

GET BACK IN THE GAME; Sport Psychology Can Help

By Ethan Bregman, Ph.D.

I am often asked what a sport psychologist does and who actually utilizes their services. Just the word “psychologist” can conjure up images of a couch, talking about your childhood, and concerns about being seen as “crazy.” In this article I address some of the circumstances in which the services of a sport psychologist may be beneficial as well as hopefully dispel some of the myths.

Historically, the sport psychologist focused specifically on performance issues. They would function as a mental coach or performance consultant. The sport psychologist would implement a program of mental training and skills to assist athletes in taking performance to the next level. Until recently these services have generally been available to elite athletes.

The reality is that individuals participate in sport for many different reasons and they are more than just their performance. Regardless of participation level, what all athletes have in common is that their sport is important to them, it enhances their life, and athletes are committed to being the best they can be. A sport psychologist can assist athletes, coaches, and family members in addressing all issues that impact not only performance but also enjoyment and participation in sport.

Whether one is an elite, student, competitive recreational, or recreational athlete, developing mental skills can address issues of performance, adjustment, transitions, and relationships in order to maximize ones potential. A sport psychologist can also help to facilitate personal growth, and the overall well being of athletes regardless of age or competition/participation level.

In my practice I take a holistic approach, which includes attending to many issues that can affect athletes. I address the psychological factors that influence participation and performance in sport as well as concerns that make managing the demands of sport and everyday life difficult. I aspire to give athletes tools and skills that they can utilize and apply daily in sport and life.

While enhancing performance may be the ultimate goal, I also take into account circumstances, situational variables, and the personal disposition of the athlete. Performance concerns are seen in the context of the athlete’s entire life. This helps to understand the roadblocks that get in the way of being at ones best and then implement appropriate tools and mental skills to move passed them.

A very important area I address in my practice is sport injury and the emotional/psychological repercussions. Injury is an inherent risk with sport participation but its emotional and psychological impact can be at best challenging. The emotional fallout can even impair ones ability to engage in the very actions that promote successful recovery.

To only address the physical injury ignores an entire and very important part of the athlete. Sometimes the arduous process of recovery can give way to depression, lowered self esteem, decreased motivation, and isolation just to name a few. Psychological principals and mental skills can provide tools to assist in successful recovery including regaining a sense of self, increased motivation to engage in rehabilitation protocols, and ultimately a successful return to sport with confidence.

In my practice, I teach skills to improve focus through relaxation or mindfulness techniques. I address issues related to anxiety, recovery from poor performances, and managing anger and other strong emotions in the context of sport and life.

I address sport and career termination, assisting and supporting athletes in answering questions for themselves regarding life after sport. Athletes may benefit from help modifying or rethinking goals when they can no longer engage in a specific sport or activity.

Interpersonal difficulties in sport are not uncommon. One can learn techniques to communicate effectively with coaches, teammates, and parents. Being able to engage in open and effective communication can help to improve performance, reach goals, and increase enjoyment in sport.

Though not limited to these, some issues encountered by athletes that may benefit from the assistance of a sport psychologist are:

- Motivation
- Anxiety/Depression
- Injury recovery
- Anger management
- Adjustment difficulties (interpersonal, competitive level, student athletes, etc.)
- Performance enhancement
- Career transitions
- Substance abuse
- Time management
- Athletic burnout

In my practice I work with the whole athlete promoting continued discovery and/or rediscovery of the joy of sport and fitness activities. I am committed to helping athletes of all ages, levels, and abilities to be the best they can be at the sports and activities they enjoy and in life. If you have any questions about sport psychology and my practice I encourage you to call me at 916-880-8079.