

There are more to athletes than just performance

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SSMU's sport psychology staff at hpc hosted a two week workshop (1 -15 May 2010) for lectures and students from the California University of Pennsylvania (United States of America), as well as from the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria. This workshop re-emphasised the importance of sports counselling services for the athlete population.

USA / SA Workshop

Prof. Taunya M. Tinsley (Department of Counsellor Education at the California University of Pennsylvania, USA), Prof. Lourens Human (Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria, SA), other USA academic staff and students, MA (Counselling Psychology) students of the University of Pretoria, as well as athletes from the various sporting academies at hpc participated in group sessions during the two weeks.

The theme for the two weeks was developing cultural competence and cultural sensitivity for helping professionals working with the athlete population. It consisted of lectures, practical sessions and various visits to community projects.

These discussions included amongst others the role of sport in the lives of adolescents, the role of family in sport participation and the meaning of sport. Everybody came from different cultures but sport was the meeting place for all these stories to come together.

Sports Counselling Services

One topic that was discussed in detail was the role of sports counselling services in the lives of the athlete population. The term athletes will be used in this article to refer to children and adolescents participating in high performance sport.

Athletes have been viewed as one of the most recognized, yet unofficial special populations in schools. Sport can be the most rewarding and most stressful endeavours for athletes. Athletes also experience the same academic, emotional, personal goals and concerns as other children not participating in sport. However, athletes need to also manage the rigors of athletic participation which include the stress of performance and issues of time management. Many athletes spend about 20 hours per week practicing and participating in sport. This often leaves little time

for academic work or any leisure activities. Successfully balancing the above mentioned demands could be too much to handle for some athletes, making them more susceptible to mental and physical distress.



The Story of John

Here is an example of a young cricket player to illustrate the point:

John is a 16 year old cricket player. He has been performing well all season except for during the last month. He appears to be distracted whilst training and reluctant to talk. Bob, his coach referred him for performance enhancement interventions with the hope of getting "the old John" back. One day in school he broke down and admitted to the school principal that his marks are going down and he doesn't know what to do. His parents struggle to understand as they just recently paid for a course in study methods. So instead of focusing in training he worries about school work and then in school he worries about not performing in cricket and getting dropped from the team. John is obviously faced with a couple of dilemmas. However, there are a lot of athletes that shares John's story and experience. Luckily there is always hope and there are services that can help John to perform well again! Sport psychology services offer sports counselling to athletes that struggle with performance related matters for example in John's case.



Referral Guidelines for Sports Counselling

Here are some guidelines for referring an athlete:

Athletes can be referred by teachers, coaches, parents, anyone involved in their training and lives. They can also refer themselves.

(I) Performance development:

This is to enhance the athlete's performance, for example, improving a soccer player's focus and concentration after making a mistake during a game. In the case of John, performance development could be one of the interventions to assist him.

(II) Performance dysfunction:

This includes athletes who experience any psycho-social, interpersonal or relationship difficulties for example a tennis player who experience his coach as cold, unforgiving and harsh and therefore he struggles to perform well because he just receives criticism from his coach. This also reminds him of his father's view where he was never good enough. In the case of John he might be worried that the decline in his performance might influence the relationships with his coach, and therefore a sports counselling intervention might be needed to address this concern. In the case of John this sports counselling intervention should be addressed first, before any performance development work can be done.

(III) Performance impairment:

This includes athletes that experience clinical difficulties for example a swimmer that is so conscious of her weight that she starts developing dysfunctional eating patterns which results in an eating disorder.

(IV) Performance termination:

This is in reaction to career termination due to injury or retirement from sport. For example: an athlete who decides to retire from competitive sport after struggling to perform well again after a severe ankle injury and surgery.

The two week workshop in May 2010 proved again the importance of sports counselling. Previously when an athlete was not performing everybody wanted performance enhancement. Now we realise again that other factors such as performance dysfunction, performance impairment and performance termination need to be sorted out first otherwise it will take so much longer to get an athlete like John back to performing optimally or like Coach Bob stated getting "the old John" back.