responses, and possible treatment approaches through observations made in settings where the consequences of mistakes are less meaningful than in competitive situations. Practice settings are great places to observe how athletes interact with coaches and teammates, respond to or engage in leadership, and deal with successes and failures.

With practice often being less stressful than games, athletes and coaches are more likely to behave in their usual manner. Observations of typical behaviors during warm-ups, drills, and competitive simulations allow consultants to form a picture of the team’s athletic subculture (e.g., values and beliefs, roles and status that affect communication and support). Such observations allow consultants to identify cliques and subtleties in leadership. Many presenting problems and treatment plans have social components to them, and practitioners should consider identifying these social interactions as possible components in future treatments.

**Competitive settings**

Even though practice observations are important, we also encourage consultants to observe competitions to gather information not available during practices. Competition observations may provide insight into how athletes behave, react, and interact in outcome-oriented environments with respect to sportspersonship, pride, shame, and self-worth. Competition also allows for observations of the influence of external factors that are not relevant during practice settings (e.g., responses to perceived errant calls, fan interactions). Finally, competition observations help consultants examine how teams respond to pressure, winning, and losing.

**Other settings**

Beyond practices and competitions, athletes often interact with each other in settings such as the locker room, weight room, training room, cafeteria, and during travel. Observing interactions in these settings can help practitioners garner a great deal of information. These observations can provide evidence about the athletic subculture of the team, athletes’ personal identities, social networks of influence, motivation, communication patterns, cohesion, and social support.

Observations in weight rooms and training rooms (where athletes receive treatments) may focus on social issues, but one should also be open to gather information about motivation, athletic subculture, athletic identity, and self-perceptions. In these settings, psychologists should pay close attention to how hard athletes work, how much they need to be pushed to perform, the motivation they provide to others, how they interact with support personnel,
how strongly they identify with the role of athlete, and how they carry themselves in terms of confidence. Although several of these issues may be observed via overt behaviors, observations related to athletic identity can be made by listening to athletes and how, and how often, they discuss their sports, the importance of sport to them, and by observing their reactions to injury and the influence that it has upon other aspects of their lives.

Although the weight and training rooms are areas where athletes may be encouraged to push their limits using both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational strategies; locker rooms, cafeterias, buses, and planes provide athletes with informal social opportunities. In these settings, consultants should look for illustrations of the athletic subculture and social networks. Observations in these areas could focus on communication between teammates, seating arrangements, eating and exercise habits, evidence of social support, and friendships. This information can provide the consultant with an understanding of how the team members affect each other and how they fit, or don’t fit, together. Such observations can also provide evidence of social support opportunities for athletes who may be struggling with athletic, personal, or social problems. Observations made in the locker room can at times resemble observations made in less structured (e.g., cafeteria) and more structured (e.g., practice) environments. In some instances, these observations may provide evidence about social networks and support systems, and in other instances may result in learning a great deal about leadership styles and motivation.

**Inconsistencies in observations**

An important component of observational assessment is identifying potential discrepancies between practice and competition behaviors. For individual athletes, discrepancies between practice and competition behaviors may provide evidence about attitudes or sources of motivation. Other individual behaviors to compare between practice and competition include arousal, anxiety, focus and concentration, confidence, and differences in social interactions.

It is equally important to identify possible changes in coach behaviors and team interactions from practice to competition settings. Coaches’ behaviors can have major effects on athletes, and if these behaviors change between practice and competition, athletes may be confused by the inconsistencies. Inconsistent coaching can leave athletes not knowing what to expect, and can result in anger and a loss of trust. Differences in team interactions between practice and competition may also be useful information for psychologists. How teams behave and how the members interact with one another are indicative of the team climate. If that climate were to change between practice and competition settings, it may signify a disruption in the team unit.

It is also important to be aware of any discrepancies between what athletes are saying during one-on-one sessions and their behaviors during observations. Individuals live in their perceived realities, and what they think they are doing and what they are actually doing may be different. For example, if an athlete suggests in session that he is confident about his performance under pressure and then is observed by the psychologist to be cracking under pressure (e.g., errors, negative body language), there may be a disconnect between the athlete’s perceptions and reality. This disconnect could be something that the psychologist and athlete discuss in session to figure out what may be happening for the athlete. To be consistent with observations across communication type and settings, practitioners should consider using a behavior tracking form (see Figure 10.1 for a sample form).
What to observe?

Observational assessment can provide practitioners with an opportunity to examine verbal and nonverbal communication among players and coaches. This information can be useful in understanding team dynamics. The majority of communication is nonverbal (Mehrabian, 1981), and as Plato’s quote at the beginning of this chapter implies, athletes’ body language can be equally as telling as their words. Nonverbal cues paint a picture of both interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. High fives and positive verbal communications may suggest high cohesion among team members, whereas limited verbal communication and no physical touching may imply team tension. Similarly, athletes who always have their heads up and shoulders back regardless of the score or previous outcome exude confidence, and athletes who slouch and whose eyes are pointed at the floor may lack confidence or be feeling dejected.

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<tr>
<th>Athlete/Team: ____________________________</th>
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<tr>
<td>Practice/Competition against _____________</td>
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<th>Warm-Up</th>
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<td>Nonverbal Communication</td>
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<td>Interactions with Teammates</td>
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<td>Overall Assessment Comments</td>
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**Figure 10.1 Individual observation tracking form.**
Other forms of nonverbal communication for practitioners to be aware of include facial expressions, stride length, visual gaze, breathing, ritualistic behaviors, and speech patterns (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). For example, athletes may be showing signs of fear or stress if they take short and indecisive strides, have a lost or apprehensive expression on their faces, seem to be having trouble focusing on the task, breathe faster and shallower than expected, use short or fast speech patterns, or perform ritualistic behaviors. On the other hand, athletes may be perceived as confident and comfortable if they display multiple behaviors opposite to those identified above.

**Individual observations**

**Pre-performance observations**

Observing the way an athlete prepares for competition can be informative. Many athletes use pre-performance routines to regulate arousal and mentally prepare for competition. Athletes with systematic and consistent routines may be more aware of the importance of arousal regulation and mental preparation. If athletes use their pre-performance routines inconsistently, they may not see the usefulness of the routine, be distracted, or be unable to focus on the routine. In addition, by observing athletes’ pre-performance routines, practitioners may be able to better understand the issues the athletes may have related to performance anxiety, focus, and concentration. The activities in which athletes engage prior to performance may illustrate how they feel about the impending competitions. For example, overconfident athletes may not feel the need to prepare as much as athletes who have a suitable level of confidence or are underconfident.

**Anxiety and arousal**

If athletes experience anxiety, or are unable to attain optimal levels of arousal, it may negatively affect their performance. In such instances it is important for consultants to use observations to identify behaviors that may indicate anxiety or issues with arousal regulation. Examples may include athletes swaying back and forth or constantly drying their sweaty palms. Similarly, athletes with difficulty attaining optimal levels of arousal may appear lethargic at intense moments or over-aroused when it might be more effective to be less intense.

**Composure and emotional control**

The best scenarios in which to gauge athletes’ composure and emotional control are during successes, failures, and situations in which they have minimal control. Athletes’ responses to successes and failures say a great deal about their composure and emotional control; athletes with composure and control maintain a similar gracious attitude in success and failure. If athletes are boastful after a win or good play, or unsportsmanlike after a loss or mistake, they may need to work on their composure and emotional control.

**Confidence and concentration**

Oftentimes, athletes who lack confidence have heightened levels of performance anxiety, experience frequent lapses in concentration, talk a bigger game than they play, and struggle
with indecisiveness (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). Many of these behaviors and cognitive changes can be observed (or inferred) during competition. Performance anxiety may manifest itself through observable behaviors (discussed in the previous section). Lapses in concentration and indecisiveness are both apparent when athletes experience a number of unforced errors during competition. An athlete with diminished confidence may struggle to focus and may appear to be physically disengaged (e.g., wandering eyes). In addition, if athletes are indecisive, they may appear tight or tentative.

Low confidence is only one of the many reasons athletes have difficulty maintaining focus and concentration. External and internal distractions, such as the opponent(s), the previous point, the score, and negative self-talk can lead to lapses in concentration. Observable examples of distracters may take the form of “trash talking” or athletes verbally criticizing themselves.

**Motivation, dedication, and commitment**

Although psychological attributes are less tangible than physical attributes, practitioners can still use observation to assess behaviors that may illustrate an athlete’s motivation, dedication, and commitment. If athletes demonstrate responsible behavior, adhere to team norms, and try hard to succeed, they are demonstrating high levels of motivation, dedication, and commitment. Athletes who loaf around or are disengaged when not in the competition, may have limited motivation and dedication and may not be truly committed to their team or individual performance.

**Group observations**

When psychologists are hired to work with entire teams, their observations should be somewhat different than those discussed for individual athletes. When working with teams, consultants should focus on both coach-related and team-related factors.

**Coaching behaviors**

When consulting with teams, we encourage practitioners to use their observation time to focus on team-related issues that may affect performance. Because the team is bigger than the sum of the individual parts, it is important for observations to extend beyond the individual athletes themselves. Such observations should also focus on gathering information about coaches, and how the coaches influence the team through their interactions with the athletes, their leadership styles, and the emotional and motivational climates they promote.

**Coach–athlete issues**

The relationships between athletes and their coaches can strongly affect performance and other aspects of athletes’ lives (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). Through observational assessment, psychologists can examine verbal and nonverbal interactions between coaches and athletes to gain information about the way coaches interact with athletes. Consistency, or lack thereof, can heavily influence the coach–athlete relationship. If coaches demonstrate inconsistencies in their interactions across time or athletes, these inconsistencies may affect team dynamics and subsequent performance. Specific coaching behaviors to observe
include modeling, reinforcement, and feedback style. By observing these behaviors, practitioners will be able to better determine whether or not coaches interact consistently and/or effectively with athletes.

**Leadership**

Team settings provide opportunities for learning and developing leadership skills. The leadership tendencies of coaches and athletes affect behavior and performance and are important to assess during games and practices. Information about the leadership tendencies of players and coaches can be garnered from warm-ups, encouragement given during drills and games, and feedback or instruction provided to players. Other leadership observations might include assessments of leadership practices on the team (e.g., autocratic vs. democratic) and responses to differing leadership styles.

Questions that consultants may want to ask when observing coach leadership styles include: how does the coach teach? How does the coach communicate with athletes following successes or failures? How does the coach react to player feedback/comments? In addition, psychologists should pay particularly close attention to how athletes or teams react to their coaches in these situations.

While observing athlete leaders, consultants may want to focus on questions such as: How does the athlete leader motive his/her teammates? Are there “unofficial” leaders, beyond the captain, who emerge during practice or competition? What leadership strategies appear to be working best? Do different team members respond to leadership styles differently? All of this information can be used to help the athlete leader become more aware of the team landscape and to provide guidance for improvement of leadership strategies in the future.

**Climate**

Some coaches create climates where athletes are free to learn and make mistakes as long as they work toward improved performance, but other coaches create climates that are rigid and threatening, where athletes are shamed and reprimanded for mistakes. The setting influences player autonomy and satisfaction, but can also influence other factors such as self-confidence, role expectations, cohesiveness, stress, and anxiety (Ames, 1992). Observations of team climate can help consultants understand player thoughts and behaviors. For instance, observing coach–player interactions following different situations (e.g., success and failure in practice or competitive situations, individual mistakes, personal crises) and more so, player reactions (e.g., hanging head, tentative movements, frustration) to these interactions can provide the psychologist with information about the perceived climate and the influence of the climate on individuals and the team.

**Team processes**

By observing teams across settings, consultants can learn how athletes communicate. Communication strategies should be observed in as many situations as possible, but may be particularly informative when teams are under pressure. Stressful and evaluative situations that demonstrate communication patterns include successes and failures, position challenges, and team scrimmages. These situations give information about communication patterns, but also team processes such as leadership characteristics, team support structures, and team roles.
Observations of team processes such as leadership, status, social support, and roles are important for practitioners to understand. Not only does knowledge of these factors affect how practitioners understand the information obtained from clients in session, but also provides information that can inform interventions. When consultants know the roles, support systems, and/or leadership styles on the team, they are better able to judge the potential efficacy of team interventions. Further, if effective social support is not present, or players do not understand their roles or status, consultants may want to develop initial interventions that target improvements of these factors.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, psychologists need to be aware of the roles that observations can play in the consultation process. Not only do observations play an important role in the development of rapport between client and psychologist, they also provide information to consultants that can be used to better understand and corroborate information learned in one-on-one sessions, provide information that can help develop and maintain effective interventions, and assess the effectiveness of interventions. Given the importance of observations, we recommend that psychologists consider conducting both practice and competition observations as early and often as possible. These observations should focus on the social and situational factors influencing athlete and team attitudes and behaviors. These social factors include social networks of influence, the athletic subculture, leadership styles, and communication patterns.

Observational assessments provide information that helps with evaluation. Although observational assessments may not provide specific information about why athletes experience stress, anger, fear, or limited focus or self-confidence, they can provide insight into the athletes’ experiences. If conducted well, these observations can benefit the consultation process. Although we have provided an outline for conducting effective observations, psychologists will need to develop their own methods of practice/competition and individual/group observations. In addition, they will need to develop strategies for using the information that they gain from these observations. See Box 10.1 for the main take-home messages from this chapter.

**Box 10.1**

*Take-home messages about observing clients*

- A significant amount of information can be learned from observations that may not be possible to obtain in traditional consultation sessions.
- Observations can help build rapport and inform the consultation process with information about clients’ experiences, ideas for effective interventions, and assessment of client change.
- Consultants should attempt to gather pertinent information from clients (individual athletes, whole teams, coaches) using observations of both practice and competition situations.
- Observations should start from a distance. With time and rapport development, they can periodically move to closer proximities.
References


