

Charlie Brown, PhD — Sport Psychologist

BIGGER, STRONGER, FASTER

We live in a competitive world, where having a mental edge can mean getting that job, landing that Broadway role, being admitted to Harvard or winning an Olympic medal. Because of the particular pressures in sports at the highest levels, more and more athletes are turning to sport psychologists to learn how to match their mental dominance to their physical prowess.

Enter sport psychologist Charlie Brown, PhD. He served as a psychologist for the USA Canoe and Kayak Whitewater Slalom team and SwimMAC of the Carolinas, a training center that sent five swimmers to the 2012 Olympic Games. Three of those swimmers earned gold. He has also worked with world record holders and professional athletes.

SUPERFAN

Brown's interest in sport psychology began when he was looking for a new dimension to his psychology career. He wanted to combine his professional skills in strategic problem-solving with his personal interests in athletics and travel.

To make the transition from his more traditional psychology practice in Charlotte, N.C., to sport psychology, Brown took courses comparable to earning a second master's degree, including a supervised practicum. He needed this training because it is not enough to be a licensed psychologist who happens to like or participate in sports; becoming a sport psychologist involves specialized training in clinical or counseling psychology and sport performance. It can be beneficial to take additional classes in kinesiology, physiology, sports medicine, business and marketing.

Much of what Brown does with athletes mirrors psychology in other domains. He can help an athlete visualize nailing a dive or sinking a putt; he can help athletes manage their stress under pressure; and he can help them recover from losses or other setbacks.

"The people who win gold medals are not those without mistakes but those who are best at handling mistakes," says Brown.

ETHICS IN THE FISHBOWL

Brown wanted to move into sport psychology because it matches his professional skills with his personal interests. For others, the specialty is appealing because it allows them to work with high-achieving clients who want to be the best at what they do.

But working with high-profile athletes can have drawbacks, Brown says. Often, he is needed just before a sporting event, meaning his work is conducted at the competition. "If the venue is the only place I can counsel an athlete, what if ABC is taping while we have that conversation?" he says. Confidentiality can be much harder to ensure than it is in a private office.

Finally, Brown says that being on the road with a team also means that "you are always 'on.' That's why it's important for sport psychologists to care for their own emotional health while they care for the players."

For those who might be wondering if Brown thought the extra training and the transition to sport psychology was worth it, he says, "I have the best job in the world."



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SPORT AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY

Sport and performance psychologists identify psychological principles that can be applied to facilitate peak performance among athletes and in other performance-demanding venues.

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