

Putting the Team in Sport Psychology Consulting: Five Sport Psychology Consultants Collaborating Service for Athletes at the USOC

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Most conference presentations and professional articles on the application of sport psychology focus on an individual consultants' work with athletes and teams. Rarely do we hear how a group of consultants under the same roof collaborates in working with athletes and teams. The U.S. Olympic Committee offers a unique opportunity for collaboration between five sport psychologists, three in Colorado Springs and two in Chula Vista. Although each sport psychologist is the designated contact for the Olympic sports under his or her "sportfolio," we often work together with a particular team or collaborate on projects for the USOC. In addition, when a crisis situation arises, we generate options as a group and provide peer consultation as needed. This article will present the general collaborative model used for USOC Sport Psychology and then provide several examples of how the USOC Sport Psychologists have worked as a consulting team.

KEYWORDS *sport psychology consulting, collaborating with other consultants, Olympic performance*

There is nothing more inspiring than a peak Olympic performance. Spectators flock to Olympic events to see top athletes in their ultimate physical shape demonstrate skills that only talent and years of preparation and training can produce. Even more inspiring and chill-producing are team performances at the Olympic Games, particularly the come-from-behind, last second wins, underdog wins, and wins in spite of unexpected obstacles or tragedies. Ask the general public in the United States what Olympic moments

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they remember most and often they may mention the 1980 U.S. Hockey team win over the Soviet Union, or Kerri Strug's vault on an injured ankle to assure the 1996 Women's Gymnastics team a gold medal. Team sport medals have a particular emotional resonance with nations. Ask the Canadians which Vancouver gold medal mattered most to them, and the answer may be the gold medal in men's ice hockey. Ask the Czechs the same question about the Nagano Olympic Games and they might say the gold medal of their men's hockey team. South Africans might mention their win against New Zealand in the 1995 rugby World Cup, an event that was later portrayed in a major motion picture, *Invictus*. These team sport performances pull nations together and generate conversations and discussions for months and years to follow.

What, then, is the parallel for our sport psychology consulting profession? In the general practice of psychology, groups of psychologists collaborate at University Counseling Centers, Agencies, Clinics, or Private Practices. Unfortunately, there are fewer opportunities for full time work in sport psychology consulting, and thus groups of sport psychology professionals under the same roof are unusual. We primarily work as individual consultants with individual athletes or teams, although sometimes we pair up or consult on difficult cases with our colleagues. Because of the individual nature of our work, rarely do we hear about how a group of Sport Psychology consultants within the same organization collaborates in working with athletes and teams. Most sport psychologists miss out on the "team" in sport psychology consulting.

Just as in sports performances, the coordination of efforts, communication and support within a sport psychology consulting group can be inspiring and memorable. The United States Olympic Committee (USOC) is fortunate to have five sport psychologists in the same organization. That makes the work we do at the USOC unique and worthy of discussion because we, too, have our own memorable moments.

First, an overview of the organizational structure of the Sport Performance Department at the USOC is helpful. There are four performance teams consisting of a variety of professionals in sport performance fields. A team leader oversees each team, also referred to as a "sportfolio." Under each team leader are High Performance Directors (HPD) and under the HPDs are Sport Psychologists, Sport Dietitians, Strength and Conditioning Coaches, Technologists, and Sport Scientists. Each sport performance team provides service to between eight and eleven Olympic and Pan American National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGB's). Sport Psychologists work closely with these other providers in their sportfolio to meet the needs of athletes, coaches, and teams.

The authors of this article are the five sport psychologists within these sportfolios at the USOC. Ross Flowers and Wendy Borlabi are at the Chula Vista Training Center in Southern California, and Sean McCann, Peter Haberl,

and Karen Cogan, are at the Colorado Springs Training Center. All are licensed (or in the process of becoming licensed) psychologists and Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) members. A third training center is located in Lake Placid; however, there are no full time sport psychologists housed there. In addition to working with other professionals, we form a department of sport psychology and have separate staff meetings via Skype in order to maintain communication between the two training centers and make progress on joint projects. We work together on sport psychology issues, policy, conference presentations, and events related to the USOC. When difficult or crisis issues arise with athletes, coaches, or teams, we consult and collaborate with each other. In addition, we work together on common goals within the USOC to deliver the most cutting edge services to athletes.

One of the greatest feelings is that of being supported by each other in our efforts, whether those efforts are personal or professional, psychological or performance. It's good to know that someone else cares enough about each of us and our work, to "have our backs" through the journeys of success and failure. The opportunity to share perspectives en route to achieving a common goal or commiserate, in the midst of an ongoing battle, with a colleague who understands our specified missions, objectives and obstacles can be invaluable in the world of sport. Considering the dynamic opportunities in applied sport psychology working within Olympic sport, collegial support can provide the reassurance, redirection, or confirmation to further the working relationship. So to exemplify the importance of collegial support in the field of applied sport psychology at the Olympic level, the following sections describe how we as the USOC sport psychologists support each other.

THE NEW KID

When Wendy Borlabi first began work at the USOC, it took approximately 6 months to get up to speed on issues related to USOC policy, legal documents, the reporting chain of command, confidentiality within the sport environment, NBG codes of ethics, Training Center codes of ethics, and dual relationships. In addition, she had to become familiar with the rules and regulations of the California state psychologist licensing board under which she was now operating. Her veteran sport psychologist colleagues were instrumental in assisting her as she navigated the new environment. It was reassuring to pick up the phone or walk into the next door office to get a question answered. In this field we can often feel as if we are on an island because general mental health practitioners do not travel with their clients or understand the unique environment in which we work. There are not many sport psychologist teams with colleagues who consult weekly and support each other through all the challenges of this unique and always exciting profession.

U.S. OLYMPIC TRAINING CENTERS

United States Olympic Training Centers (OTCs) offer athletes and coaches the opportunity to train, eat, sleep and live in a secure performance focused environment. At any given time a sport psychologist may be on site at an OTC or travelling with an NGB to provide service. When sport psychologists travel there are still many athletes living and training at OTCs who may request psychological services. In order to fulfill the need for service and support the continuity of psychological care the sport psychology team members will work across sport performance teams. For example, Wendy Borlabi and Ross Flowers are the on-site sport psychologists at the Chula Vista OTC. USA Sailing and USA Cycling are two NGBs to which Wendy provides services. USA Sailing trains and competes outside of the Chula Vista OTC and requests Wendy's presence during national and international training camps and competitions. When Wendy is working with USA Sailing, Ross is available to support the psychological needs of BMX Cycling on-site in Chula Vista. Ross consults and debriefs with Wendy to keep her apprised of potential coach, athlete and NGB changes, and today's technology allows sport psychologists to maintain contact through internet and cell phone communication. The travel requirements and communication needed to maintain trusted relationships between sport psychologists and NGB's are critical to the job. Having a trusted colleague who understands the demands, is willing to support the existing relationship structure, and clearly communicate status updates is a valuable asset in the ongoing practice of working with NGBs. These factors of adaptability, trust, communication and relationship building cannot be emphasized enough.

These instances of covering for colleagues raise the issue of confidentiality and managing confidential communications at the USOC. There are the legal and practical aspects related to this issue. Legal aspects are managed both through the HIPAA waiver that all resident athletes sign for all services at the USOTC, as well as the initial informed consent form which we discuss with athletes in our first sessions. Since we are all working for the same institution, communication among colleagues is not problematic unless athletes specifically limit disclosure in their HIPAA form.

On the practical side, confidentiality is always a complicated issue in our world since so many sessions are in semi-private or public settings such as the stands after practice or over a cup of coffee at a coffee shop when with a team on the road. Perhaps because our athletes are used to greater transparency about our services due to the nature of our world, they generally are quite open to sharing information between colleagues if it proves useful. We try to mirror the athletes' practical orientation towards confidentiality by clearly communicating what collegial coverage means and how it works.

CRISIS INTERVENTION AT THE OLYMPIC TRAINING CENTERS

Although typically we deal with more general, less critical athlete issues (e.g., maintaining focus, reducing anxiety, communication with coaches), we occasionally are faced with situations that are more crisis-oriented. Examples would be athletes attempting suicides, athletes completing suicides, athletes with life-threatening illnesses or cancer, severe team conflicts, severe internal conflicts within the NGB, relationship conflicts, and deaths of athletes' relatives during important moments in the athlete's career. It is not just cognitive behavioral mental skills training. Everything is a performance issue for us (McCann, 2008; McCann, Haberl, Cogan, Flowers, & Borlabi, 2011).

When Karen Cogan first arrived at the USOC, four crisis events occurred within the first month of her employment. Previous to the USOC, she had spent 19 years in University Counseling Centers and private practice where she worked with both athletes and the general population. Crises were a common, weekly occurrence. So although she knew how to manage a crisis and the steps to take to stabilize an athlete, she did not know the inner workings of the USOC, the chain of command, who "needed to know" policies, and resources in Colorado Springs. Additionally, in any crisis, no matter how experienced the clinician, it is in everyone's best interest to consult (American Psychological Association, 2002). Fortunately, there was a team of experienced sport psychologists, each with ideas and unique strengths, to consult with on these crises. They knew the unique organizational structure of the USOC and how the environment differed from other general and sport organizations. Working as a team, we were able to generate options and solutions and determine the best course of action. These events, especially spaced so close together, led to discussion about a Crisis Response Plan and collecting information to put that into place. Again, five heads are better than one when establishing this sort of policy.

TRAINING CENTER EVENTS FOR ATHLETES

The USOC sponsors a yearly program for athletes in residence and others who train near the Training Center entitled "Reach the Peak." It is a two day program revolving around a theme related to the mental side of performance. Examples of past themes include: "Breaking Through, Overcoming Adversity, Realizing Potential," "Raising Your Bar; Building Your Foundation," and "Preparation, Planning, Perseverance."

Each year the Sport Psychology team has been primarily responsible for the content of the program that includes key note speakers, team building activities, small group discussions, and journaling. The Sport Psychologists work collaboratively to outline the content of the programs and then

determine activities that will have the desired impact and highlight the theme. This is an opportunity to work together creatively to produce a high quality program. Again, Skype and conference call meetings are used to include the Sport Psychologists at both Training Centers and this year the Chula Vista Sport Psychologists will attend the Colorado Springs Reach the Peak in order to prepare to offer a Reach the Peak in Chula Vista.

DEVELOPMENT OF STATE OF THE ART WEB-BASED RESOURCES

One of the unique components of being employed at the USOC is a new goal setting process. In keeping with how we educate athletes to use goals to direct them toward their ultimate dreams, we as professionals are doing the same to direct us in our service provision. One of our goals is a Sport Psychology team goal: To improve the accessibility, application and quality of sport psychology services to support athletes and coaches working to win medals at key World Championships by taking the lead on the development of a web-accessible sport psychology network database. This will be accomplished by collaborating across the sport psychology team to develop and compile sport psychology resources (audio recordings, video recordings, print articles, and other sport psychology materials) that can be uploaded onto a USOC server. Athletes and coaches will be granted access to download necessary sport psychology materials for the benefit of improved performance. This same web-based server will be used by the sport psychology team to identify and list the qualifications of local and regional networks of sport psychologists who are qualified for contract opportunities with NGB's.

Each of us is responsible for contributing a portion of the resources to this website in the area of written information (e.g., articles, tip sheets), audio files (relaxation, imagery, mindfulness sessions), pod casts, evaluation forms, and Registry of Sport Psychology providers listings for referrals in areas of the country where we are not located. When it is complete and launched, athletes and coaches will be able to access it and easily download resources we have suggested to them. The depth and breadth of the resources would never be as extensive without five experienced sport psychologists who are committed to this project and willing to share their knowledge. Everything we share as a team benefits all the athletes we work with and ultimately pushes us toward our organization's goal of Olympic medal performances.

OLYMPIC GAMES

Having a trusted colleague with whom we can share our emotional states and discuss a plan of action, or simply brainstorm at various times of the day, or night is invaluable at the Olympic Games for a number of reasons.

Inevitably there will be moments and situations at some point in an Olympic Games when athletes or teams we have worked with for days, weeks and sometimes years will come up short of their stated goals. Undoubtedly this is a painful moment for athletes and teams. Often, it is also a painful moment for us as the sport psychologists. Graduate school often teaches us to be neutral, have professional distance and to separate ourselves from the performance of teams and athletes. While this sounds great in theory it can be a difficult challenge to master, particularly since the sport psychologist fully knows how much time, resources and sacrifices were made by the athletes, the coaching and support staff to ensure optimal performance. Commitment and full engagement are a necessary pre-requisite for Olympic success and we think this also applies to the sport psychologist. This level of engagement is beneficial, as it certainly shows the athletes how much we are invested. It also carries with it the risk of getting lost in our own negative emotions when things don't turn out as planned. In such moments, having a colleague to touch base with, even late at night, can prove to be the difference between being stuck in negative emotions far too long, or after being heard, immediately getting back to work. For it is particularly in those moments, when the result is disappointing, that work remains to be done, and where being fully present is of the utmost importance. Many a time, such a conversation with a colleague has allowed for exactly this process to unfold successfully. The athletes need our presence not in the moment of triumph, but in the moment of failed expectations and crushing setbacks.

When a crisis hits, such as a death in the delegation, the psychologist becomes a first responder. When these events have occurred at past Games, the USOC Games Leadership has sought psychological input, and we had to be quick to apply the science of psychology to the specific situation. We have been asked to address athlete and coaches, some of whom we are intimately familiar with due to a long term prior working relationships, others whom we see for the first time in a chaotic situation. These crisis moments have tested our skills and preparation. Being able to quickly check in with our sport psychologist teammates, to formulate, clarify and/or verify a particular approach, again, is priceless. We have felt part of a team, part of a common collective, with the same mission, rather than feeling alone. Consulting often taps into a wealth of experience, and speeds up the learning curve to make each of us that much more effective and managing crisis situations.

Prior to the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics the tragic death of a Georgian luge athlete sent shock waves through the Olympic congregation. Team USA medical staff in the Whistler and Vancouver Olympic Villages were immediately informed of a violent crash in turn 16 of the luge course when an athlete was unable to make the 270-degree turn at the end of the course, flew off of his sled and slammed into a metal support pole. The athlete received medical treatment on site and was then helicopter-lifted to the Whistler Village hospital where he was

pronounced dead. Within minutes of the crash Team USA medical staff contacted Team USA sport psychology staff with information about the tragedy. The sport psychology staff in Whistler and Vancouver consulted about the impact of the tragedy on Team USA with specific attention to the luge, skeleton, and bobsled team members. Sport psychology staff discussed and planned a concerted effort to identify, locate, and support team members with respect to the tragic accident, death, presenting fears, opportunities to train and compete during the Olympics, and personal performance plans. Through cell phone communication and travelling back and forth between Vancouver and Whistler the sport psychology staff provided the appropriate support to Team USA and each other. Unfortunately, Team USA has experienced a personal and/or team tragedy during every Olympic Games since 1994 that has served as a foundation of preparation and expectation for the Olympic Games. The USOC sport psychology staff has prepared manuals, DVD's, and handouts for Team USA to illustrate what to expect during the Olympic Games, how to prepare for success, and how to charter your course after the Olympic Games in hopes to avoid potential troubles and magnify possible successes. The sport psychology staff continues to create new opportunities and strengthen relationships to support Team USA during and between Olympic Games in order to provide the best opportunities for Olympic success. In the process, the team of psychologists continue to learn more about each other personally and professionally to enhance the work and promote the connection of psychology AND performance.

We, as sport psychologists and human beings, experience our own sadness and grief when tragedies occur. Although we may attempt to be "professional" and assist our delegation through the grieving process, these events affect us emotionally as well. Anger is another negative (yet normal) emotion that can easily arise in the Games environment. People live in close quarters, with the pressure to perform, tight schedules, and little rest, and nerves can become easily frayed. Minor situations as well as major injustices in the treatment of athletes can trigger anger. Psychologists are not immune to experiencing negative emotions such as anger at the Games and the challenge lies in following the wisdom of Aristotle:

Anyone can become angry—that is easy, but to be angry with the right person at the right time, and for the right purpose and in the right way—that is not within everyone's power and that is not easy. (Aristotle, n.d.)

Being part of the team of psychologists, that sometimes includes trusted colleagues from other countries, allows each of us to hold the emotion in awareness, to process the thought stream and then to choose the most skillful response for the situation. This emotional regulation can happen specifically for the purpose of defusing the hot emotion of anger. It also happens prophylactically through the process of sharing meals, or exercising

together in the early morning hours. Making time for meals, exercise, and sleep can be a challenge in the Games environment, yet self-care should not be neglected. None of us would advise our athletes to skip meals, sleep, or exercise and expect optimal performance. The same advice applies to us, and having a colleague ask you to go for a meal, for a run, or to turn off the light, often is a gentle and effective reminder to practice what we preach.

THE EXTENDED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY TEAM AT THE OLYMPICS

Working with a team is particularly helpful when facing the one aspect of our job that is hard to prepare for. The first experience of consulting at an Olympic Games can be like the first experience of competing at a Games—overwhelming. As mentioned above, having a range of experiences on our USOC sport psychology team has been very helpful when introducing, explaining, and mentoring a first-time Olympic sport psychologist. Our USOC sport psychology team decided that this process of preparing for the Games as a team of sport psychologists would also be useful for external consultants who are working with U.S. Olympic teams and athletes. Prior to the Athens Games, our USOC staff organized a meeting of all sport psychologists credentialed to work with U.S. athletes at the Olympics.

It is important to mention here that our own internal staff of five cannot provide sport psychology services for every Olympic Team. Since 1984, the USOC has had a Sport Psychology Registry of sport psychologists around the United States to help identify well trained sport psychology consultants to provide services for potential Olympic athletes. In addition, some NGBs have independently identified sport psychology consultants to work with their coaches and athletes. Some of these NGBs have brought these non-USOC sport psychologists to the Olympic Games. The planned purpose of our meetings with all Games sport psychologists prior to the Games is to help orient and prepare these consultants for unique Games phenomena. Although these consultants are generally highly experienced and accomplished, they are as unfamiliar with the nitty-gritty of Olympics consulting as anybody else. In particular, there are three aspects of Olympic sport psychology consulting that these pre-Olympics meetings help us address as a team: (a) credentials and access; (b) the practical and political landscape of the Olympics, and; (c) common mistakes consultants make.

Credentialing and access are regular challenges and frustrations for new Olympic consultants. The International Olympic Committee has very strict rules regarding number and kind of credentials that it distributes to each nation. These credentials are then divvied up by each National Olympic Committee, and there are never enough credentials. This shortage results in competition between coaches, physicians, officials, massage therapists, bike mechanics, Olympic village housing administrators, nutritionists, drivers,

various “important people,” and sport psychologists. U.S. Sport Psychology consultants are fortunate that the U.S. International Games staff that runs the process in the United States understands that sport psychology can make a performance difference at the Games, but we also have the biggest Olympic Team and the biggest shortage of credentials. One piece of our pre-Olympic meetings is emphasizing that a pre-Games “promise” of credentials and full access may change once you arrive at the Olympics, and providing guidance on how to manage this difficult situation that may prevent the normal pre-competition contact the consultant has with his or her clients.

The credential shortage leads directly into a discussion of the political and practical issues that occur with regularity at the Olympics. The more experienced members of the USOC sport psychology team can take the lead in these discussions, using a variety of case studies to show the multitude of ways that the Olympics can be a new and intimidating minefield. We hope that this pre-Olympic meeting can quickly get external consultants up-to-speed on these issues and help them negotiate the minefield without any harm to themselves, others, or the field of sport psychology.

Unfortunately, it is easy to make mistakes, and story-telling and sharing the mistakes we all have made is one of the best ways to build an overall U.S. sport psychology team with the USOC staff and external consultants. Some famous wisdom from these stories includes, “don’t be on the Jumbotron” (avoid being identified and seen on the giant TV screen at an Olympic venue); “don’t be a fan” (avoid the seduction of the Games, including autographs, pin-trading, or using your credential to watch too many other events); and “don’t let it be about you” (don’t be high maintenance or bring negative energy to the team because of your situation). Our pre-Olympic meetings help all consultants face realities and hopefully learn the hard lessons of others. Finally, of course, these meetings help make the team bigger, stronger, and more able to utilize each other, as in sports.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

We recognize that not every sport psychologist has the luxury of a built-in professional group with which to consult as needed. With advances in technology, however, opportunities to form professional groups at a distance are not only possible, but are also becoming the wave of the future. Even though we have multiple sport psychologists at each site, we use Skype to connect the sport psychologists in Colorado Springs with those in Chula Vista. We recommend that other sport psychologists who practice more individually form consulting groups that commit to meeting consistently and have an agenda that involves sharing case presentations, addressing professional issues, and collaborating professional products, including papers, research, and conference presentations.

We also recognize that the focus of this article is more on the clinical and crisis-intervention side of performance than on collaboration about traditional performance issues (e.g., mental training strategies). To be clear, we see all of these interventions as important in assisting athletes in reaching their potential. We collaborate on more traditional performance issues not only among ourselves, but also with other professionals on our teams (e.g., nutritionists, strength and conditioning coaches, technologists, biomechanists, and physiologists). Space limitations, however, prevent us from completely exploring this work, and thus we narrowed our focus because the crisis situations are unique and probably are addressed less often in the literature.

Working as a team is not reserved just for athletes as we approach the London Olympics. We as the sport psychologist team use our own brand of teamwork to produce our best performances as consultants. Although we may not be required to demonstrate the same type of physical abilities as the athletes we help, we must demonstrate mental abilities and face the emotional challenges that accompany any Olympic competition. Having our team in place allows us to prepare for the routine of the Olympics and more importantly the unexpected events that are evident at each Games.

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