Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology
A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners
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Many professional athletes are used to being told how they ought to handle challenges, and their adaptive (and maladaptive) responses to adversity have been reinforced by authority figures (parents, coaches, physicians, trainers) for a considerable time. In a professional environment, where non-sport-related behaviors and activities receive increasing scrutiny, athletes can find themselves needing to operate within a fairly rigid set of behavioral guidelines that do not necessarily leave room for the expression of individuality. An outcome of these restrictions can be that professional athletes enter the therapeutic encounter expecting a similar dynamic. The job of facilitating athletes’ choices about what outcomes they would like from the work undertaken together can take substantial time and effort on the psychologist’s part. Collaborative effort may be a novelty. It may help to start by asking athletes how they feel about being there and explaining the rules in terms of confidentiality, reporting, and client notes, as well as something about the role of a psychologist. An introduction may go something like, “I’d encourage you to think of this as your space and your time, and what I’m interested in is helping you work through what is going on for you. Over time what I’ve found is that what seems to work best is when we approach this work together as a team.” (see Andersen, 2000).

Professional athletes get lauded for “tough behavior” and “gusting it out” and so help-seeking can seem like a weakness, particularly if the stigma is reinforced by coaches, many of whom came through an era where prowess and heroics would never have been accompanied by the expression of emotional vulnerability. It may feel uncomfortable for professional athletes to acknowledge that they are struggling on any front. One of the things I find useful in opening the door to talking about feelings is to focus on bringing palatable emotions to the fore. These feelings might include passion, anger, or the shattered feeling one experiences after a loss. Making common-sense comparisons and drawing parallels to similar emotions in other aspects of the athletes’ lives can help.

On occasion, a medical analogy can help an athlete understand the significance of emotional health and wellbeing. For example, to say “if you were suffering from mononucleosis, would you see it as necessary to deal with it in isolation and not seek help?” Or “playing with depression and ignoring it is possible, like playing with a small broken bone in your foot maybe. But it’s uncomfortable and perhaps unnecessary if treatment is available.” I also refer
to statistics and research because quantification can be useful in the early stages of engagement and rapport building, and athletes are used to quantitative comparisons.

Although professional athletes may not be especially familiar or comfortable with showing vulnerability, they are often used to receiving feedback that most other people would find deflating and demoralizing. Feedback may be given without permission or invitation from the athlete and may be in front of their peers and presented without a right to reply. As a consequence, it seems that some athletes are desensitized and blunt about what is wrong with them (e.g., “I have an addictive personality,” “lying is part of my personality”). It might be worth raising a red flag for such comments because they sound suspiciously like other people’s diagnoses of the athletes, and those who diagnosed may carry a great deal of weight with the athletes (e.g., coaches, team physicians). These self-views need to be examined carefully because it may be unhelpful to therapeutic relationships in their infancies to place oneself in opposition to important people in the athletes’ lives.

Considering things in the third person can assist athletes to access topics until they find a degree of comfort in speaking on a personal level. For example, to ask “what would you think if it were your best mate feeling this way or in this predicament?” It can also help normalize the athletes’ experiences (if this approach is suitable) to present de-identified or amalgamated case examples and share them with the clients.

**Language**

I have heard people say that one needs to dumb down one’s language for athletes. I wholeheartedly disagree with the comment. As with any other group, overuse of jargon or psychological terms can be alienating and plain language is best. I have found it useful, however, to use terms that seem familiar to the athletes such as mental practice or mental preparation rather than, say, cognitive restructuring or reframing. I might also reference things physically and start by asking questions such as “what do you feel in your body when that’s going on for you, what do you notice?”

It is also worth talking about the technical sport language used when speaking with athletes. As a sport psychologist, you should be at least familiar with the technical terms used within the sports with which you are working, so that your clients can feel confident you are relating to what they say. If your spin bowler (cricket pitcher) is talking about unhelpful cognitive intrusions on the run-up to bowling a “leggy,” or feeling consumed with anger if he is accused of “chucking,” you need a grasp of the context and an understanding of the terms. Inevitably, however, there will be occasions when you do not understand a technical term or jargon, and these occasions present a great opportunity to learn and to empower the client by asking what that term means. Doing so adds to your competence and provides some balance in the relationship (e.g., client as knowledgeable teacher). On the flip side, the psychologist’s overuse of sport-technical terms, and particularly sport jargon, can seem too informal, flippant, and even sycophantic. For example, in Australian rules football sometimes sports commentators will refer to the ball as the pill, the field of play as the paddock, or a pair of football boots as a set of wheels, but using such language with an athlete can make you look like you are trying too hard. I suspect that athletes appreciate that you get it, but also that you are not part of their world, and you represent a space slightly separate from their sports. Perhaps it is best to meet the athletes where they are in terms of language.
Boundaries

Working with athletes can present interesting challenges in regard to one’s professional boundaries. In my role as a psychologist working within a player development program for an Australian sports organization, I see athletes one-on-one for therapy, and I see groups for psycho-educational sessions on such topics as depression and anxiety, problem gambling, responsible use of alcohol, and drug education. All of these interactions require trust and rapport, but it is sometimes a fine balance between interacting with the group and keeping the therapeutic relationship with the individual “special.” I explain to one-on-one clients that I will not overtly single them out and acknowledge them in group settings because it may be construed as identifying them as clients of mine. It is not uncommon for me to have several clients within the group I am addressing, but they do not know each other as Pippa’s clients.

I tend to adopt an open but not “matey” style, which is common in football clubs, and I deliberately approach the captains or club delegates as a point of introduction. Collaboration and relationships with club stakeholders and power brokers is a must in professional environments, and an insider recommendation (from a coach or a club doctor) is potent and credible. Again, the balance is fine because relationships with club doctors or coaches that are too neutral and do not add any value to them in their roles are as damaging as relationships that are too close and breeding grounds for breaches of client confidentiality. For this reason, one needs to be clear and consistent about the professional ethics and boundaries of a psychologist with all parties from day one (Gardner, 1995). A luxury in my current role is that I work across clubs rather than with one club, and so I am seen as neutral and as representing or advocating for the players, not the clubs, which is helpful when the desired outcomes of each are not aligned, and I am clearly signposted as being on the players’ side. It is, however, important to remain respectful of the coaches, administrators, and other staff members in each club because there can be strong paternalistic dynamics, and the coach, in particular, is sometimes seen as a singular and omnipotent decision-maker against whom the athletes feel uncomfortable to pit themselves. Part of the privilege of my role is that I can pit my opinion against a coach, respectfully, and voice disagreement, or concern that an athlete may not wish to do something: in effect, giving him a vicarious outlet for the frustration he feels.

Professional club or team-based social occasions can challenge the sport psychologist’s professional boundaries. What to do if after a big event or perhaps at the end of the season when the rest of the team, including coaches, physiotherapists, doctors, and administrators, are ready to let their hair down, and invite you to come along? To decline would seem isolating or maybe stand-offish, but to go along and get into the swing of things might put you in a position where your boundaries are stretched: perhaps an athlete may have a few too many drinks and start to probe into your life, or the coach might share way more information than he intended about your clients. Your clients, although seeming comfortable on the surface, might become uneasy about you being so friendly with the people about whom they talk to you week-in–week-out, or alternatively, they may feel restricted in the way they behave because they don’t feel comfortable with you in the room. You’re supposed to be separate, remember? However close your connection with the team or the athlete, there are few occasions when there is more to be gained from staying for the duration of a social event than attending for a while and making your apologies early and leaving.

Confidentiality

Psychologists operating in any professional domain are ethically bound by and accountable to rules of confidentiality set by their accrediting bodies. This accountability is, in part,
designed to engender trust and instill confidence in clients. Psychologists working in sport settings sometimes have these ethics tested because they may have more than one client: the athlete and the person paying the bills (club / coach / parent). Sport psychologists work in myriad settings but are most often associated with teams, clubs, or organizations who refer clients to them. If it is a third-party referral situation, whereby the coach, for example, calls the psychologist to make the referral, sends the athlete along to offices outside of the regular sport setting, and understands that the psychologist is a neutral service provider, the issue of confidentiality may never come up. Likewise, if athletes refer themselves to the psychologist without anyone else being involved, there is no issue. Nevertheless, when the psychologist is contracted or employed by the club or similar body, the reporting lines and responsibilities may become blurred, and the psychologist not only needs to be hyper-vigilant about walking the ethical line, but also needs to be a strong and credible communicator.

Most coaches and administrators have the interests of the athletes at heart and are genuinely looking for positive improvements in their health, performance, and wellbeing (Gardner, 1995). To this end, they seek information about how athletes are progressing, whether they are emotionally fit or ready to perform this week (and if not this week, when?), how they might react to decisions pending (such as being dropped or selected), and what are their abilities to contribute to the team. The coach has to make decisions about fielding the best team and competing optimally week to week, and sees this information as “need-to-know.” At other times, the coach may be making decisions about the tenure of the athlete on the team, and the information you hold can significantly influence those decisions. As discussed earlier, the relationship with the professional coach or administrator is a pivotal one for the psychologist, but the presumption needs to be that the information given to you from the athlete is in confidence and is not to be shared with the coach or other stakeholder. In an ideal scenario, you would either have the client present or have been given consent to share specific information on behalf of the client. It doesn’t, however, always run so smoothly, and oftentimes psychologists are checking and monitoring themselves along the way. Some psychologists manage to stay flexible by clearly indicating to the group of athletes that particular types of information will be shared with the coach, and letting the athletes know what information has been requested and subsequently shared. Other psychologists carefully pick through their available data and choose what they can talk about, and keep it specific.

Some challenges that I have observed include a situation where a psychologist was involved in the case management of several athletes, one of whom, he was aware, had a pervasive gambling problem that had consumed his attention for many months. Although the athlete had made excellent progress and had finally started putting the problem behind him, legacies of the gambling problem, however, were a serious amount of debt, a broken relationship, and also a lack of focus on planning for life after sport. Two of the members (not psychologists) of the case management team believed that this athlete did not care about his performance, nor did they believe he was invested in the team. He was seen as stand-offish and aloof. Their inclination was to deselect him and elevate someone else to the team. The senior coach asked the psychologist directly whether he knew of any reason why the athlete would have been underperforming that they could take into consideration; if there was no such information, he would not be renewing the athlete’s contract. The athlete had not wanted the coach to know about his problem in case he did not get a new contract, which he desperately wanted. The psychologist believed that the deselection of the athlete would be devastating to him, put him under immense pressure, and risk his progress and rehabilitation. But he was also unsure of the amount of empathy the case management
team overall would have for the athlete, whom they believed to be difficult at the best of times. In this case, the psychologist asked both the athlete and the senior coach to consider coming together in private to discuss the athlete's position before the case went back to the management team for a decision. The psychologist told the athlete the position he was in and his concerns that he would not be able to represent his situation well and also maintain confidentiality, and explained that he thought that the senior coach might be open to hearing the athlete's story. In this case, the coach and athlete were able to discuss the scenario and reach a resolution whereby the athlete continued his tenure with the team under strict performance improvement criteria.

Another situation involved a sport psychiatrist (with whom I work regularly) who had accepted a referral from a club doctor to work with an athlete on a generalized anxiety issue. The doctor told the psychiatrist that information should be presented back to a particular staff member who was “appropriately trained in psychology.” The psychiatrist checked with the client, who concurred that this person was the right person in the club, and all information on players had to go back to him. After giving this person feedback on the athlete’s concerns and offering an outline of the deeper psychological processes and long-term issues, it came to the psychiatrist’s attention that this man was not a psychologist, but an influential sports scientist and high-performance manager whose priority was the decisions on the playing status of athletes week to week. On further probing, it became clear that the client was under the firm impression that he did not have a choice about information going back to the club. This scenario highlights the importance of explaining confidentiality to each party even when a referral is from a trusted source such as a doctor.

Work environments

The environmental trappings of psychologists working with professional athletes are often unusual. In an ideal consulting situation, a client would see a psychologist in private, comfortable rooms, most commonly set up with two chairs, a table with a box of tissues, access to drinking water, and so forth. The rooms would be reasonably soundproofed, for example, with a door that fully closed and walls that enclosed the rooms, as opposed to partitions. The appointments would be pre-arranged with an acknowledgment that they would go for a set period of time, and the psychologists would have the opportunity to ask a few introductory questions and explain how they work. Sport psychologists sometimes find themselves responding to the question “do you have a couple of minutes to talk?” from an athlete while they are poolside, trackside, courtside, pitchside, or otherwise. There is an emphasis on being accessible, particularly in circumstances where the discipline of psychology is new to a group of athletes, and asking for guidance is openly encouraged by the coach or other staff. There are some advantages to this loose consulting environment that include the normalization of help-seeking behaviors, the integration of sport psychology services into the overall preparation for sport, and the familiarity, rapport, and relationships built between athletes and psychologists (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999). The priority is to accept the client’s invitation to talk, but there is also an onus to protect, as much as possible, the client’s privacy and not open up potentially sensitive topics in earshot of other athletes or coaches. Privacy can be achieved by moving away – up to the stands if possible or to the edge of the playing field, but there is still the likelihood of being visible to other people. A good alternative is an administration office or private space that you are able to access, and where you are likely to be undisturbed. Alternatively, if there is some suggestion that
the issue up for discussion may leave the athlete feeling vulnerable, it may be prudent to welcome the opportunity to talk and make a time in the near future, outside the setting, where you can meet privately. Many hours of good work have been done by adaptable sport psychologists in local cafés.

Office set-up and location

Even when discrete office space is available there are special considerations with professional athlete populations. For example, it is important to ensure that clients will not be compromised by meeting teammates or players from other teams in your waiting room or at the door as appointments cross over. If clients are well-known public figures, they may request that they have separate entry and/or exit from sessions. On occasion a client will present around an issue that has been in the media, and journalists may turn up at your premises to attempt to photograph or interview the athlete. This situation can present difficulties if you do not have the luxury of a receptionist.

Sometimes, however, the athlete is much more comfortable in a less formal setting. I have noticed that younger male clients and also many Indigenous Australian athletes prefer casual settings. We might go for a walk or meet over a coffee. At my home office, some of my Indigenous clients choose to take their shoes off and sit on the rug leaning against the armchair, rather than sitting in the arm chair. Some of my professional athlete-clients ask me to allow my dogs into the room, who sit close to the clients and become the focus of attention, visually and physically, particularly when the clients venture into emotionally sensitive territory.

A consideration for all psychologists working in private settings, or more casual, informal settings, is personal security. Many sport psychologists work alone and although you may endeavor to “meet the clients where they are” and be flexible, it should never be at the risk of your personal security. If you are one-on-one with a client in private, someone should know where you are working or what time you are scheduled to check in again.

Population

Professional athletes are not a homogenous group. There are, however, some consistent themes or aspects to the athlete population. For example, in professional sport:

- Professional athletes are constantly judged and critiqued by other people.
- Athletes are often displaced geographically, and from family and friends, to train or compete.
- Male team athletes spend an enormous amount of time with other men in large groups, which can create strong cultural norms and dynamics that may seem unusual or extreme to others.
- The conduct of modern professional athletes inside and outside of their sports is regulated tightly (particularly in popular high-revenue sports that attract media coverage).
- Unlike other young men and women, many professional athletes throughout their careers have access to a great deal of support/intervention/assistance/help such as regular access to specialist medical personnel and psychologists (Ray & Wiese-Bjornstal, 1999).
- Professional athletes may have unusually high disposable incomes, significant down time, and access to the means to get into trouble (alcohol, drugs, gambling).
High-ranking professional athletes lead public (sometimes celebrity) lives and they are often held accountable to the public and the media as role models.

Athletes cannot have ultimate control over their careers in terms of longevity, injury, or success, and unlike other professionals, who generally progress and grow as they age and become more experienced, professional athletes usually peak at a young age and then find themselves on the brink of deterioration, with their careers at the cusp of being over.

A professional athlete's life is often in flux and rarely certain or stable. Perhaps because of this instability, in combination with relative financial freedom, it seems that male team sport athletes tend to make commitments in relationships and to family at an earlier age than the general population (Australian Football League Players’ Association, 2009).

Professional terms and conditions

Few sport psychologists are employed full-time by professional teams or clubs. Those who do work exclusively with such organizations are usually contracted for a number of hours on a fee-for-service basis, or have restricted terms such as a financial retainer to cover all services provided. Consequently, the amount of time the psychologist is able to dedicate to a client may be necessarily limited. It may be useful to work out with the team or athletes what would happen should athletes require further support. Consideration should be given to whether the athletes pay for extra services themselves or whether the team could extend existing resources. Psychologists should decide whether they are in a position to offer pro-bono services to their clients, but many professional athletes have substantial incomes and could pay for continuing service. It may be possible for clients to claim medical rebates for services that continue beyond the agreement. If there are no options available, psychologists must consider how they will dispense with their duty of care for athletes if they believe they would benefit from further support. It may be necessary to involve another party to assure the safety of the client, for example, a team doctor. In any case, psychologists must clearly communicate to clients the length of time they have available and plan to effectively summarize and terminate the sessions.

For some sport psychologists, getting professional athletes to turn up regularly can be challenging. This limited commitment may be more pronounced when the psychologist is employed or contracted by a third party (team, club, sports governing body) who pays the bills for the athletes rather than athletes paying for services themselves, and so there are no financial consequences for the athlete for not showing up. Cancellations may lessen significantly once a relationship develops between client and psychologist, but in the early engagement phase the commitment may be tenuous. When a client fails to show or cancels without good reason or for a second or third time, it is worth questioning whether the client is making an appointment voluntarily or under the persuasion of the coach or significant other. Athletes may report that training session times are constantly shifting, thus making it difficult to meet external commitments. Professional athletes may be under unrealistic time pressures, or they may not feel ready to meet with a psychologist. I have found it unhelpful to chase up clients beyond the first missed session. Instead, I encourage and welcome them to get in touch if and when they are free and ready. I explain that it might feel a bit awkward at first to talk, but it will be on their terms and at their pace if they choose to come to an appointment. Despite the need for flexibility when working in sport, it is not fair on other athletes (who may need your services) or on you to allow clients to make a
habit of canceling without recourse. Possible ways to address this issue may include a three-strikes policy whereby you let the client know that a third cancellation will mean that you do not accept further appointment bookings without a discussion, or clearly explaining that cancellation fees will apply for a second no-show or late cancellation.

Conclusions

Working with professional athletes as a psychologist presents plenty of challenges, including working with dual clients, traveling and unusual hours, managing boundaries in flexible work settings, maintaining confidentiality (when other people may be openly talking about issues in the athletes’ lives), and navigating through myriad ethical dilemmas. One dilemma involves the contrasting philosophies within sport about the *raison d’être* of the professional athlete: one side is that the purpose of being is to win at all costs and anything less than winning is failure. On the other side is that the endeavor of elite sport is purpose in itself. In typically short competitive careers, the majority of professional athletes will fail by the criteria of the win-at-all-costs, and the dilemma as a sport psychologist is to assist athletes to strive toward narrowly defined, singular, and extreme goals involving a great deal of compromise and pain, while finding meaning, and staying well. In the big picture of sport psychologists working with professional athletes, performance enhancement is only a small part of the work (cf., Murphy, 2000).

In conclusion, I think that the work of the sport psychologist is far from over when the professional athlete retires from sport. There is a great need for services to assist with transition out of professional sport and adjustment to life thereafter (see Glanville, 2009; Chapter 26). See Box 41.1 for take-home messages from this chapter.

Box 41.1

*Take-home messages about working with professional athletes*

- Athletes may initially have difficulty in expressing vulnerability, and it can be useful to start with a practical, performance orientation.
- Complex relationships with professional athletes, coaches, and administrators mean that it is especially important to communicate your boundaries to all stakeholders.
- Sport psychologists need to find a balance between being part of the team and being someone neutral and separate in the athletes’ world.
- The settings for doing sport psychology with professional athletes are sometimes unusual and practitioners need to be flexible yet discrete.
- Working on performance is only a part of what a sport psychologist does; seeing and valuing the person behind the performer is critical.
- The characteristics and competencies of a good psychologist are the same in sport as in any other environment.
- Sport psychology can offer services to professional athletes beyond their retirement dates.
References


