

# 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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8 Sport Psychology Consulting at Elite Sport Competitions

9 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.

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Table 1.  
Emergent categories and sub-categories

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

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