Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology
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Edited by Stephanie J. Hanrahan and Mark B. Andersen
The applied sport psychology intake

Jeff Simons

Listening is a rare happening among human beings. You cannot listen to the word another is speaking if you are preoccupied with your appearance or with impressing the other, or are trying to decide what you are going to say when the other stops talking, or are debating about whether what is being said is true or relevant or agreeable. Such matters have their place, but only after listening to the word as the word is being uttered. Listening is a primitive act of love in which a person gives himself to another’s word, making himself accessible and vulnerable to that word.

William Stringfellow

Well before diving into psychological work with athletes, one would do well to heed the beautiful words of Stringfellow, listening with the accessibility and vulnerability that invite relationship and foster insight. From the start, it is important to take the time to listen as the words reveal the athlete’s stories. In this chapter, I will focus on the applied sport psychology intake, relatively free from assessments. A great many protocols for clinical or counseling intake include an assessment schedule. For example, Taylor and Schneider (1992) have offered a method for athlete intakes that includes a well-considered and comprehensive assessment. Nevertheless, as Andersen (2000) pointed out, even though such a protocol is a valuable resource for practitioners, it is often too formal and clinical for the far more loose initiations of service common to applied sport psychology situations. Furthermore, jumping into assessment during the initial intake will often implicitly constrict the process to the tools favored by the clinician before adequate time has been spent determining whether or not psychological counseling is even warranted (Van Audenhove & Vertommen, 2000). Based on extensive investigations into the subject, Van Audenhove and Vertommen stated that they “became more and more convinced of the importance of the intake phase preceding the start of psychotherapy” (p. 296), even to the point of recommending several sessions prior to formally proceeding in clinical settings. So here, I will examine the value and practical issues surrounding intakes in applied sport psychology that are light on assessment.

Essentially, most or all of the important aspects of an intake are the same, or closely related, across any area of psychological work (Lukas, 1993; Perry, 2002). The practitioner wants to create a welcoming space for the client that is comfortable, safe, open, and is
accompanied by a sense of optimism for positive change. The intake, one hopes, begins to establish the foundation of a relationship between client and practitioner that will determine much of the opportunity to do significant work. It is a time to set basic boundary conditions (e.g., confidentiality) and modulate expectations (e.g., no magic wand). And the intake allows the psychologist (and often the client) to develop understanding around the objective and subjective realities of the client’s position and situation. None of these processes and procedures is unique to applied sport psychology.

If, however, an athlete is referred specifically to a sport psychologist, it is usually because the client is a performer, and service expectations are often centered on areas of athlete training and performance support. These expectations cannot be understated. Even if the athlete is referred because of a recognizable issue of psychological adjustment or disorder, we need to be mindful that most expectations of a “sport” psychologist are, ultimately, to help the athlete perform better. Certainly, this may not be the case if the referral is to a clinical/counseling psychologist or psychiatrist without the “sport” title or inference. But because we are assuming a referral to a sport psychology practitioner here, the intake may differ from other clinical examples due to the nature of expectations for performance results.

One of the persistent issues underlying referrals of athletes is that the sport psychologist is often just one possible solution to “something that is not right.” The situation is not much better when the sport psychologist is viewed potentially as “the next secret to a higher level of performance.” It may be that the athlete is not performing well and no one knows what to do, or the athlete might be hoping for some new (magical) techniques, capabilities, or skills to improve and gain an edge. It may be a last-gasp effort (e.g., day before competition) or just a trial of something different. But the necessity of sport psychology is often not implicit in the search (unlike the surgery needed to repair a detached ACL). If there is a clear psychological issue (e.g., eating disorder, suicidal thoughts, relationship difficulties) the connection is much clearer. But often the mostly vague notion that behavior or performance could possibly be improved with the help of a psychologist leads to less-than-half-hearted attempts at securing support. Sport psychology is most often seen as a “potential” fix – something to try – and only a few athletes and coaches seem to fully embrace a psychological approach to athlete issues. It is like a wet bar of soap – hold too loosely and it slips away; grasp too tightly and it squirts off. Establishing an attraction and connection for the athlete is part of the professional’s art.

Thus, the intake becomes incredibly important. It is up to the sport psychologist to hold the soap firmly but with sensitivity. The practitioner needs to be clear and positive and to convey the value of the service. One cannot afford to be too abstract, theoretical, or vague. The psychologist will, conversely, not want to come on too strong, or make the process of psychological work seem like a life-sentence of commitment. A gentle hand and an open perspective are needed to cultivate a relationship that might lead to continuing and significant work.

To be effective, the psychologist needs to determine a philosophy and a set of objectives for the intake. Essential elements of the philosophy are the centrality of care for the benefit of the athlete and the importance of developing a positive relationship between athlete and psychologist. Without a reasonably positive connection, little is likely to be accomplished no matter the technical expertise of the practitioner. Several objectives also seem universal for the intake: clearing a psycho-social space in which to explore issues, cultivating the athlete–practitioner relationship, tapping diverse perspectives of the athlete and the situation, creating engagement by the athlete to a process of change, and setting the course for effective reflection and action. None of these objectives needs be pursued in depth, much
less completed. But the “first impression” created by the intake will significantly influence further work.

**Setting**

Some professionals may meet athletes in a traditional psychotherapeutic office setting, but classically this situation is often not the case in applied sport psychology. Commonly, first meetings are held in and around performance venues, training spaces, dorms, airports, hotels, or cafés (see Andersen, 2000). While in full-time practice, my time was largely spent at training venues, competitive events, on the road with athlete groups, and in and around sport institutions with no dedicated office space. Such circumstances mean far less control over the environment. Not only does one have to deal with the standard disruptors such as phones and PDAs (personal digital assistants; see Perry, 2002), but there seems to be an ever-changing variety of distractions and potential interruptions in these settings.

I would not say that an office is necessarily a better space. Athletes are comfortable in their familiar locales, and privacy is a relative thing. I distinctly recall a first meeting with a well-known professional athlete at my office located in a city university building. He was having some (well-publicized) performance issues and had taken the major leap to seek professional help. By the time I arrived to greet him in the waiting area, he had been inundated by a small hoard of fans wanting autographs and asking why he was there. I still remember vividly the “deer-in-the-headlights” look on this otherwise impressive sport star, and I don’t think we ever really got into a reasonable and relaxed intake on that day in my office. We would have been far better off meeting at his team venue or a more secluded place.

Whatever the setting, one needs to create the essentials of a comfortable conversation space. Beware of letting the physical dynamics happen haphazardly. Physical and social discomforts will often be difficult to overcome once the conversation begins. Consider lines of sight for background distractions, lighting (including glare outdoors), and seating comfort. Make sure that orientation and spacing between you and the athlete are conducive to relaxed and dynamic conversation. In sum, purposefully apply your professional and personal judgment in setting up the meeting dynamics to optimize the chances of a quality discussion.

**Getting started**

Initial words and nonverbal communications create first impressions that set the psychological climate for relationship building. As with all therapeutic situations, the practitioner needs to create a relaxed but professional tone and a receptive, engaging atmosphere. When the two have never met before, it is important that the athlete senses the nature of the relationship that will be shared with the sport psychologist, as this is likely to be unique in their relationships around sport. In other situations, it is common that the sport psychologist and athlete may have some level of existing relationship (e.g., team interactions, travel), and the “first impressions” now are a reorienting towards a practitioner–client relationship. Either way, deliberately set the psychosocial tone that you wish to carry into a working situation at the outset.

To a reasonable extent, try to meet the culture of the sport and athlete. One needs to be wary of coming off as a fake “insider,” (e.g., overuse of the sport jargon), but athletes tend to appreciate the psychologist who understands the language, culture, and experiences of
sportspeople. Position yourself as part of the working aspects of sport and as a resource for athletes and coaches, and watch that your interests are not interpreted as fan attraction, particularly when working with high-profile athletes. The last thing a client needs is another enthusiast hoping to get intimate with an athlete. It is up to practitioners to be clear as to their purpose and to remember for whom the relationship is designed.

Set the boundaries of confidentiality early. Sport is particularly public, and there are many people who feel they have rights to personal information about athletes. Many athletes are accustomed to a type of “sport confidentiality,” where everyone offers non-disclosure, but it is regularly violated. In addition, there tends to be a whole network of “unseen people in the room” (see Henschen, 1998) who have dual relationships with the athlete. To set the intake on the right course, be specific and clear about the nature of the psychologist–athlete relationship and establish clear expectations of confidentiality.

Interview

Unlike many mental health settings, sport psychology clients rarely have accompanying files or records. Not often will one be able to read through professional notes. Performance records, however, are often readily available, and it is advisable, when possible, to do a little advance research on the athlete’s situation. It is common that a coach or administrator may have already provided some perspectives on the athlete’s issues, or that the athlete has offered some performance information when making the appointment. Despite what information you have or what you think you know, a primary objective of the intake is to elicit the client’s understanding of what is happening. Accomplishing this task is where professional listening skills become essential. You want to hear the client’s version and perspective (Lukas, 1993).

The practitioner’s task is to convey to clients that they will be listened to, and that the psychologist is working at understanding (Lukas, 1993). Throughout the session, active listening entails stimulating the dialogue and discussion, but also much waiting – being quiet long enough to hear emergent stories, images, emotions, and thoughts as they arise from the client (see Chapter 2). As Andersen (2000) stated in reference to intakes, “the bottom line is helping athletes tell their stories” (p. 4).

Intake is best viewed as a process of relationship-building and uncovering the “objective” facts. Unless there is a mutual agreement that the intake is an in-depth assessment, it is usually pushing it to do deep exploration and analysis. Stimulate discussion with questions, but don’t make the client take a quiz (Andersen, 2000). Especially in a first meeting, you want to ask questions that they can readily answer. Over-probing or intense analysis of causal factors is usually too much for a first session. For example, Lukas (1993) advised, “ask who, what, when, where, and how. Don’t ask why” (p. 8). The client may not know the answer to “why” questions (and experience embarrassment or confusion), or maybe the answer is the source of conflict (forced into an emotional place), or it may lead to too much emotional exchange for a first discussion (leading to the client feeling vulnerable and then withdrawing), any of which could stifle relationship building.

Reflect, summarize, and follow lines of thought, while being careful of leading towards your own conclusions or biases, or of putting words or emotions into the client’s mouth. In particular, stay clear of your own personal “Maslow’s hammer” and be wary of “over-psychologizing” – pushing the client toward underlying issues. Important issues and suitable interventions will arise in due time, given insight and trust. The dance at intake is
to engage the client in ways that allow a broad and safe discussion that reveals important perceptions and experiences, and engenders a sense of understanding.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom in psychological practice, the presenting problem in applied sport psychology may well be the problem, especially when it relates to underdeveloped mental skills for the high-performance demands of elite sport. For example, an age-group athlete requested my help in the case of a severe batting slump. After requesting a few details of his situation, I asked him what he was focusing on while at bat. He produced a list of outcomes on his mind such as scoring, winning, being successful, moving up to higher levels of play, and so forth. I replied that none of those things was likely to help him make contact with the ball, and that he might try focusing on batting one ball at a time (a brilliant idea that I thought up myself, of course). His response was, “OK that makes sense.” And he simply did it, immediately ending the slump and continuing on to his best season ever. I’m glad I didn’t begin the long exploration into why the expectations of his parents and an outcome-mad society were leading to his sense of failure about himself. The point here is that the presenting problem is often directly related to a real and highly desired outcome.

Nevertheless, even if the concern seems easily remedied, the practitioner should keep a healthy sense of skepticism about the facts and connections the client and others present (Lukas, 1993). One must remain open to other possible elements and follow professional curiosity about the situation. Certainly, this approach is the same in most of the helping professions. I have encountered many athletes seeking psychological assistance to raise performance when their primary issue was limited physical capabilities or inadequate training. Members of teams are notorious for only seeing their side of the equation. Ask "where’s the proof" of the clients’ perceptions, conclusions, and causal connections. Be aware that presenting issues may be distractions from the real underlying or otherwise obscured ones, and appreciate the possibilities of both embellished and attenuated stories.

Although an intake, as described here, is not targeted at assessment, psychologists still need to monitor and record (mentally or in notes during or after the session) their perceptions of their clients – personalities, styles, verbal and nonverbal communication, emotions, moods, and general presentation. We need to note the objective situation and apparent constraining/supporting factors, record a professional reading of affective flows and underlying themes or issues that appear to be in play, and keep track of questions that arise that are not necessary to address in this first meeting (see Chapter 6). All of these tasks aid in determining the possible needs of the client and the feasibility of providing professional help.

Covering the bases

During the intake, practitioners are faced with the challenge of eliciting stories relevant to potential service needs. Returning to the central assumption that expectations of applied sport psychology are that ultimately the athlete’s needs will be addressed, the interview should cover a range of training and performance issues prior to determination of intervention, if any. In particular, matters beyond the psychology of the person are centrally important. What demands are placed on the athlete by the sport? What are the cultural norms (sport, family, community)? How do the athlete’s objective skills work into the equation? How do all of these factors pose problems, and how can one identify potential solutions to the needs of the athlete?

Jim Loehr, in Simons and Andersen (1995), made the cogent point that psychologists’ training tends to skew the investigation to mental problems. Many experienced practitioners
would agree that focusing too early or solely on deep psychological issues puts many athletes off (“oh no, the Psychologist”). Further, as Loehr stated:

The mind–body dichotomy, looking at things from a mental or psychological perspective is a very limiting way to view the athlete ... I’m much more effective in my work today, and I think it’s largely because I tend to see things much more integrated, as kind of a mental, physical, and emotional whole.

(in Simons & Andersen, p. 455)

The applied sport psychologist is well-advised to maintain a broad view, from intake to intervention.

A framework that aids the practitioner in eliciting stories from different perspectives is most helpful. It is important that the structure be as unbiased as possible, because if the intake is primarily client driven, theory driven, or technique driven, the perspectives arising are invariably myopic (Marquis, 2008). One simple framework borrowed from dynamical systems concepts of motor control and performance allows the practitioner to consider the interacting perspectives of person x task x environment (Newell, 1991). Applying this approach, stories would be elicited from perspectives of the athlete’s perceptions, feelings, and psychological processing (person), the general and specific training and performance demands in relation to the athlete’s skills (task), and sport, institutional, physical, and psycho-social settings in which the athlete lives (environment). Whatever the presenting problem is claimed to be, the issues are embedded within these interacting factors. Moving between person, task, and environment allows checks of congruence between stories, strengths and weaknesses within the whole situation, and varied potential avenues for interventions.

Another framework that I have increasingly favored is based on Wilber’s (2000a) integral model. One of the fundamental tenants of the integral model is that there are four basic perspectives of being, which can be illustrated as quadrants of a 2 x 2 matrix (see Figure 9.1). Wilber’s insight is that all things exist in terms of external and internal features, both as a singular entity and as part of a collective. With regard to humans, the internal singular contains the individual’s experience and psycho-spiritual development that constitute “I” (first person perspective). The internal collective contains the norms, expectations, and values of the culture(s) within which the individual operates, constituting “We” (first person plural). The external singular is the empirical world of facts, events, and other observable or recordable things, and can be identified as “It” (third person singular). The external collective, labeled by Wilber as “Its,” encompasses identifiable systems, including natural/physical systems, societies, institutions, infrastructure, and methodological approaches of knowledge, training, and so forth (third person plural). Because integral theory eschews reductionism in all forms, it is recognized that “being” is an irreducible confluence of interactions among these perspectives. Yet there is significant value in the consideration of the quadrants as an intellectual tool for fuller understanding, particularly when looking from outside of the subject.

The depth and extent of integral theory is substantial, and the interested reader can readily access a multitude of resources on and around it. In particular, psychologists might begin the challenge with Wilber’s (2000b) volume on Integral Psychology and the thorough guide to integral assessment by Marquis (2008). For the present discussion, however, just the simple outline of the four quadrants provides a valuable framework from which to explore what may be happening with a new athlete client. It is a meta-theoretical model, and
therefore brings no bias to evaluations or interventions. Further, it is ultimately practical in evoking stories covering the bases of influence in the athlete's life situation (see examples in Figure 9.1). Pursuing stories of “I” not only gives the practitioner windows into the athlete’s experience, but also psychological processing, and stories of “We” provide reflections of shared values and expectations. Stories of “It” speak to physical and mental skills, objective performance, and situational demands, and stories of “Its” inform the practitioner of at least some of the institutional, programmatic, environmental, and social demands. Just a few explorations of each quadrant will fill an intake with substantial sharing and a high likelihood of openings to a positive athlete–psychologist relationship.

**Figure 9.1** The four quadrants of being, based on Wilber’s (2000a) integral model, with examples of elements that might be explored by the sport psychologist within each.

Moving forward

Throughout the intake the practitioner wants to normalize the nature of psychological work. Particularly with reference to practical applications, we want athletes to understand that psychology is not outside, or different, or an add-on to who they are and what they do and how they perform, but rather it is inextricably linked to all of their experiences. The intake is an opportunity to help dissolve the artificial separateness of the Western mind–body dichotomy (dualism). Without invoking theory or jargon, it is possible to highlight the natural influences of the four quadrants of experience. Living, training, and performing are not just external things nor just internal subjective interpretations, but both simultaneously. There are distinct individual aspects and shared/connected aspects. The work of psychology is inherent in all that sportspeople do – it is already and forever part of their game. The question then to clients is whether they would rather let this arena just progress by chance or by purposeful development. The psychologist may be viewed as a facilitator, providing guidance or coaching within this essential domain.

The intake should typically conclude with goals. Perry (2002) suggested, asking what the client thinks would be important. What changes would make the work worth the time?
If treatment were successful, what would be different? What would the client like to see happen? What does the client want to work on? Answers to such questions indicate what is meaningful, and therefore motivating, to the athlete. In addition, the practitioner can easily expand or add to the ideas expressed by the athlete according to professional insight. Goals may be related to some directed assessment or exploration, or they may include some practical applications. In my experience, athletes are particularly eager for action-oriented goals. They want more than instructions for reflection or the promise of another conversation later. Consider specifically directed inquiry or exploration, and whenever possible provide a particular step to take. The action goal can be a perspective, a thinking process, a communication process, or a behavior. Just get them engaged in the work.

Make sure to finish with a next step to a working relationship that is planned and scheduled. Even if it is simply, “I will stop by/call next Tuesday to check in on how you are doing.” Remember, athletes seeking help from sport psychologists are notoriously slippery. Particularly in situations where casual contact is common (sport teams, athletic departments, institutes of sport), it is easy to be vague or assume a good chance will arise in the near future. The commitment needs to be more than “see you around” or “catch you at practice sometime.” These vague plans too often never materialize, and the relationship started during intake becomes one of unease and avoidance. Clearly, the athlete has the right to opt out in most cases, and should be granted such a decision graciously. But if the relationship is to continue and develop, the onus is on the psychologist to keep the momentum and organization. Create the supportive expectation, set the meeting, and follow through. That engagement in itself will demonstrate that the psychologist–athlete relationship is qualitatively different than so many others in the athlete’s life, and an opportunity for meaningful work.

A final thought

In accordance with Stringfellow’s observations, the intake interview is a loving and caring encounter centered on listening and truly hearing the athlete’s story. Being heard and understood is often the beginning of therapeutic change. See Box 9.1 for a summary of the key points of this chapter.

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**Box 9.1**

**Key points about applied sport psychology intakes**

- The intake is first and foremost about building an athlete–practitioner relationship to support potential psychological work.
- A primary objective is to listen with an open and unbiased ear as possible to create an accepting environment and to develop understanding of the athlete and the situation.
- No matter what the apparent reason for an athlete referral, keep in mind from the outset that nearly everyone involved will expect that a sport psychologist will assist with sport performance.
One of the challenges for sport psychologists is to be conscious of traditional guides for the intake environment while often working in the nontraditional settings of sport venues, cafés, hotel lobbies, and so forth. The psychologist needs to meet the culture of the athlete as well as possible, but also be cautious about resembling the fan or any of many others around sport who have dual relationships with the athlete. It is helpful to have a framework for eliciting athlete stories that encompasses the multitude of perspectives that interact to create the whole situation for the athlete. Make sure to end the intake with clear plans for future contact and action-oriented goals for next steps.

Note

1 “... it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (Maslow, 1966/2002).

References


