

Pursuing a Career in Sport and Performance Psychology

ALL ABOUT SPORTS AND PERFORMANCE

If you've watched sports, you've seen it. With seconds on the clock and the game tied, a player needs to make one free throw to win the game. He takes a deep breath, focuses, shoots — and scores!

Have you then wondered how he did it, with the crowd roaring, under such pressure? It's possible he has been working with a sport and performance psychologist.

While coaches and trainers are expected to maximize and fine tune an athlete's physical abilities, sport and performance psychologists focus on the mental aspect of achievement. Ask anyone who has had to come through when it counts — be it an Olympic skier, an aspiring actress or a company's CEO — and they'll tell you that the mental game must be won first.

Sport and performance psychology focuses on helping athletes, performers and others reach goals and cope with the anxiety that can impede performance in many venues, from athletics to the boardroom.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

While often behind the scenes, sport and performance psychologists are a vital part of the action, helping individual players or even entire teams realize their potential.

Sometimes, that involves on-the-field action. Often, it can also include thought patterns, coping styles, communication skills, personal dynamics and relationships.

Consider a young team made up of individual dynamos who must work together for the first time, or a veteran squad that recently lost a team member to tragedy. On an individual level, athletes may become anxious or lose focus at key moments while competing, or they might have trouble communicating with their teammates, controlling their tempers or motivating themselves to exercise.

Although none of these scenarios have anything to do with physical prowess, psychological factors are getting in the way of success.

Sport and performance psychologists may act as an objective listener to overwhelmed or frustrated athletes who are expected to “do too much” or perhaps aren't getting the playing time promised. Conflict resolution is a common occurrence in locker rooms — among players and even between players and management.

Sport psychologists may also teach relaxation exercises to overly anxious athletes to help them calm down before games, or they might explain visualization techniques to maintain a focus on success. They may also probe why an athlete may have a specific, recurring problem, such as trouble concentrating.

And all of these principles can be applied beyond the sports arena. In boardrooms and on Broadway, performance counts, and more and more professionals of all backgrounds are seeking partnerships with psychologists who can get them there.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

While it's nice to be able to read a box score or know which teams have vied for the last 30 Super Bowl championships, having an affinity for sports does not qualify you to be a sport and performance psychologist; you need academic training and credentials.

Most positions require a master's or doctoral degree in clinical, counseling or sport psychology. Even then, additional classes in kinesiology, physiology, sports medicine, business and marketing are required. Direct training and experience in applying

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psychology to sports and exercise is a must. The good news is, due to sport psychology's recent rise in popularity, a few schools have begun to offer it as a concentration.

Sport and performance psychologists can also choose to specialize in a particular area. Specialties include:

- Applied sport psychology (teaching skills to enhance athletic performance such as goal-setting and imagery);
- Clinical sport psychology (combining mental training strategies from sport psychology with psychotherapy to help clients with mental health problems); and
- Academic sport psychology (teaching at colleges and universities and conducting research).

There are many opportunities for a sport and performance psychologist with an advanced degree. These can be anything from a NASCAR psychologist critiquing a pit-crew drill to counseling an engineer struggling with depression to a Cirque de Soleil psychologist helping performers overcome fear, recover from fatigue or injury and cope with the pressure of preparing for a show.

WHAT YOU CAN EARN

In private practice, the salary range can vary, with most clients paying for services themselves. In some cases, a team or organization will employ a psychologist to work one-on-one with athletes or business leaders to improve their performance. The location and demand for a sport and performance psychologist play key roles in their salary. Those working in larger metropolitan areas who offer a proven track record of results will earn more.

According to Scott Goldman, PhD, director of clinical and sport psychology at the University of Arizona, sport and performance psychologists in university athletic departments can earn \$60,000 to \$80,000 a year, depending on location, while the highest salaries can exceed \$100,000 annually.

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