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

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

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

buildup, preparation, and during these sport competitions.

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

working with elite athletes, while these athletes are competing at pinnacle sport competitions, and who have attended these events in a consulting capacity would be best placed to assist new and less experienced SPCs to develop their knowledge and understanding of the elite sport environment and effective SPC consulting at the elite level.

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

In recent years, there has been an increase in descriptive literature that has examined effective sport psychology provision at elite sport competitions; this has included a number of reflective accounts of the experiences of working within the elite environment and at elite sport competitions (e.g., Haberl & McCann, 2012; Haberl & Petersen, 2006; Hermansson & Hodge, 2012; Hodge & Hermansson, 2007; McCann, 2000; Orlick, 1989; Portenga, Aoyagi, & Statler, 2012). Consulting effectiveness while working at elite sport competitions has highlighted the diverse and novel challenges faced while consulting at these events (e.g., helping individuals to perform while coping with the stress, logistics, size, spectacle, and resources of

these pinnacle competitions). Although providing new consultants and less experienced SPCs with some insight into working within this environment, McCann (2000) has argued that although the environment of "the really big event" may be different, the work completed and the skills used within this environment are typically an extension of the work completed outside of such pinnacle events. Recently Knowles, Katz, and Gilbourne (2012) argued that providing reflective accounts that explore the effective practice of more experienced SPC practitioners, will "move practitioners forward at a personal level while also understanding the potential for such work to impact across practice communities more widely" (p. 468).

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

Method

Participants

Ten experienced SPCs (eight male and two female, M age = 50.44 years, M years elite level consulting experience = 21.67 years, M number of pinnacle sports events consulted at = 7.2 events) who held current sport psychology accreditation/certification (British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences [BASES], British Psychological Society [BPS], Association of Applied Sport Psychology [AASP], and/or licensed psychologist [U.S.A.]) and who had attended at least five elite sport competitions and had provided sport psychology support to elite

athletes who were competing at these sport events (e.g., British Premiership [Soccer], Commonwealth Games, European Championships, summer and winter Olympic Games, NASCAR, Pan American Games, Spanish La Ligua [Soccer], ATP Tennis Tour, World Championships, World Cups) were purposefully sampled.

With the aim of adding credibility to the sharing of best professional practice, all participants were asked whether they would be willing to waive their right to anonymity, while confidentiality was assured through no direct quotes or identifiable information (such as interview quotes) being directly linked to any one participant by name. Nine SPCs agreed to waive their anonymity; with one SPC wishing to remain anonymous. The following experienced SPCs agreed to waive their anonymity: Kate Goodger (G.B.-based SPC; BPS and BASES accredited, had consulted at three Olympic Games); Dan Gould (U.S.-based SPC; consulted at two Olympic Games and at NASCAR events); Peter Haberl (U.S.-based SPC; U.S.A. licensed psychologist and AASP accredited, attended six Olympic Games and one Paralympic Games, one Pan American Games, and numerous World Championships); Lew Hardy (G.B.-based SPC; BPS and BASES accredited, consulted at numerous World and European Championships, former Chairperson of BOA psychology steering group); Chris Harwood (G.B.-based SPC; BPS and BASES accredited, consulted with British Premiership Football Clubs and on the ATP Tennis Tour); Anne-Marte Penssgard (Sweden-based SPC; worked at five Olympic Games and numerous World and European Championships); Ian Maynard (G.B.-based SPC; BPS accredited, worked at 2 Olympic Games, 2 Commonwealth Games, 18 World Championships); Sean McCann (U.S.-based SPC; U.S.A. licensed psychologist and AASP accredited, attended 10 Olympic Games and numerous World Championships); Len Zaichkowsky (Canadian-based SPC; AASP accredited, worked at World and European Championships, Spanish La Ligua [Soccer]).

Data Collection

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

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

Analysis

Data analysis procedures commenced shortly after each interview to establish if any emergent categories warranted further exploration in the interviews which followed. Given that the primary purpose of the analysis was to gain an understanding of effective sport psychology consulting at the "really big event," a thematic content analysis approach was used to search for common themes across all data (Weber, 1990). This approach involved inductively analyzing and classifying the information from the interviews, reducing it to more relevant and manageable information units to form explana-

tions that reflected the detail, evidence, and examples provided by participants during the interviews.

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

Reliability and Trustworthiness

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

Results and Discussion

As often is the case in qualitative investigations, the description and interpretation of data are closely related. With the aim of avoiding repetition, and guided by the emergent categories, the results and discussion sections have been integrated. The categories that emerged following analysis procedures are presented in Table 1. Each of these will be discussed with supporting participant quotes with the aim of giving detailed insight into experienced SPC consulting experiences. To ensure anonymity, participants were identified with "SPC" followed by a random No. 1 to 10 (e.g., SPC3).

Consulting Philosophy

It has been argued that: "understanding one's personal and professional philosophy is among the essential prerequisites to effective consulting practice" as an SPC (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004, p. 446). Considering this recommendation, the consulting philosophies of the experienced SPCs participating in the current investigation were examined. The emergent styles highlighted the differing backgrounds, strengths, theoretical orientations, and practice of the participants. These included (1) Cognitive Behavioral Therapy; (2) Social, Cognitive, and Behavioral approach; (3) Biofeedback; (4) Client-centered; and (5) Eclectic.

Table 1
Emergent Categories and Subcategories

Categories	Concepts
Consulting philosophy	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
	Social–Cognitive–Behavioral
	Client–Centered
	Biofeedback
	Eclectic
Adaptations in consulting philosophy	Listening to the client
	Increased confidence
	Organizational psychology
Consulting approach at elite sport competitions	Fitting in, but not getting in the way
	Consistent SPC behavior
	Limited new interventions
	More work with coaches
Consulting effectiveness	Positive impact on the client
	Positive relationship with the client
	Coach involvement
Evaluating effectiveness	Client feedback
	Personal reflection

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

The SPCs involved within the present study also demonstrated an awareness of the potential limitations of adopting a CBT approach to their consulting. These limitations included, "you have to be psychologically aware of individuals" (SPC5) and "[it's] not a quick fix, not everybody's willing to engage in that work" (SPC7). For example, SPC6 argued—

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

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

Adaptations to Consulting Philosophy

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

Listening to the client. Three SPCs commented that over time they had become more

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

Increased confidence. In addition, one SPC commented openly that her/his consulting philosophy had adapted as a result of improved confidence in his or her ability. They explained that "in my younger days I would be less confident that I could figure out where we needed to go first, I would take more broad strokes. Now I'm more likely to go after a specific thing pretty quickly" (SPC6). Although confidence in oneself and one's abilities within applied sport psychology has been identified in recent research (e.g., Sharp & Hodge, 2011), the current investigation provides readers with interesting, and perhaps unexpected reassurance that these experienced SPCs also struggled with confidence and belief in their ability in the early stages of their careers.

Organizational psychology. One SPC commented on the inclusion of organizational psychology in her/his philosophy. SPC2 commented—

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

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

Adaptions to Consulting Approach at Elite Sport Competitions

In relation to their approach while working at the "really big event," SPC responses highlighted that although the theoretical framework for their practice remained the same, it was important for their behavior to be consistent while also fitting in with those with whom they were working. Four categories emerged in relation to SPC approach while working at elite sport competitions, these included (a) Fitting in, but not getting in the way; (b) Consistent SPC behavior; (c) Limited new interventions; and (d) More work with coaches.

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

> Being proactively unobtrusive by being present but not getting in the way . . . knowing your role and leaving

the ego at the door which I think at the elite level you have to get your head around. Everybody wants to help and certainly my experience of the Olympics is [that] the biggest nuisance [for the athlete] is probably support staff, and people just getting in the way (SPC5).

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

Consistent SPC behavior. While attending the "big event," four SPCs perceived consistency in their behavior to be essential. "When I have been to the World Champs or the Olympics, things get magnified. I try to not change my behavior at those events, stay consistent to who I am and not get down or rattled by the environment" (SPC7). SPC1 commented on the need for, "my behavior to be the same throughout the whole season even at playoffs. I'll just be in the dressing room and around if they want to chat." However, SPC8 warned that, "you can go days without anything happening. It's important to stay calm and not feel like you have to do something because you feel you need to, to justify why you are there, to show you're busy." Changes in SPC behavior at the elite sport competitions were also discussed, with SPCs believing that behavioral variations can "effect your decision making . . . you have to be able to think quickly and to look for the hot spots" (SPC5).

These findings provide a novel insight into the pressures SPCs themselves may experience working at elite sport competitions, while balancing support provision to multiple clients (e.g., athletes, coaches, and organizational personnel). As McCann (2008) warned, one of the tests SPCs face while at elite sport competitions is getting caught up in the same pressure and desperation as the athletes and coaches. Haberl and Petersen (2006) also discussed the need for "self-preservation at the Olympics" in order to develop and ensure consistency of personal behavior. These experienced practitioners highlighted the importance of the SPC looking after themselves through "sleep, exercise, nutrition, regular contact with family at home, perspective taking and peer debriefing consultation" (p. 38). Haberl and Petersen (2006) and the SPCs in the present investigation had extensive experience working at elite sport competitions, and had

learnt through these experiences. Those with little or no experience of working at elite competitions should be aware of the pressures they may experience and develop and implement strategies that will assist them in coping in these pressured environments. Researchers have argued that it is critical for SPCs to have some form of peer supervision and support in place to ensure any challenging issues that arise can be discussed and resolved (Sharp & Hodge, 2011).

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

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

Vealey (1988) argued that, "coaches have special [psychological] needs of their own and would benefit from psychological skills training programming specifically designed for them" (p. 323). Recently, Sharp and Hodge (2013) provided insight into the consulting relationships of two coach–SPC relationships. These relationships developed as a consequence of the coaches' positive perceptions of the work the SPCs had completed with the coaches' athletes. Based on these perceptions, coaches started working with the SPCs to see whether there would be any potential benefits for their coaching from working with the SPC to improve their coaching performance. Despite this recent study, little progress has been made in meeting coach individual needs no matter what environment they are working in (e.g., Gould, Hodge, Peterson, & Petlichkoff, 1987; Thelwell et al., 2008). The present investigation provides a new insight into the flexible role of experienced SPC's work at elite sport competitions, while also highlighting the need for SPCs to be aware of the needs of coaches working within these pinnacle sports environments.

Consulting Effectiveness

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

Positive impact on the client. SPCs perceived that an effective SPC should, "make a difference that is positive; for example, effecting behavioral change, attitudinal change or whatever you're working" (SPC1), while also "seeing a demonstrable change in that individual, ideally one that they recognize" (SPC4). "You'd like it all to be about contributing to gold medals, but sometimes it's just helping individuals to cope" (SPC5). Positive impact on both the performance of the athlete and the athlete as a person were identified as important for consulting effectiveness. As one SPC ex-

plained, "I think early on [effectiveness] meant when the athlete was successful at the field of play but that has changed over the years, it's still part of it, it's a little more important now to understand whether the athlete was successful at paying attention to the task at hand" (SPC7).

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

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

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

Positive relationship with the client. SPC responses highlighted that, "absolutely, categorically your personal relationship with the players" (SPC7) is central to consulting effectiveness, as "ultimately it always comes down to the relationship" (SPC3). The personal consulting relationship with clients was perceived to be "based on mutual respect. It's a hard world they

live in where failure smacks you in the face . . . it's real hard. They need to know that you understand that and that you live in that world too" (SPC2).

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

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

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

> If you do your job right you"ll become redundant. So being able to identify what the issue is, initiate an intervention that's effective that causes changes and brings about permanent change. If you can't completely initiate change, maybe just give them the coping skills to deal with it because some things are just going to remain (SPC5).

Responses highlighted that through the development of a positive consulting relationship, the SPC was able to encourage client independence. Specifically, the SPC would work toward providing their client with all the necessary psychological skills and techniques to work independently of them. If the consulting relationship was strong the client would then return to the SPC to develop or improve their psychological skills and techniques whenever they believed it was necessary. In their discussion of a self-determination theory (SDT) ap-

proach to psychotherapy, Ryan and Deci (2008) argued that the application of SDT as an approach to psychotherapy and behavior change was not only useful to develop the content of therapeutic sessions, but could also be applied across various systems of practice. Creating client independence can be linked specifically to the psychological need of autonomy. Autonomy literally means "self-rule" and refers to self-initiation, volition, and willing approval of one's behavior. Athletes who act with a sense of autonomy engage in sport (and in sport psychology) for their own valued reasons and believe that participation is their choice (Allen & Hodge, 2006; Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT proposes that by encouraging client autonomy in the therapeutic process, the client will more easily integrate learning and behavior change, which will result in more successful treatment outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2008). The concept of autonomy-support refers to an individual in a position of authority (such as a coach, SPC, or therapist) considering the other person's feelings and providing them with relevant information and opportunities for choice, while minimizing the use of pressures and demands (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). One could argue that the findings from the current study indicated that experienced SPCs created autonomy-supportive environments within the consulting relationship.

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

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

The results from the present investigation provide novel insight into the multiple roles SPCs adopted working with coaches and their athletes "at elite competitions." Researchers have argued that some multiple relationships are unavoidable and in themselves are not unethical (Younggren & Gottlieb, 2004). Hays (2006) advised practitioners to consider whether any particular relationship or action is, or might be, exploitative or harmful to those you are working with when adopting multiple consulting roles with coaches and their athletes. In some situations, Hays (2006) suggested that "rigid maintenance of a singular role or relationship could potentially become unhelpful, harmful, or destructive" (p. 228). Therefore, SPCs should be aware of the potential challenges and expectations that they may be faced with when adopting multiple roles and ask themselves "whose needs are being met through working together?", and "is there a risk of exploitation or harm to the client?" Furthermore, considering the informal and complex nature of the elite sport environment asking "who is the client?" and what boundaries for confidentiality are in place may assist SPCs when adopting multiple roles.

Evaluating Effectiveness

Within sport psychology research, concerns have been raised regarding the need for effective evaluation within the applied SP consulting (e.g., Haberl & McCann, 2012; Martindale & Collins, 2007; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Engagement in evaluation of practice will allow SPCs to document their practice and facilitate their improvement to ensure they are accountable to their client, themselves, and their profession (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002). Within the present investigation, these 10 SPCs provided an original insight into the challenges they faced evaluating the effectiveness of their practice at the elite level and identifying the impact of their work on their client(s). "You would like to see that your work has contributed to improved performance and results of the performance even if there's not necessarily a direct way of attributing the work you've done to improved performance" (SPC1). "Sometimes you just can't make that connection between what happens in sport psychology and them winning the medal or not winning the medal . . . I think you are just a small cog in the wheel" (SPC3). "It's a bit like qualitative research, you're never going to know causation, but you can draw conclusions based on multiple sources of information" (SPC10).

> One thing I learned a long time ago, to my great benefit, is that more athletes fail than succeed at an Olympic Games. There are hundreds of athletes sometimes competing in an event and there are three people that win medals, and fourth place is considered a failure at the Olympic Games; so, the odds are that you are going to working with people who don't succeed. That's a kind of good humbling experience to realize that. I learned pretty quickly that if you're going to take credit for wins, which many people in our field do, then you better take blame for the losses, which very few people in our field do. I had to figure out a different way of thinking about it, even though it is all about Olympic Games success. So my goal is to help athletes and coaches succeed at the games (SPC6).

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

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

Consultant Evaluation Form. Five SPCs indicated that they used the Consultant Evaluation Form (CEF; Partington & Orlick, 1987) in some form as a tool to gain client feedback. "You have the CEF I think that is certainly an important indicator for looking at your measure of effectiveness in terms of client satisfaction" (SPC1). Since its inception the CEF (Partington

& Orlick, 1987) has been used by SPCs and is recognized as a valuable and appropriate means of evaluating SPC effectiveness in general terms (e.g., Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991; Hardy & Parfitt, 1994). The CEF was designed to assess athletes' perceptions of SPC effectiveness and also assess the amount and type of athlete–SPC contact across 10 consultant characteristic items that are rated on an 11-point ordinal scale, while also assessing perceptions of consultant effectiveness via two 11-point rating scales, which required the participant to evaluate how effective the consultant was on (a) effect on you and (b) effect on team. However, the SPCs in the current investigation believed the CEF needed modification: "I think the form is quite limited and quite basic" (SPC1), which has resulted in the CEF being adapted to include, "some qualitative questions, like what should I stop, start, continue doing" (SPC7), "just some open-ended questions—a little more data" (SPC6), and "more open-ended questions around the effectiveness of particular techniques I've used with a client" (SPC1).

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

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

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

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

Personal reflection. Personal reflection was used as a method of evaluating effectiveness by two SPCs. These SPCs commented "for me it's important to evaluate your own work from their perspective, based around the tasks and techniques or strategies that you're actually using with clients" (SPC1); "effectiveness as a consultant is doing my job well . . . Being an effective consultant is a lot about identifying what it takes in that specific role and making sure I do those things more consistently and more effectively" (SPC6). Previously applied sport psychology researchers have proposed that reflection is essentially about the self and the self in-context; furthermore, it has been argued that there is a need for more reflective accounts from experienced SPCs to encourage practitioners to engage in the reflective process (Faull & Cropley, 2009; Knowles et al., 2012). Findings from the present investigation highlight that, despite their extensive experience, experienced

SPCs continue to actively engage in the process of reflection as a tool to evaluate their practice.

Summary

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

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

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