

The Ethical Sports Psychologist

By Andrea Corn Ph. D.

Over the past decade the field of Sports psychology has become popularized, at times glamorized, but overall, increasingly more specialized and diverse. Today's field draws from an interdisciplinary group of professionals including psychologists, clinical sport and exercise psychologists, physical educators, behavioral scientists, athletic trainers, sports physicians, nutritionists plus a variety of other allied professionals. For those who work in the capacity as a sport psychologist or as a sports psychology consultant our job is to apply and integrate psychological theories, the latest research, and sometimes draw upon personal experiences to provide psychological services to athletes of all ages and abilities.

In some cases, sport psychologists have the good fortune to treat individuals who are not only highly talented, motivated, and high achieving but also relatively strong mentally, physically, and emotionally. Of course, this is not always the case, as no athlete or individual goes through life unscathed. Even gifted and talented athletes will seek out therapeutic services for a myriad of reasons, such as emotional disorders (including mood or anxiety disorders, anorexia, or substance abuse), as well as mental or physical difficulties following injuries, burnout, unable to concentrate, or how to cope with problems outside the world of sports but nonetheless, are affecting the athlete's personal, family life, or intimate relationships. However, this paper is going to focus on a narrow topic and discusses the importance of maintaining healthy and appropriate boundaries working with athletes.

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL TRAINING

Generally speaking, highly competitive athletes seek out a sport psychologist to align mind and body in the quest of pursuing greater success, achieving excellence, or to overcome unrealistic and self-defeating ideas. If the athlete has already attained a modicum of success it informs the sport psychologist that the athlete has the raw talent and emotional and mental skills to potentially rise and reach his or her optimal performance.

RELATIONSHIP BOUNDARIES

While an athlete is free to share his or her successes (as well as disappointments) freely with others, the sport psychologist or consultant cannot. It may be tempting to want to bask in the same positive light and recognition the athlete receives, but that is not our role. Despite whatever gratification is derived working with athletes, our sense of purpose, duty, and satisfaction in our role must be contained

and metaphorically held inside ourselves. Therapeutically, any personal feelings of pride and accomplishment must come from the knowing each one of us did our best in working with the athlete. Some athletes will be able to acknowledge progress, or realize the benefits of making constructive changes, and the insight subsequently attained. Of course, this doesn't always occur, even if the sports psychologists' best efforts were given. There will be those athletes who do not appreciate or understand how important the therapeutic relationship is in creating a new way of seeing oneself. Or, some athletes despite repeated statements about seeking self-improvement, end up unwilling to change familiar ways of behaving (even if self-destructive or self-defeating).

What really stands out is the fact that an athlete's feats as well as blunders are readily accessible and can travel instantaneously, whether through the Internet, virtual sports pages, websites, twitter accounts, or shared on social media sites. As much as some athletes welcome the local to global recognition, when events go badly, it leaves them with few places to hide. And, coupled with poor decision an athlete's words and actions can boomerang very quickly raising bigger concerns about his or her maturity and discretion. For example, this summer we witnessed a situation with NBA star Michael Beasley, formerly of the Miami Heat; now playing with the Toronto Raptor. Following an unusual, eye-catching Twitter photo this NBA athlete's posting was carefully scrutinized. Shortly thereafter, he wound up entering a rehab facility due to violating the NBA's substance abuse policy. As professionals we may wonder why any professional athlete might be willing to be so transparent and reveal thoughts or feelings that could pose a risk to his or her career. Not knowing any more than what has already been reported in the news, I wish to turn the spotlight back to our own profession, as there is an important lesson and cautionary tale to consider.

WAYS TO ACHIEVE PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION

As a psychologist or sports psychologist, our measuring stick of achievement is best witnessed through increased referrals, seeing new patients come to our offices through word of mouth, positive feedback or recommendations from colleagues or friends. Additional ways to receive external recognition can occur through professional involvements in other organizations, such as the APA, (Division 47, Exercise and Sport Psychology), AASP (Association of Applied Sports Psychology, which has its own Ethics Code), and the newly formed ISPA (International Society Professionals Association). Other means include teaching and educating students; whether at the collegiate or graduate level, writing articles, chapters in textbook, journals, or other professional publications. Personal gratification and

success can also occur by sharing one's experience, wisdom and knowledge at conferences, seminars, or in supervision. Regardless, our role is to protect our patient's well being, safeguard their privacy, and uphold the principles and ethical guidelines of our profession. If not, then the psychologist needs to first ask him or herself why...because something must be lacking or is out of conscious awareness but leads this individual to blur or at worst, cross this invisible boundary line.

Following an APA conference in 2005, Stephen Behnke was quoted as saying,

“The goal is for our members and the profession to view ethics not as a set of external constraints that limit our possibilities and inhibit our creativity, but rather as a part of the fabric of our professional lives, and ethical dilemmas not as a sign that something has gone wrong in our work, but rather as reflecting the richness, complexity, and importance of what psychologists do”

Thus it strongly recommended to any sport psychologist or consult to reacquaint oneself and reread the APA Ethics Code, which is comprised of an Introduction, a Preamble, five General Principles, and Ethical Standards. The Preamble and General Principles are inspirational goals pointing to the highest ideals within our profession. Even though this section of the code is rarely enforced, it underscores the right course of action. Even AASP has adopted the APA's Ethic Code but have tailored them so they uphold the values and mission of this sports organization. Given the limited space of this article, I will list the sections as a reminder of the spectrum of material covered (See below).

Everyone of us has our own moral and ethical compass that guides us in our work with the talented athletes that we treat. And, regardless of the athlete's physical and God-given talents, working out mind-body problems occur within the sanctity and privacy of the therapeutic space or office (Sometimes this space has to be portable to accommodate an athlete's schedule). And, while each athlete's accomplishments and achievements are visibly and public for the world to see; those of us who work therapeutically with athletes, the opposite must be true. Here, our work must be done privately, with complete confidentiality and respect for this individual, his or her issues, and course of treatment. Some cases will be challenging, and if the psychologist feels ill equipped to handle the problem, then he or she needs to seek out additional supervision and guidance. At the same time, the psychologist would benefit from re-reading the APA's and/or AASP's Ethic Code of Conduct.

Preamble and General Principles:

Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence

Principle B: Fidelity and Responsibility

Principle C: Integrity

Principle D: Justice

Principle E: Respect for People's Rights and Dignity

Standard 1: Resolving Ethical Issues

Standard 2: Competence

Standard 3: Human Relations

Standard 4: Privacy and Confidentiality

Standard 5: Advertising and Other Public Statement

Standard 6: Record Keeping and Fees

Standard 7: Education and Training

Standard 8: Research and Publication

Standard 9: Assessment

Standard 10: Therapy

In closing, ask yourself, when was the last time you looked at the APA or AASP Ethical Guidelines? If you have a hard time remembering when it was, then it may be worth the time and effort so you cause emotional or mental harm to your patient or yourself as well as risk the repercussions that would be imposed on you by our fine profession.

About the Author:

Dr. Andrea Corn is a sports psychology consultant in private practice in Lighthouse Point, FL, where she sees children, adolescents, and adults. She is also a highly regarded psychologist in the area of child and adolescent development, youth sports, and family matters. Dr. Corn has spoken locally as well as nationally at conferences on youth sport issues. She is a member of the American Psychological Association (APA), including the Division of Exercise and Sport Psychology (47), the Association of Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) and the International Sports Professionals Association (ISPA).

Dr. Corn has written articles on various sports related topics for The National Alliance of Youth Sports (NAYS), South Florida Parenting, and The Miami Herald. Dr. Corn taught Sport Psychology at St. Thomas University in Miami to undergraduate and graduate students. For several years, Dr. Corn served on AASP's Committee for Child and Adolescent Sport Related Issues and has written several of their position papers on youth sports.

References

Behnke, S. (2005, November). Ethics at APA's Annual Convention. *Monitor on Psychology*, pp. 74-75