



Sport Psychology Consulting at Elite Sport Competitions

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1 Running Head: SPORT PSYCHOLOGY CONSULTING AT ELITE SPORT
2 COMPETITIONS

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Sport Psychology Consulting at Elite Sport Competitions

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Revision # 2

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49 **Abstract**

50 The purpose of this investigation was to examine what experienced sport psychology
51 consultants (SPCs) believed to be essential for consulting effectiveness at elite sport
52 competitions (i.e., pinnacle sporting events). A purposeful sampling method was used to
53 recruit 10 experienced SPCs (8 male and 2 female, *M* age = 50.44 years, *M* years consulting
54 experience = 21.67 years) who held current sport psychology accreditation/certification and
55 who had considerable experience consulting at pinnacle sporting events (e.g., Olympic
56 Games, World Championships, World Cups, European Championships). Following
57 individual participant interviews, extensive inductive content analysis revealed that effective
58 consulting was reflective of building a relationship with clients that has a positive impact on
59 the individual and which the client is both happy with and will continue to develop.
60 Additionally, fitting in but not getting in the way, consistent SPC behavior and working
61 closely with coaches were perceived as essential while working at elite sport competitions.

62 *Keywords:* consulting effectiveness, elite sport, consulting relationship, coaches

63

Introduction

64 For elite athletes competing at “the really big event” in elite sport competitions (e.g.,
65 Commonwealth Games, European Championships, summer and winter Olympic Games, Pan-
66 American Games, World Championships, World Cups) is often the pinnacle of their sporting
67 careers. “Winning a medal at the Olympics can change an athlete’s entire life. The awareness
68 that the next performance is the most important thing the athlete has ever done in sport, raises
69 intensity, uncovers hidden vulnerabilities and puts all kinds of issues on the table” (McCann,
70 2008, p.268). The elite sport environment is not only viewed as the pinnacle arena for sports
71 performers and their coaches, but also by those involved in the sport science support network
72 who work closely with elite athletes in the build-up, preparation and during these sport
73 competitions.

74 For many young people entering into the sport psychology profession the goal of
75 working at the highest level-professional sport is inspiring (Zaichkowsky, 2006). However,
76 gaining access to gather experience working in these elite environments is often challenging.
77 One way that new or less experienced practitioners can increase their knowledge and
78 experience about the elite sport environment is to observe or learn from more experienced
79 sport psychology consultants (SPCs) (Fifer, Henschen, Gould & Ravizza, 2008).
80 Furthermore, “by understanding and communicating what professional decision makers do
81 and how they do it well, we make valuable contributions both to our field and to the
82 professional community at large” (Smith, Shanteau & Johnson, 2004, p.4). Researchers have
83 previously defined elite sport coaches as, “those who work with performers on a regular basis
84 who are currently National squad members and perform at the highest level of their sport
85 (e.g., Olympic Games and World Championships) (Hanton, Fletcher & Coughlan, 2005,
86 p.1131). With this in mind, it could be argued that SPCs with extensive experience working
87 with elite athletes, while these athletes are competing at pinnacle sport competitions and who

88 have attended these events in a consulting capacity would be best placed to assist new and
89 less experienced SPCs to develop their knowledge and understanding of the elite sport
90 environment and effective SPC consulting at the elite level.

91 Recently, researchers have reported perceived consulting effectiveness to be the
92 ability to build a connection with the athlete to create positive behavior change, within a
93 consulting relationship that meets the athletes' needs (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Nevertheless,
94 defining effective sport psychology practice has proved challenging for researchers as the
95 roles and services provided can be wide and varying (e.g., performance enhancement, mental
96 skills training, counseling, and/or a combination of all the above for athletes (Singer &
97 Anshel, 2006). Building on the pioneering work of Orlick and Partington (1987), substantial
98 progress has been made in recent years in identifying the characteristics and qualities
99 necessary for effective sport psychology consulting from the athlete's, team and coach's
100 perspectives (Anderson, Miles, Robinson & Mahoney, 2004; Gould, Murphy, Tammen, &
101 May, 1991; Lubker, Visek, Geer, & Watson, 2008; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Sharp &
102 Hodge, 2011; Tod & Andersen, 2005). For example, Anderson et al. (2004) found that elite
103 British athletes regarded the following characteristics as important for consultant
104 effectiveness: personable, practical advice, good communicator, knowledgeable about sport
105 psychology, exhibits professional skills, and honest and trustworthy.

106 In recent years there has been an increase in descriptive literature that has examined
107 effective sport psychology provision at elite sport competitions; this has included a number of
108 reflective accounts of the experiences of working within the elite environment and at elite
109 sport competitions (e.g., Haberl & McCann, 2012; Haberl & Peterson, 2006; Hermansson &
110 Hodge, 2012; Hodge & Hermansson, 2007; McCann, 2000; Orlick, 1989; Portenga, Aoyagi
111 & Statler, 2012). Consulting effectiveness while working at elite sport competitions has
112 highlighted the diverse and novel challenges faced while consulting at these events (e.g.,

113 helping individuals to perform while coping with the stress, logistics, size, spectacle and
114 resources of these pinnacle competitions). Although providing new consultants and less
115 experienced SPCs with some insight into working within this environment, McCann (2000)
116 has argued that although the environment of “the really big event” may be different, the work
117 completed and the skills used within this environment are typically an extension of the work
118 completed outside of such pinnacle events. Recently Knowles, Katz and Gilborne (2012)
119 argued that providing reflective accounts that explore the effective practice of more
120 experienced SPC practitioners, will “move practitioners forward at a personal level while also
121 understanding the potential for such work to impact across practice communities more
122 widely” (p. 468).

123 Outside of elite sport competitions Fifer et al. (2008) interviewed three experienced
124 SPCs on “what works when working with athletes”. Insights were provided into how these
125 experienced SPCs plan, deliver and implement psychological assistance, and how they
126 approach major competitions. However, in response to Fifer et al’s (2008) investigation,
127 Martindale and Collins (2010) argued for the need to extend this line of research to include
128 “why does what works work” by exploring the professional judgment and decision making
129 processes of successful SPCs. Considering Martindale and Collins’ (2010) recommendations,
130 the present investigation aimed to explore what experienced SPCs believed to be essential for
131 consulting effectiveness at elite sport competitions and explored how experienced SPCs
132 developed their philosophical approach to applied sport psychology work at the elite level.

133 **Method**

134 **Participants**

135 Ten experienced SPCs (8 male and 2 female, *M* age = 50.44 years, *M* years elite level
136 consulting experience = 21.67 years, *M* number of pinnacle sports events consulted at = 7.2
137 events) who held current sport psychology accreditation/certification (British Association of

138 Sport and Exercise Sciences [BASES], British Psychological Society [BPS], Association of
139 Applied Sport Psychology [AASP], and/or licensed psychologist (USA)) and who had
140 attended at least five elite sport competitions and had provided sport psychology support to
141 elite athletes who were competing at these sport events (e.g., British Premiership [Soccer],
142 Commonwealth Games, European Championships, summer and winter Olympic Games,
143 NASCAR, Pan-American Games, Spanish La Liga [Soccer], ATP Tennis Tour, World
144 Championships, World Cups) were purposefully sampled.

145 With the aim of adding credibility to the sharing of best professional practice, all
146 participants were asked if they would be willing to waive their right to anonymity, while
147 confidentiality was assured through no direct quotes or identifiable information (such as
148 interview quotes) being directly linked to any one participant by name. Nine SPCs agreed to
149 waive their anonymity; with one SPC wishing to remain anonymous. The following
150 experienced SPCs agreed to waive their anonymity: Kate Goodger (G.B. based SPC; BPS
151 and BASES accredited, had consulted at 3 Olympic Games); Dan Gould (U.S. based SPC;
152 consulted at 2 Olympic Games and at NASCAR events); Peter Haberl (U.S. based SPC; USA
153 licensed psychologist and AASP accredited, attended 6 Olympic Games & 1 Paralympic
154 Games, one Pan-American Games and numerous World Championships); Lew Hardy (G.B.
155 based SPC; BPS and BASES accredited, consulted at numerous World and European
156 Championships, former Chairperson of BOA psychology steering group); Chris Harwood
157 (G.B. based SPC; BPS and BASES accredited, consulted with British Premiership Football
158 Clubs and on the ATP Tennis Tour); Anne-Marte Penssgard (Sweden based SPC; worked at
159 5 Olympic Games and numerous World and European Championships); Ian Maynard (G.B.
160 based SPC; BPS accredited, worked at 2 Olympic Games, 2 Commonwealth Games, 18
161 World Championships); Sean McCann (U.S. based SPC; USA licensed psychologist and
162 AASP accredited, attended 10 Olympic Games and numerous World Championships); Len

163 Zaichkowsky (Canadian based SPC; AASP accredited, worked at World and European
164 Championships, Spanish La Liga [Soccer]).

165 **Data Collection**

166 Data were collected through individual semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with
167 the primary investigator. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to ensure that the
168 same systematic and comprehensive lines of inquiry were followed with each individual
169 while also allowing some flexibility to allow topics to be approached and explored in a
170 variety of ways (a copy of the interview guide can be obtained on request from the first
171 author). Question topics explored SPC definitions and evaluation of consulting effectiveness
172 (e.g., What does effective practice mean to you?), consulting philosophy (e.g., What
173 consulting approach do you use regularly and why do you prefer to use that approach?), and
174 experiences of consulting at pinnacle sporting events (e.g., What characteristics have your
175 most successful/satisfying consulting experiences working with athletes at a pinnacle sporting
176 event had in common?). The interview guide was pilot tested with two experienced SPCs to
177 check participant understanding and the flow of interview questions, resulting in no changes
178 to the interview guide.

179 Following university research board ethical approval, SPCs were identified via
180 purposeful sampling and contacted via email to organize individual face-to-face interviews.
181 Interviews were organized at a time and location suitable to each participant and were
182 conducted by the first author who had considerable experience using qualitative research
183 methodology. Interviews ranged in duration from 70 mins to 90 mins. Each interview was
184 audio-recorded with the participant's written consent. The interviews were later transcribed
185 verbatim by the primary researcher yielding 188 single-spaced pages data in total. Verbatim
186 interview transcripts along with the researcher's preliminary interpretations were then sent to
187 each participant for member checking.

188 Analysis

189 Data analysis procedures commenced shortly after each interview to establish if any
190 emergent categories warranted further exploration in the interviews which followed. Given
191 that the primary purpose of the analysis was to gain an understanding of effective sport
192 psychology consulting at the “really big event”, a thematic content analysis approach was
193 employed to search for common themes across all data (Weber, 1990). This approach
194 involved inductively analyzing and classifying the information from the interviews, reducing
195 it to more relevant and manageable information units to form explanations that reflected the
196 detail, evidence and examples provided by participants during the interviews.

197 A number of coding procedures were utilized during the analysis process, specifically
198 open coding, line-by-line coding, constant comparison methods and memo writing were
199 employed, until saturation was achieved (i.e., when no new sub-categories, categories or
200 themes emerge; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Throughout the course of these coding procedures
201 categories, sub-categories, and concepts emerged to describe and explain what SPCs believed
202 to be essential for both consulting effectiveness at the “really big event” and the consulting
203 relationship. The analytic procedures used within this investigation were not regarded as
204 rigid or static; as Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained, the qualitative analysis process is a
205 “free-flowing and creative process, in which analysts move quickly back and forth between
206 types of coding, using analytic techniques and procedures freely and in response to the
207 analytic task before analysts” (p. 58). These coding methods allowed the researcher to
208 interact with the data to produce meaningful pieces of information to produce a set of
209 concepts and novel relationships which adequately represented what experienced SPCs
210 believed to be essential to consulting effectiveness (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

211 Reliability and Trustworthiness

212 A number of trustworthiness methods were implemented in an attempt to ensure
213 accurate and rigorous findings are presented to the reader (Sparkes, 1998). First, a member
214 checking procedure was employed. Verbatim interview transcripts along with the
215 researcher's preliminary interpretations were then sent to each participant for member
216 checking. Each participant was asked to confirm the accuracy of the transcript and
217 researcher's interpretations, and to confirm that their thoughts and experiences were being
218 accurately represented. Second, validation discussions of emergent concepts and categories
219 between the primary researcher and two experienced sport psychology researchers
220 independent of the analysis process occurred. Third, extensive participant quotations were
221 included in the results.

222 **Results and Discussion**

223 As often is the case in qualitative investigations, the description and interpretation of
224 data are closely related. With the aim of avoiding repetition, and guided by the emergent
225 categories, the results and discussion sections have been integrated. The categories that
226 emerged following analysis procedures are presented in Table 1. Each of these will be
227 discussed with supporting participant quotes with the aim of giving detailed insight into
228 experienced SPC consulting experiences. To ensure anonymity, participants were identified
229 with "SPC" followed by a random number 1 to 10 (e.g., SPC3).

230 **Consulting Philosophy**

231 It has been argued that: "understanding one's personal and professional philosophy is
232 among the essential prerequisites to effective consulting practice" as an SPC
233 (Poczwadowski, Sherman & Ravizza, 2004, p.446). Considering this recommendation the
234 consulting philosophy's of the experienced SPCs participating in the current investigation
235 were examined. The emergent styles highlighted the differing backgrounds, strengths,
236 theoretical orientations, and practice of the participants. These included; (1) Cognitive

237 Behavioral Therapy; (2) Social, Cognitive and Behavioral approach; (3) Biofeedback; (4)
238 Client-centered; and (5) Eclectic.

239 The majority of SPCs (seven SPCs) perceived their consulting philosophy to be
240 largely based within a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) framework. CBT has been used
241 effectively in a diverse range of applications, from treating depression (Williams, 1992), to
242 developing exercise and health fitness behaviors of exercise participants (Cushing & Steele,
243 2011). CBT focuses on methods that reinforce positive behavior and weaken negative
244 behavior towards a desired goal. Experienced SPCs believed the rationale for adopting this
245 approach was because “it works, it seems to work for me” (SPC10). “[CBT] works and helps
246 me to work in a manner and a language that the athletes can engage with and are comfortable
247 with” (SPC7). Additionally, “it's easy for the athletes to comprehend - they're used to
248 practicing these different techniques and I think they like the structure of the consulting... It's
249 quite easy to comprehend what's going on. So in that respect I think it's useful” (SPC5). “The
250 main advantage is that it gets behavior change. We are the experts in behavior change and
251 that's what wins medals -- behaviors... Changing behavior that is not winning medals into
252 behavior that is winning medals” (SPC6). Previous research has highlighted the positive
253 impact CBT can have on athletes' attitudes to the way they approach training and
254 competition, and the cues they use to adapt to given situations (Kirschenbaum & Bale, 1984).
255 The current investigation highlighted the ease with which athletes are perceived to engage
256 with CBT techniques and the positive impact these have on the individual; but also the
257 potential limitations of a CBT-only philosophy.

258 The SPCs involved within the present study also demonstrated an awareness of the
259 potential limitations of adopting a CBT approach to their consulting. These limitations
260 included, “you have to be psychologically aware of individuals” (SPC5) and “[it's] not a

261 quick fix, not everybody's willing to engage in that work” (SPC7). For example, SPC6
262 argued;

263 People worry that CBT can be superficial or you can't get to the root of an issue. I
264 don't see that as a problem. I think if you're effective at getting athletes to open up
265 about what they're thinking and feeling you pretty quickly get to where that comes
266 from... it doesn't prevent you from going into deeper issues.

267 Although the majority of SPCs aligned their consulting philosophy closely with CBT,
268 they also commented on the need for flexibility within their approach and how, when
269 required, they were happy to be flexible in their approach. Other philosophical approaches
270 adopted by the SPCs included “Carl Rogers client-centered... it's dealing with the individuals
271 or you can do it with a group” (SPC4), in which “treating each athlete, each situation, each
272 team as a specific situation, with a specific set of challenges and problems as opposed to
273 here's the skills we're going to teach” (SPC6). In addition, a social cognitive behavioral
274 model was adopted “I don't think you can fail to have humanistic elements in your consulting
275 approach while trying to be true to the social cognitive behavioral paradigm” (SPC1). The
276 use of biofeedback was extensively used by one SPC, as he believed “the advantage is that
277 we've known for a long time the only way people learn is if you give them feedback so this
278 allows me to provide feedback” (SPC9). Despite, the flexibility in consulting approach, all of
279 the approaches discussed by the SPCs were evidence-based, in that theory-guided research
280 efforts informed their applied practice. However, one SPC did note that “I'm pretty open to
281 almost any technique that I think will work” (SPC10). This highlighted the openness that
282 experienced SPCs place on trusting their intuition or professional judgment, in addition to the
283 scientific evidence for the techniques they employ. Streat and Roberts (1992) have argued
284 that, “Intuition is and will rightfully continue to be part of any therapeutic or educational
285 intervention” for SPCs (p. 62).

286 **Adaptations to Consulting Philosophy**

287 These SPCs noted that they had evolved and adapted their consulting philosophy over
288 time as a result of increased consulting experience. As one SPC explained “the biggest
289 change for me is the addition of ‘mindfulness’, partly because of experience at the Olympics
290 where I didn't think that the athletes I worked with I had prepared them well enough...
291 something was missing” (SPC7). As a result of increased experiences, adaptations in
292 philosophy included: (1) Listening to the client; (2) Increased confidence and (3)
293 Organizational Psychology.

294 **Listening to the client.** Three SPCs commented that over time they had become more
295 aware of the need to listen to the client they were working with. As SPC10 stated “over the
296 last 10 years I've gotten a lot better at asking versus telling”(SPC10). “With more experience
297 you recognize sometimes the solution for a client is to spend more time listening” (SPC1).
298 These responses highlighted that even with extensive experience SPCs needed to be aware of
299 the need to “learn how to hear not just listen” (SPC3). Researchers have previously argued
300 that “words can be clues to inner experience, revealing hidden thoughts, feelings or wants.
301 We can use words in much the same way as we use nonverbal messages” (Giges & Petipas,
302 2000, p.18). These results suggest that it is essential that practitioners consider developing
303 their listening skills.

304 **Increased confidence.** In addition, one SPC commented openly that her/his
305 consulting philosophy had adapted as a result of improved confidence in his/her ability. They
306 explained that “in my younger days I would be less confident that I could figure out where
307 we needed to go first, I would take more broad strokes. Now I'm more likely to go after a
308 specific thing pretty quickly” (SPC6). Although confidence in oneself and one’s abilities
309 within applied sport psychology has been identified in recent research (e.g., Sharp & Hodge,
310 2011), the current investigation provides readers with interesting, and perhaps unexpected

311 reassurance that these experienced SPCs also struggled with confidence and belief in their
312 ability in the early stages of their careers.

313 **Organizational Psychology.** One SPC commented on the inclusion of organizational
314 psychology in her/his philosophy. SPC2 commented:

315 Up until the early '90s most sport psychologists thought sport psychology was about
316 working one-to-one with athletes behind closed doors. I actually had already got to
317 the point where I was thinking there is no point doing any of that unless you're going
318 to work with the organization because the organization can undo all of that. So really
319 you've got to work with the organization first... Sport psychs used to say "well we
320 don't know anything about organizational psychology" and I used to say to them
321 "well you better find out because it's important."

322 Gardner (1995) argued the need for the development of an organizational psychology
323 knowledge base within sport psychology if progress and development are to be made. Indeed,
324 researchers have recently made considerable progress investigating organizational stress
325 within the sports environment by examining the stress experienced by coaches (Fletcher &
326 Scott, 2010; Olusoga, Butt, Hays & Maynard, 2009), athletes (Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees
327 & Hutchings, 2008), parents (Harwood & Knight, 2009), and SPCs (Fletcher, Rumbold,
328 Tester & Coombes, 2011). However, "questions remain as to whether applied sport
329 psychologists currently possess the authority and competencies to meaningfully intervene at
330 an organizational level" (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009, p.433). Considering this finding,
331 practitioners should be aware of the need to develop their knowledge of organizational
332 psychology and incorporate this into their practice.

333 **Adaptions to Consulting Approach at Elite Sport Competitions**

334 In relation to their approach while working at the "really big event", SPC responses
335 highlighted that although the theoretical framework for their practice remained the same, it

336 was important for their behavior to be consistent while also fitting in with those with whom
337 they were working. Four categories emerged in relation to SPC approach while working at
338 elite sport competitions, these included: (a) Fitting in, but not getting in the way; (b)
339 Consistent SPC behavior; (c) Limited new interventions; and (d) More work with coaches.

340 **Fitting in, but not getting in the way.** Four SPCs believed that it was essential that
341 while away at the big event, the SPC needs to “fit in with the family [the team], fit in with the
342 system; that really helps” (SPC 10). “You muck in when you are sport psych with a national
343 squad. You muck in -- you get the coffee, get the biscuits, the drinks, whatever, you pick
344 balls up, you organize the kit, you just muck in” (SPC2). A number of authors have
345 previously discussed the importance of assessing the subculture of the sporting environment
346 in which the SPC is working; the people, team members, and the support and management
347 staff that the SPC regularly interacts with (Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011; Ravizza in
348 Fifer et al., 2008; Reid, Stewart & Thorne, 2004). While fitting in was essential:

349 Being proactively unobtrusive by being present but not getting in the way... knowing
350 your role and leaving the ego at the door which I think at the elite level you have to
351 get your head around. Everybody wants to help and certainly my experience of the
352 Olympics is [that] the biggest nuisance [for the athlete] is probably support staff, and
353 people just getting in the way (SPC5).

354 You earn your money when you are away at the big ones. Because fundamentally
355 you hope to be redundant. If you’ve done your job [as an SPC], and it’s working [for
356 the athlete], then I think I was probably one of the most expensive food fetchers in the
357 Olympics because that was basically my job [within the team] (SPC3).

358 **Consistent SPC behavior.** While attending the “big event” four SPCs perceived
359 consistency in their behavior to be essential. “When I have been to the World Champs or the
360 Olympics, things get magnified. I try to not change my behavior at those events, stay

361 consistent to who I am and not get down or rattled by the environment” (SPC7). SPC1
362 commented on the need for, “my behavior to be the same throughout the whole season even
363 at playoffs. I'll just be in the dressing room and around if they want to chat.” However, SPC8
364 warned that, “you can go days without anything happening. It's important to stay calm and
365 not feel like you have to do something because you feel you need to, to justify why you are
366 there, to show you're busy.” Changes in SPC behavior at the elite sport competitions were
367 also discussed, with SPCs believing that behavioral variations can “effect your decision
368 making... you have to be able to think quickly and to look for the hot spots” (SPC5).

369 These findings provide a novel insight into the pressures SPCs themselves may
370 experience working at elite sport competitions, while balancing support provision to multiple
371 clients (e.g., athletes, coaches and organizational personnel). As McCann (2008) warned, one
372 of the tests SPCs face while at elite sport competitions is getting caught up in the same
373 pressure and desperation as the athletes and coaches. Haberl and Petersen (2006) also
374 discussed the need for “self-preservation at the Olympics” in order to develop and ensure
375 consistency of personal behavior. These experienced practitioners highlighted the importance
376 of the SPC looking after themselves through “sleep, exercise, nutrition, regular contact with
377 family at home, perspective taking and peer debriefing consultation” (p. 38). Haberl and
378 Petersen (2006) and the SPCs in the present investigation had extensive experience working
379 at elite sport competitions, and had learnt through these experiences, Those with little or no
380 experience of working at elite competitions should be aware of the pressures they may
381 experience and develop and implement strategies that will assist them in coping in these
382 pressured environments. Researchers have argued that it is critical for SPCs to have some
383 form of peer supervision and support in place in order to ensure any challenging issues that
384 arise can be discussed and resolved (Sharp & Hodge, 2011).

385 **Limited new interventions.** Two SPCs stated that “you don't want to do much
386 intervention at [‘elite competitions’]” (SPC8). “You shouldn’t be doing anything else [new]
387 in that period, except reinforcing stuff and absolutely the most minor tweaks to things”
388 (SPC2). “The stuff you do at the Games should actually be done before then and should only
389 be done in little bits... you shouldn't be doing anything new in that period” (SPC2). One SPC
390 described adopting a “helicopter role,” “being able to keep perspective. Instead of responding
391 emotionally to the situation you have to really work on your emotions to keep them in tap [in
392 control] so you can see the situation as they’re arising, intervene quickly and get people back
393 on track” (SPC5). These findings support the comments of previous researchers (e.g. Giges &
394 Petipas, 2000; McCann, 2008) who discussed the role of the SPC at elite sport competitions
395 shifting from an intervention role to a monitoring role in order to ensure the athlete maintains
396 focus. Indeed, Portenga et al. (2012) warned that: “Intervening at major competitions carries
397 the risk that the intervention becomes a distractor itself instead of facilitating a better
398 performance focus” (p.104).

399 **More work with coaches.** Interestingly, two SPCs commented that while working at
400 “elite competitions” the focus of their work was often more with the coaches of the athletes
401 than the athletes themselves. As SPC8 noted “you actually talk more with the coaches than
402 with the athletes because the coaches need more support at the time.” Close links can be
403 made with the earlier sub-category of “fitting in, but not getting in the way.” As SPC6 stated,
404 “I tend to have a lot more contact with coaches. My consulting tends to be more with the
405 coaches I'll still do the work with the athletes one-on-one, but I have coaches that will be
406 running things past me regularly because I'm there.”

407 Vealey (1988) argued that, “coaches have special [psychological] needs of their own
408 and would benefit from psychological skills training programming specifically designed for
409 them” (p.323). Recently, Sharp and Hodge (in press) provided insight into the consulting

410 relationships of two coach-SPC relationships. These relationships developed as a
411 consequence of the coaches' positive perceptions of the work the SPCs had completed with
412 the coaches' athletes. Based on these perceptions, coaches started working with the SPCs to
413 see if there would be any potential benefits for their coaching from working with the SPC to
414 improve their coaching performance. Despite this recent study, little progress has been made
415 in meeting coach individual needs no matter what environment they are working in (e.g.,
416 Gould, Hodge, Peterson, & Petlichkoff, 1987; Thelwell et al., 2008). The present
417 investigation provides a new insight into the flexible role of experienced SPC's work at elite
418 sport competitions, while also highlighting the need for SPCs to be aware of the needs of
419 coaches working within these pinnacle sports environments.

420 **Consulting Effectiveness**

421 Defining consulting effectiveness has proved challenging for researchers, however the
422 participants in the present investigation believed consulting effectiveness to be reflective of;
423 (a) Building a relationship with clients that has a positive impact on the individual and (b)
424 Building a relationship which the client is happy with and will continue to develop. Three
425 subcategories emerged in relation to consulting effectiveness these included: (1) Positive
426 impact on the client; (2) Positive relationship with the client; and (3) Coach involvement.

427 **Positive impact on the client.** SPCs perceived that an effective SPC should, "make a
428 difference that is positive; for example, effecting behavioral change, attitudinal change or
429 whatever you're working" (SPC1); while also "seeing a demonstrateable change in that
430 individual, ideally one that they recognize" (SPC4). "You'd like it all to be about contributing
431 to gold medals, but sometimes it's just helping individuals to cope" (SPC5). Positive impact
432 on both the performance of the athlete and the athlete as a person were identified as important
433 for consulting effectiveness. As one SPC explained, "I think early on [effectiveness] meant
434 when the athlete was successful at the field of play but that has changed over the years, it's

435 still part of it, it's a little more important now to understand whether the athlete was
436 successful at paying attention to the task at hand” (SPC7).

437 All SPCs commented on the need to consider their impact on athlete performance at
438 the elite level. “Fundamentally it’s about performance. For me it's about what the athlete does
439 in the final analysis; you know just like coaches have to live and die by that I think sport
440 psychs have to live and die by that” (SPC3). Additionally, “we're [SPCs] accountable to
441 performance improvements therefore I think ultimate effectiveness is going to be the athlete
442 feels like you're having a demonstrable improved effect on individual performance”(SPC1).
443 “They've [athlete, coach, organization] got to be satisfied with what you are doing. I think if
444 an athlete’s happy and satisfied with what you are delivering they've got a positive frame of
445 mind when they enter the competition and because of that they are likely to succeed” (SPC3).
446 However, SPC6 warned that you need to realize;

447 That when someone wins an Olympic medal you didn’t become smarter or more
448 effective as a SPC. You maybe become better known and you can use that to political
449 advantage, practical advantage or economic advantage, but that doesn't make you any
450 more effective... Hopefully you were as good before the athlete won the medal and
451 you are as good afterwards, and didn’t get worse because it went to your head and you
452 stop working hard.

453 Previously researchers have argued for the need to “adopt a philosophy that envisions
454 performance and personal excellence as co-existing in the high level sport setting, where
455 appropriate personal and athletic development occur within the sport experience” (Miller &
456 Kerr, 2002, p.145). The present investigation provided evidence to suggest that SPCs
457 currently working within the elite environment adopted both personal and performance
458 measures for evaluation of their effectiveness.

459 **Positive relationship with the client.** SPC responses highlighted that, “absolutely,
460 categorically your personal relationship with the players” (SPC7) is central to consulting
461 effectiveness, as “ultimately it always comes down to the relationship” (SPC3). The personal
462 consulting relationship with clients was perceived to be “based on mutual respect. It's a hard
463 world they live in where failure smacks you in the face... it's real hard. They need to know
464 that you understand that and that you live in that world too” (SPC2).

465 The first time [I worked with Athlete A], I probably did about three months of proper
466 work with him when he was about 14, before his first Olympics. Since then you just
467 keep things ticking over. He doesn't need much sport psychology because he is really
468 mentally tough. That was a 16 year relationship. It's one of those things... you are
469 there if you are required, but you don't push yourself [on to that athlete] (SPC3).

470 The relationship between the SPC and client has previously been regarded as a
471 significant component in successful sport psychology (e.g., Petitpas, Giges & Danish, 1999;
472 Poczwadowski & Sherman, 2011; Sharp & Hodge, 2011) and psychotherapy interventions
473 (Norcross & Wampold, 2011). The SPCs in the present investigation stressed the relationship
474 as being central to consulting effectiveness in the elite environment, while highlighting
475 mutual respect as a key component when working within elite sport.

476 SPCs believed that “if you have a long term relationship it's usually because things
477 are working reasonably well” (SPC4). Furthermore, responses highlighted that “a good sign
478 is usually that they ask you back” (SPC7), while “sounding unscientific... I think it's a
479 reasonably good test of how effective you are in the fact that you still have clients coming
480 back to you” (SPC3). In comparison, one SPC believed that,

481 If you do your job right you'll become redundant. So being able to identify what the
482 issue is, initiate an intervention that's effective that causes changes and brings about

483 permanent change. If you can't completely initiate change, maybe just give them the
484 coping skills to deal with it because some things are just going to remain (SPC5).

485 Responses highlighted that through the development of a positive consulting
486 relationship, the SPC was able to encourage client independence. Specifically, the SPC would
487 work towards providing their client with all the necessary psychological skills and techniques
488 to work independently of them. If the consulting relationship was strong the client would then
489 return to the SPC to develop or improve their psychological skills and techniques whenever
490 they believed it was necessary. In their discussion of a self-determination theory (SDT)
491 approach to psychotherapy, Ryan and Deci (2008) argued that the application of SDT as an
492 approach to psychotherapy and behavior change was not only useful to develop the content of
493 therapeutic sessions, but could also be applied across various systems of practice. Creating
494 client independence can be linked specifically to the psychological need of autonomy.

495 Autonomy literally means "self-rule" and refers to self-initiation, volition and willing
496 approval of one's behavior. Athletes who act with a sense of autonomy engage in sport (and
497 in sport psychology) for their own valued reasons and believe that participation is their choice
498 (Allen & Hodge, 2006; Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT proposes that by encouraging client
499 autonomy in the therapeutic process, the client will more easily integrate learning and
500 behavior change which will result in more successful treatment outcomes (Ryan & Deci,
501 2008). The concept of autonomy-support refers to an individual in a position of authority
502 (such as a coach, SPC or therapist) considering the other person's feelings and providing
503 them with relevant information and opportunities for choice, while minimizing the use of
504 pressures and demands (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). One could argue that the findings from
505 the current study indicated that experienced SPCs created autonomy-supportive environments
506 within the consulting relationship.

507 **Coach involvement.** Coach involvement within the consulting process was perceived
508 by SPCs as being essential for effectiveness at elite level: “if you don't get on with the coach
509 you are wasting your time because ultimately the coach has the power and you don't”
510 (SPC4). “If you're not part of the team it's hard to work with an athlete if you don't really
511 connect somehow with the coach, and believe in his or her philosophy of doing coaching”
512 (SPC8).

513 When I first started off... I'd be at that end of the spectrum where I thought it was the
514 athlete and the sport psychologist was the real important stuff. But with age and time,
515 you realize that the coach is there 24/7, if the coach is buying into the sport
516 psychology it's going to happen on the pitch, on the diving board, because they are
517 there all the time, they are reinforcing it... If you are very exclusive in the way that
518 you [work with the athlete], that just creates more barriers... It won't get accepted,
519 and more importantly, it won't get practiced in the pressure situations because if it's
520 not working there it's never going to work in the Olympic Games (SPC3).

521 The results from the present investigation provide novel insight into the multiple roles
522 SPCs adopted working with coaches and their athletes “at elite competitions”. Researchers
523 have argued that some multiple relationships are unavoidable and in themselves are not
524 unethical (Younggren & Gottlieb, 2004). Hays (2006) advised practitioners to consider
525 whether any particular relationship or action is, or might be, exploitative or harmful to those
526 you are working with when adopting multiple consulting roles with coaches and their
527 athletes. In some situations, Hays (2006) suggested that “rigid maintenance of a singular role
528 or relationship could potentially become unhelpful, harmful, or destructive” (p.228).
529 Therefore, SPCs should be aware of the potential challenges and expectations that they may
530 be faced with when adopting multiple roles and ask themselves “whose needs are being met
531 through working together?”, and “is there a risk of exploitation or harm to the client?”

532 Furthermore, considering the informal and complex nature of the elite sport environment
533 asking “who is the client?” and what boundaries for confidentiality are in place may assist
534 SPCs when adopting multiple roles.

535 **Evaluating Effectiveness**

536 Within sport psychology research, concerns have been raised regarding the need for
537 effective evaluation within the applied SP consulting (e.g., Haberl & McCann, 2012;
538 Martindale & Collins, 2007; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Engagement in evaluation of practice
539 will allow SPCs to document their practice and facilitate their improvement in order to ensure
540 they are accountable to their client, themselves and their profession (Anderson, Miles,
541 Mahoney & Robinson, 2002). Within the present investigation, these ten SPCs provided an
542 original insight into the challenges they faced evaluating the effectiveness of their practice at
543 the elite level and identifying the impact of their work on their client(s). “You would like to
544 see that your work has contributed to improved performance and results of the performance
545 even if there's not necessarily a direct way of attributing the work you've done to improved
546 performance” (SPC1). “Sometimes you just can't make that connection between what
547 happens in sport psychology and them winning the medal or not winning the medal... I think
548 you are just a small cog in the wheel” (SPC3). “It's a bit like qualitative research, you're never
549 going to know causation, but you can draw conclusions based on multiple sources of
550 information” (SPC10).

551 One thing I learned a long time ago, to my great benefit, is that more athletes fail than
552 succeed at an Olympic Games. There are hundreds of athletes sometimes competing
553 in an event and there are three people that win medals, and fourth place is considered
554 a failure at the Olympic Games; so, the odds are that you are going to working with
555 people who don't succeed. That's a kind of good humbling experience to realize that.
556 I learned pretty quickly that if you're going to take credit for wins, which many

557 people in our field do, then you better take blame for the losses, which very few
558 people in our field do. I had to figure out a different way of thinking about it, even
559 though it is all about Olympic Games success. So my goal is to help athletes and
560 coaches succeed at the games (SPC6).

561 Despite these challenges these SPCs engaged in evaluation of their effectiveness and used
562 two methods for evaluation; (1) client feedback; and (2) personal reflection.

563 **Client feedback.** SPC responses highlighted a number of methods that were used to
564 gain client feedback. “Feedback from coaches and athletes... Even if you have a good
565 relationship with the team the feedback can be very useful” (SPC6). However, “only if I think
566 there’s an open enough relationship that they are going to be honest” (SPC5). In addition,
567 gaining feedback from new clients was also believed to be essential, “sometimes with a new
568 team I do it at the end of the season as well but I want to be careful I don’t overdo it” (SPC7).
569 Evaluation of their work at the big events was also important as “we evaluate after each
570 Olympics. We ask them to rate how effective they have felt we have been” (SPC8). By
571 engaging the client in informal feedback discussions, it could be argued that the SPC is
572 working to maintain collaboration between themselves and the client which may enhance the
573 consulting relationship, while also allowing for discussions on the modification of strategies.

574 **Consultant Evaluation Form.** Five SPCs indicated that they used the Consultant
575 Evaluation Form (CEF; Partington & Orlick, 1987) in some form as a tool to gain client
576 feedback. “You have the CEF I think that is certainly an important indicator for looking at
577 your measure of effectiveness in terms of client satisfaction” (SPC1). Since its inception the
578 Consultant Evaluation Form (CEF; Partington & Orlick, 1987) has been employed by SPCs
579 and is recognized as a valuable and appropriate means of evaluating SPC effectiveness in
580 general terms (e.g., Gould, Murphy, Tammen & May, 1991; Hardy & Parfitt, 1994). The CEF
581 was designed to assess athletes’ perceptions of SPC effectiveness and also assess the amount

582 and type of athlete-SPC contact across ten consultant characteristic items which are rated on
583 an 11 point ordinal scale, while also assessing perceptions of consultant effectiveness via two
584 11 point rating scales, which required the participant to evaluate how effective the consultant
585 was on (a) effect on you and (b) effect on team. However, the SPCs in the current
586 investigation believed the CEF needed modification: “I think the form is quite limited and
587 quite basic” (SPC1) which has resulted in the CEF being adapted to include, “some
588 qualitative questions, like what should I stop, start, continue doing” (SPC7), “just some open-
589 ended questions -- a little more data” (SPC6) and “more open ended questions around the
590 effectiveness of particular techniques I've used with a client” (SPC1).

591 In comparison, one SPC commented that, “I tend not to use evaluation forms,
592 primarily because athletes have so much paperwork to fill out yours gets lost in it” (SPC5).
593 Recently, Haberl and McCann (2012) have reported that they have made adaptations to the
594 CEF, specifically through the inclusion of questions examining effective team building,
595 practice attendance and the Olympic environment. In addition, these practitioners discussed
596 how moving to electronic data gathering has helped simplify gaining this feedback from their
597 clients. Considering the responses above and the recommendations of Haberl and McCann
598 (2012), practitioners should be aware of the potential limitations of the CEF and consider
599 adapting the CEF in order to assess the work they have conducted with their clients more
600 specifically.

601 **Clients continue to work with the SPC.** As previously discussed, many of the SPCs
602 believed that continued work with a client was perceived to be a measure of an effective
603 consulting relationship. Simply “by not getting fired if they keep coming back” (SPC9) and
604 “do you get hired or fired” (SPC10) was also perceived to be a measure of overall
605 effectiveness. Furthermore, as one SPC observed “if they return/come back and their level of
606 engagement” (SPC5) were taken as measures of effective practice. SPC responses further

607 reinforced the belief that a positive consulting relationship with the client is of central
608 importance. As discussed previously, there is a central need for respect between both the SPC
609 and client. Additionally, previous research has also discussed the need for SPCs to
610 demonstrate effective communication skills, build rapport, show empathy, and be open and
611 approachable in order to allow a positive consulting relationship to develop (e.g., Anderson et
612 al., 2004; Lubker et al., 2008; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Therefore, less experienced
613 practitioners should consider additional training to assist in the development of a range of
614 counseling skills in order to be able to utilize them within their applied practice.

615 When I see an athlete succeed at an Olympic Games for instance, and I know what a
616 tortured journey it's been over three or four years. To watch where they have had
617 really bad patches, true battles, and being there in the trenches with them and then
618 seeing them come through on the other side. Those are the ones that are most
619 satisfying for me because you put a lot of time and effort in, you know how important
620 it is, you know that their life has changed forever as a result of the success. It is really
621 satisfying when you have put in years with a team, with a coach, with an athlete. It's
622 one of those things where after the Olympic Games where you can look at each other
623 and give each other that look and you are both thinking about all the times that it was
624 like 'oh my god we are ready to strangle somebody' and it worked out (SPC6).

625 **Personal reflection.** Personal reflection was utilized as a method of evaluating
626 effectiveness by two SPCs. These SPCs commented "for me it's important to evaluate your
627 own work from their perspective, based around the tasks and techniques or strategies that
628 you're actually using with clients" (SPC1); "effectiveness as a consultant is doing my job
629 well... Being an effective consultant is a lot about identifying what it takes in that specific
630 role and making sure I do those things more consistently and more effectively" (SPC6).
631 Previously applied sport psychology researchers have proposed that reflection is essentially

632 about the self and the self in-context, furthermore it has been argued that there is a need for
633 more reflective accounts from experienced SPCs in order to encourage practitioners to
634 engage in the reflective process (Faull & Cropley, 2009; Knowles, Katz & Gilbourne, 2012).
635 Findings from the present investigation highlight that, despite their extensive experience,
636 experienced SPCs continue to actively engage in the process of reflection as a tool to evaluate
637 their practice.

638 **Summary**

639 This investigation sought to examine what experienced SPCs believed to be essential
640 for consulting effectiveness at elite sport competitions. These findings provide less
641 experienced SPC practitioners with a number of novel insights into working within the elite
642 sport environment. The experienced SPCs in this investigation believed the key to consulting
643 effectiveness within the elite sports environment was to build a relationship with clients that
644 had a positive impact and which the client was both happy with and continued to develop.
645 Experienced SPCs clearly identified consulting philosophies and approaches which they had
646 tried and tested within the elite sport environment and believed were effective when working
647 with elite athletes. Less experienced practitioners should be aware these experienced SPCs
648 had adapted their philosophy as a result of increased experience and confidence in their
649 consulting ability. Although previous literature has discussed consulting at elite sport
650 competitions, the present investigation extends this literature further by providing
651 practitioners with real world examples and suggestions on how best to be effective at elite
652 sport competitions. Key findings included; (a) fitting in but not getting in the way, (b)
653 demonstrating consistent SPC behavior, (c) limiting new interventions, and (d) working more
654 closely with coaches. Finally, these findings provide insight into the challenges experienced
655 SPCs faced in evaluating their effectiveness and identifying the impact of their work on the
656 client.

657 Although this investigation will be of interest to sport psychology practitioners who
658 are currently working within the elite environment or wish to work within this environment,
659 the findings need to be considered in light of their methodological strengths and limitations.
660 The small select sample size of SPCs can be viewed both as a strength and a limitation. The
661 participants within this investigation were all experienced SPCs with considerable experience
662 working at the elite level ($M = 21.67$ years). Additionally, the substantial variety in SPC elite
663 consulting experiences (e.g., Winter Olympics, Summer Olympics, World Champs,
664 NASCAR, professional soccer) across a range of pinnacle events, and team versus individual
665 sports, can be viewed as a strength. The majority of SPCs involved within the current study
666 were male and any future research should investigate this possible gender imbalance within
667 elite level sport further in order to promote an atmosphere of inclusion for both male and
668 female SPCs. SPCs working at the elite level are a small and unique population and therefore
669 there is much we can learn from these individuals about working at pinnacle sports
670 competitions. Although these findings should help readers to develop an awareness of the
671 characteristics and conditions necessary for effective consulting at elite sport competitions,
672 these findings should also be considered with respect to the current sport environments in
673 which they consult.

674

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804

Table 1.
Emergent categories and sub-categories

Categories	Concepts
Consulting philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive Behavioral Therapy • Social-Cognitive-Behavioral • Client-Centered • Biofeedback • Eclectic
Adaptations in consulting philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to the client • Increased confidence • Organizational psychology
Consulting approach at elite sport competitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fitting in, but not getting in the way • Consistent SPC behavior • Limited new interventions • More work with coaches
Consulting effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive impact on the client • Positive relationship with the client • Coach involvement
Evaluating effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client feedback • Personal reflection

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