

## HIGH- PERFORMANCE SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST: INPUTS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

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*El objetivo del presente artículo es el de exponer algunas aportaciones y retos futuros de la labor del psicólogo del deporte en el alto rendimiento. Las acciones del psicólogo del deporte (evaluación, asesoramiento, formación, desarrollo personal y del talento deportivo, entre otras) van dirigidas hacia el amplio colectivo que integra el contexto deportivo: los deportistas, el equipo, el entrenador, la familia, el área médica, la dirección deportiva y los árbitros. Por otra parte, se realiza una reflexión sobre la necesidad de crear una División Estatal de Psicología del Deporte, recibir una buena formación en Psicología del Deporte, crear una acreditación profesional para el psicólogo del deporte, incorporar nuevos conocimientos y técnicas psicológicas provenientes de otras especialidades de Psicología y áreas de conocimiento, y valorar determinados aspectos éticos-deontológicos en la práctica profesional.*

**Palabras claves:** Alto rendimiento, Necesidades psicológicas, Preparación psicológica.

*The aim of the present article is to discuss some of the contributions and future challenges in the profession of the high-performance sport psychologist. The actions of sport psychologists (assessment, guidance, training, personal and skills development, among others) are directed toward the broad group that integrates the sports context: the team, the family, the coach, medical assistance, sports management and the referees. On the other hand, the following considerations are made: the necessity of creating a State Division of Sport Psychology, the importance of adequate training in Sport Psychology, the creation of a professional accreditation for sport psychologists, the incorporation of new knowledge and psychological techniques and assessment from other disciplines and the value of certain ethical and deontological aspects in professional practice.*

**Key words:** High-performance, Psychological needs, Psychological preparation.

**T**oday, sport is undoubtedly the social phenomenon with the greatest relevance and significance in our society (Cox, 2008). Sport media fill the first places in the list of the most read newspapers; parents dream of their children one day achieving "success" in sport; some clubs and sport entities are considered to be money generating companies; some athletes' multimillionaire contracts...although, what is necessary for the athlete to achieve his/her maximum performance level?

Williams and James (2001) point out that an athlete's performance and sports results are multifactorial. Both the success and the failure of an athlete or team are derived from a combination of conditional physical capacities (strength, speed, resistance, etc.), techniques (the execution of the forehand in tennis, the kicking of the ball in soccer, etc.), tactics (zone defense in basketball, remaining in the peloton in cycling, etc.) and psychological aspects (personality, coping skills, etc.), as

well as other external variables (referee, field, opponent, etc.). In this regard, the athlete is considered a functional unit (emotional, cognitive, social, physiological and behavioral) that needs comprehensive attention and training in order to attain its maximum performance (Morilla *et al.* 2003).

From this perspective, the Sport Psychologist (SP) emerges as a specialist of the "psychological aspects" (wellbeing, personality, motivation, concentration, confidence...) that influence sports performance (Cox, 2008). The role of the Sport Psychologist (SP) can be perceived as a technician in Psychology who is at the service of the technical body (coach, physical trainer, etc.) and other professionals in the area (manager and sports coordinator, etc.) (Vives and Garcés de Los Fayos, 2003), although the coach is the main psychological manager responsible for the athlete and/or team. As such, the SP must participate in the general training of the athlete along with the remaining technicians and specialists (doctor, nutritionist, etc.).

Research work and professional practice makes Sport Psychology an applied scientific discipline that is widely developed, that is increasingly more recognized by sports

technicians, athletes and other professionals in the area and, more importantly, which is starting to be respected by the group of psychologists who do not work within the field of sport (Weinberg and Gould, 1996). In spite of this, analyzing the work that the SP performs in high-performance sports is considered opportune for its improvement.

The present article is not intended to be an exhaustive review of the literature of the SP's work in the improvement of sport performance. The objective is to present the reader with a personal viewpoint resulting from my professional experience and the considerations of other psychologists who work in the field of sports in its practical aspect as well as in research.

In the following sections, several previous considerations will first be addressed that will aid in the understanding of the text, such as the possible groups of athletes that constitute high-performance, some evaluations regarding Clinical Sport Psychology, the different situations in which the SP can work and the need for planning the psychological work that is conducted with athletes or teams. Second, some of the actuations undertaken by the SP in high-performance sports will be described in function of the collectives that integrate the sports environment (athletes, trainers, families, medical services, referees and sports management). Finally, several future prospects are outlined.

### 1. SEVERAL PREVIOUS CONSIDERATIONS

#### **High-performance athletes**

A possible brief classification of the high-performance athlete is focused on the official classifications granted by the Spanish Olympic Committee (deportistas con Ayudas al Deporte Olímpico –ADO “athletes with aids for Olympic Sports” and the Superior Council of Sports (high-performance athletes). Some examples are; having been European champion or runner-up, having a certain classification in the national and international rankings, etc. Another broader possibility (non-official) is that in which we can include the professional athlete (who makes a living playing sports), the semi-professional athlete (who partially makes a living playing sports) and the baseline-sport athlete (young athletes with professional prospective). A common characteristic of these groups of athletes is the intended high level of practice (approximately, from 2 to 6 hours a day and from 5 to 7 days a week, depending on the sport) dedicated to the sport (Ruiz, Sánchez, Durán and Jiménez, 2006). The

work of the SP will be established based on the age and the level of competition of the athletes since every “developmental period” and “sports situation” will require the attainment of specific objectives in a certain time.

On the one hand, in baseline sports, the ultimate goal would be for the youngsters to reach professional sport (well prepared). In these formative periods for athletes, the development of all the necessary qualities is essential (physical, technical-tactical, and psychological) for future high-performance competitions (Morilla *et al.*, 2003). This infers the meticulous planning of this work, along with continuity in time. This rational and coherent practice, along with the follow-up of the psychological aspects that accompany and influence the correct development of the athlete (personality, psychological skills, healthy habits, etc.) take into consideration the promotion of health and quality of life of the athlete, and the analysis, study and evaluation of the events that are relevant in sport (school, family, friendships, etc.) and that obviously, contribute both in its sport-related and human aspects (Roffé and Bracco, 2003).

From the point of view of inserting the SP in the work place, it is pertinent to highlight the so-called “base effect”; that is, the excellent performance and acceptance of the role of the SP in baseline sport, enables or facilitates the integration of the SP in professional sport. In addition, it is worth indicating the so-called “domino effect” in which the SP, after doing a good job with an athlete or a team, goes on to work with other athletes or teams to conduct psychological preparation. The work of the SP in baseline sport, in general, tends to have greater work stability (medium/long term projects) compared to professional sport to collaborate in the development of the previously mentioned aspects.

On the other hand, in professional and semi-professional sport, the immediate goal is to obtain results and beat others. To do this, the objectives are focused on the psychological well-being of the athlete and the improvement of sport performance, based on the basic premise that the psychological aspect should definitely be considered as a “constitutive part of the overall preparation of the athlete, as just another element that must interact appropriately with the physical, technical and tactical aspects” (Buceta, 1998).

In this sporting context, the SP is dependent on results, in which there is usually a shorter period of actuation (short/medium term) as compared to baseline sport. The SP must assume the continuous exigency of

competitiveness associated with the attainment of success, and offer the athlete his/her personal support and provide him/her with psychological strategies with a view to improving his/her sports potential.

### **Clinical Psychology applied to sport**

Caracuel and Pérez (1996) emphasize the historical evolution of the role of the SP from an almost exclusively clinical perspective to a wider and more integrative scope of actuation. This deviation from Clinical Psychology has left the SP at present with two sides: functionality and professional evaluation. On the one hand, certain disorders (anxiety-stress, obsessive-compulsive disorder, etc.) can be associated with the demands of high-performance sports (maximum exigency, strict sport discipline, etc.) and the solution requires knowing, in depth, the context in which it happens, being present at that time of the season when it takes place (immediacy), valuing whether or not it interferes in his/her activity and personal life and making an assessment from both the psychological and sports dimensions (Ezquerro, 2002). In this regard, it is recommended that the SP also have Clinical Psychology training given its usefulness in the applied field. If this is not the case, or in the cases where the psychologist does not master or know this domain, it is recommended that the athlete be derived to another specialized professional (e.g., when faced with an athlete's sexual problems).

On the other hand, the approximation to the sports sphere from a clinical perspective has left a negative connotation regarding the figure of the SP. The tags of "shrink" or "brainwasher" are examples of this problem. Without losing sight of the possible clinical function of the SP, it would be positive to divulge and make society and the different professionals in the sports field aware of the role and functions of the SP and create a more accepted (or attractive) image. For example, considering the SP as a sport technician (Morilla *et. al*, 2003) can facilitate this "change of image", I do not think it is a question of ceasing to call ourselves SP, rather it is a question of informing and "knowing how to sell" ourselves. Sometimes "marketing" is just as important as the "product".

### **Location of the SP**

Another aspect that must be taken into account is the physical-labor situation of the SP. Buceta (1998) points out the possibility that the SP may be integrated within the

work group of the medical area of the sports facility, as an independent department within the organization chart, as an external consultant (hired for specific jobs) or as an independent professional (private practice). Either way, it is important that the SP has a physical space where he/she can intervene with the athletes and other professionals that require his/her services, and he/she outlines the networks and professionals (doctors, coaches, physical trainers) and institutional supports (management, coordinators, etc.) needed to obtain optimal stability and work performance.

### **Psychological plan of action**

Improvisation and focusing on problem solving (the "fire fighter" psychologist), has marked some of the first interventions of psychologists in the sports sphere (Dosil, 2008). This risky exposition has contributed to the lack of credibility of the professional performance of the psychologist and to associate this figure with "having problems" or demanding his/her help only "when there are problems".

The job of the SP should fulfill at least three basic aspects: planning, informing and coordinating. First, the job of the SP should presume meticulous planning of the psychological work to be conducted throughout the season. To this end, general planning is required (what usually needs to be addressed), an analysis of the specific situation (what are the current needs of the athlete or team) and an adaptation to the sport or the sport institution in question (philosophy, tradition, idiosyncrasy, etc.).

Second, fluid communication with other work colleagues (and with the athlete him/herself) is a basic prerequisite for acceptance (as a professional), intervention and interdisciplinary work. Third, the psychological plan must be integrated into the general actuation program. Objectives (e.g., training or performance improvement), time periods (e.g., pre-season, periods of greater physical work, etc.) and actions are required to be coordinated with the rest of the professionals who work with the athlete or team.

Despite these aspects, the SP must also be prepared for unexpected situations (e.g., change of coach, injuries, etc.) that require a "certain improvisation" within the program.

Another aspect to keep in mind in psychological planning is to quantify most of the data that are handled from this area. For example, the performance and/or

results of the athlete before and after the psychological intervention can be registered; statistics at an academic level of the athletes can be conducted, etc.. The objective is to “make visible” what sometimes appears to be work done in “the shadow” of the SP, in compliance with the deontological code.

Once these aspects have been appraised, some of the actions that the SP conducts in high-performance sports are presented. As has been previously mentioned, the professional work is focused on the collective embracing the sport domain: athletes, teams, coaches, sport technicians, families, referees and umpires and sport management.

**2. ACTIONS OF THE SP IN HIGH-PERFORMANCE**

**2.1. Activities directed at the athlete:**

The actions of the SP are aimed basically at the evaluation and writing of psychological reports, intervention and formation of the athlete.

**2.1.1. Psychological evaluation.**

It consists of contributing a series of data regarding the different psychological facets of the athlete so that, when necessary, it can serve as a starting point for an optimal intervention or assessment of the athlete. The aspect of reference in this section is the compliance with the deontological code.

When addressing an athlete, it is required to do it from an overall perspective that is not only centered on

performance. Sometimes, there can be other priorities that interfere with this, and, if they are not solved, the athlete will not progress. For example, the athletic activity (e.g., sport failures) may influence in the personal life of the athlete (e.g., negative mood state), whereas this (e.g., conflicts with partner) can also interfere with the athlete’s performance (e.g., excessive muscle tension). One possible way to do this is to contemplate two large groups of variables in the evaluation: personal and environmental, divided at the same time as shown in Table 1 (Ezquerro, 2008).

An aspect that must be improved by the SP is the integration of psychological assessment in the usual methods of selection and detection of athletes (e.g., with TTTT and medical exams) given that certain psychological characteristics (e.g., personality) are related to greater sport performance and success (García-Naveira, 2009a).

**2.1.2. Intervention**

When an athlete is received, the aim is to attend to the different demands that he/she has, both in the personal (well-being, personal problems, family problems, etc.) and sports spheres (performance improvement, injuries, interpersonal conflicts, etc.). In this regard, a personal and sport talent development service is offered.

With regard to sport performance improvement, a significant number of psychologists nowadays undergo psychological training with diverse athletes of different modalities such as soccer, running, swimming, etc. (Garcés de los Fayos and Vives, 2005; Gimeno, Buceta and Pérez-Llantada, 2007). The general purpose of this type of intervention is to achieve a state of ideal performance through the self-control of internal processes such as confidence, attention, emotions, cognition or physiological states, as indicated by Hardy, Jones and Gould (1996). In spite of this, it is recommended to begin to focus efforts on the analysis of the efficacy of the psychological intervention on the athlete’s sport performance (Ezquerro, 2008). On the one hand, the establishment of objectives, focusing on the positive, activation control, maintaining positive dialogue with oneself, the establishment of pre-competition routines, etc., must keep proving their efficacy with increased methodological rigor. On the other hand, negative internal processes (thoughts, emotions, and behaviors) do not always have limiting effects on performance (self-regulation).

In addition, the study of perceptual-cognitive aspects

PERSONAL	Psychological	Cognitive, emotional, behavioral
	Sport-related	Sport situation, technical, tactical resources, physical condition...
	Organic	Health, rest, alimentation, history of injuries...
ENVIRONMENTAL	Sport-related	Team and work ambiance, relationship with coach, team-mates... Interpersonal
	Unrelated to sports	relationships, studies-work, economic situation, other interests...



(recognition of game patterns, detection of relevant information, meta-cognitive knowledge, etc.), which distinguish expert and excellent athletes from those who are not, should also be emphasized. (Ruiz, Sánchez, Durán and Jiménez, 2006). The development of programs that promote these aspects represents a future challenge for Sport Psychology.

In this section, other aspects to consider regarding the work with athletes are: the presence of the SP in training sessions and competitions, gender differences and assistance to foreign athletes.

### ***To be present at trainings and competitions***

This work activity requires more “tracksuit” psychologists (Roffé, 2007). On the one hand, wearing sports attire (as opposed to a white coat or a suit as in clinical or business settings) can bring the figure of the SP closer to the athletes, facilitating its personal and professional acceptance. On the other hand, the presence of the SP in the training sessions and competitions provides “real” information about the athlete’s performance. For example, the analysis of the competition can offer relevant information regarding those aspects that the athlete must improve on, the training session being a suitable place for the organization of tasks with psychological content (concentration, management of pressures, etc.) for their improvement (Ortega, Cárdenas, Puigcerver and Méndez, 2005).

### ***Gender differences***

There has been an increase in the participation of women in high-performance sports (Martín, 2003). In order to conduct more efficient interventions, it is important for the SP to have knowledge of the possible gender differences in the sport context. For example, Ruiz (2005) indicates that national-level female judokas are more affable and cooperative than male judokas. Thus, a specific training in this area is recommended (e.g., in programs of the Sport Psychology Masters), where the SP must continue to further his/her knowledge and keep pace with his/her professional practice.

### ***Assistance to foreign athletes***

Special assistance to athletes that come from other countries is necessary (Morilla, *et. al.*, 2003). Different languages and cultures, a new place of residence and training, new teammates and work technicians, the personality of the athlete, etc. are some of the aspects that

must be taken into account given that these can hinder the adaptation and performance of the athlete. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the personal and sport-related assistance and training of foreign athletes.

On occasion, for example in soccer, a lot of money is invested in contracting a foreign player without taken into consideration the necessities he/she may have in order to achieve a faster and better adaptation. In these cases, the figure of the SP who tutors, manages or guides the athlete becomes of special interest with a view to coping with change. This is caring for the important economic and human investment made by the club.

### **2.1.3. Formation**

Training is one of the basic pillars of personal and sports success. Cognitive development, learning psychological skills to face competition, structuring the day and week with activities, relating to others outside the sport context, living a balanced life with respect to habits, etc. are synonymous of “psychological well-being” and “mental preparation” for competition.

Some of the activities in which the SP participates are: collaboration in the academic area (counseling, guidance, orientation and follow-up), search for work (creating a curriculum, facing an interview, etc.), development of formative workshops (values, drug consumption, sexual education, etc.) and psychological training for competition (motivation techniques, anxiety control, concentration, etc.).

Contrary to what could be thought, training is not only important in baseline sports but the professional athlete also needs to incorporate knowledge and acquire competencies that will serve him/her to approach his/her sport activities and life in general (these are usually related) with more guarantees. The SP must pay special attention to professional athletes, as it is possible that these are a group at risk with respect to training. The lack of routines, having little time for other activities due to training sessions, thinking that their lives are already solved on an economic level, having other motivations (e.g. getting ahead in the world of sport) etc., causes many of these athletes to neglect this aspect.

Other aspects that the SP must go into in depth and consolidate into his/her actions within high-performance sport are sports withdrawal, aggression, and education in



values.

### **The withdrawal of the athlete**

The phenomenon of sports withdrawal involves numerous variables of great importance that, at least from a practical point of view, have not always been paid the proper attention (González and Bedoya, 2008). Withdrawal is a transitory process that frequently begins with a feeling of loss that evolves toward personal growth and adaptation. The athlete must adapt to a new situation for which, in most cases, he/she is not prepared.

When faced with this situation, two lines of work are required from the SP: a) *preventive*; contribute to the formation and the planning of his/her personal and professional future during the athlete's active period; b) *coping*; the entities linked to high-performance sports should establish counseling and intervention programs that will facilitate the period of adjustment to the athlete's new situation.

### **Aggression in sport**

Certain factors can be influencing the aggressive behavior of athletes and fans –physiological predisposition, low level of moral reasoning, lack of self-control, aggressive trait, certain actions of the game, etc.- (Pelegrín, 2002). This can result in a violent game, athletes' injuries due to the aggression of a rival, violence in the bleachers, etc. In addition to intervening directly with the athlete (e.g., by teaching self-control techniques), the SP can work in the development and application of education programs through sport, and in this way, collaborate in the reduction of violent acts. Furthermore, an important challenge for future lines of research and intervention is the work with fans.

### **Education in values**

It is common to consider sport as an activity that contributes to the improvement of individuals, as a promoter of useful attitudes for life in general (Palou *et al.*, 2003). In adequate educational contexts, it enables athletes to commit and mobilize their capacities so that this experience organizes and configures their own selves, achieves their self-structures, capacity to work as a team and sportsmanship. Sport, as any other activity in life, can transmit both desirable and undesirable values (Lee, 1990). The simple participation in sports cannot be considered as moral education and this demands that the

educators (trainers, parents, etc.) have a clear conscience of the values they transmit.

Usually, work in the education of values has been conducted within a recreational or leisure context. It is in the high-performance area where the SP must pay special attention. The excessive search for results (victory, triumph, to stand out, etc.) can interfere with this task (Cecchini, González and Montero, 2007). Therefore, it is necessary for the SP to take this peculiarity into account and identify the obstacles that limit his/her work and search for the necessary supports (management, president, coaches, etc.). An example of this proposal is the project "MÁS QUE FÚTBOL" (MORE THAN SOCCER) developed by the Club Atlético de Madrid, Community of Madrid, Madrid Soccer Federation, Drug Addiction Help Foundation and the Psychology Association of Madrid with soccer players who compete in under 14 and under 16 categories (for more information: [www.+kf.es](http://www.+kf.es)), although the greatest challenge would be to achieve this with adult athletes.

### **2.2. Activities directed at the team**

Specific assistance requires work directed at teams or staff, understanding these as groups with their own dynamics, with specific configurations and particular objectives (Gil, 1999). The methodology used here is specialized, directed basically at team construction (cohesion, mentalization, etc.) and strengthening the valid qualities for management (leadership) and teamwork (sacrifice, task distribution, role acceptance, team sentiments, etc.) For example, García-Mas and Rivas Garza (2001) indicate the importance of working with the coach (or the psychologist who collaborates with the coach) to improve the team's motivation. In this regard, the psychological work is approached with variables related to motivation, such as concentration, confidence, cohesion, establishment of objectives, and work when faced with victory and defeat.

### **2.3. Activities directed at the coaches**

When working with the coach, it is necessary to keep in mind the psychological characteristics of the high-performance coach as opposed to coaches from other levels of competition (Mendoza, Izquierdo, Rodríguez and Ruiz, 2007). Without entering into the studies and models that attempt to define the traits, psychological skills or efficient styles of leadership in the coach, we

could define him/her as a “person who knows the sport of his specialty in depth, as well as being highly motivated toward the practice of his profession, and who knows how to organize and integrate sports strategies, tactics and techniques in a creative manner in order to achieve the maximum performance of the athletes” (Pérez, 2002).

The work of the SP with the coach can depend on several factors: personal attachment, training of the coach, sports culture, work methodology, etc., aspects that the SP must bear in mind and develop. The SP works with the coach with the objective of contributing to his/her personal and professional development. On the one hand, the coach is also a person, and different situations (personal, familial, sport-related, etc.) can affect his/her personal wellbeing and professional practice. On the other hand, training, counseling and the learning of psychological competencies (leadership communication, etc.) are part of the work of the SP so that the coach manages the athlete and/or the team in a more efficient manner.

In this regard, the psychological work that must be performed directly with the coach or indirectly with the athlete, through the coach, would be a future research proposal (Garcés de Los Fayos, Vives and Dosil, 2004). It must also be pointed out that there are other representative figures besides the coach (e.g., physical trainer and second coach) on which the SP should focus his/her actions given the important function they carry out with the athletes.

A relevant aspect that is being promoted in certain sports institutions is the psychological assessment of the coach (communication, interpersonal relationships, etc.), with the objective of assessing the proximity between his/her competencies and the optimal profile of a trainer (developed by the institution itself). This information would serve as a starting point (*feedback*) for the reinforcement of the strong points and the improvement of the weak points detected in each trainer or as a referent for evaluating his/her work.

Another interesting line of work done by the SP is the integration of the “psychological” aspects in the structure and content itself of the training sessions with the aim of strengthening the athlete psychologically. To do this, interdisciplinary work with the coach is necessary to integrate and coordinate aspects such as concentration

work (e.g., perform exercises with rewards and punishments as a function of their execution), management of stressful situations (e.g., perform well in adverse or disadvantageous conditions), etc.

#### 2.4. Work with family

The role of the parents and other significant people (tutors, family members, etc.) is primordial to the development of excellence in baseline sport. It could be said that, “behind a great athlete, there is a great family”. The main objective is for parents to contribute positively to their children’s integral formation and to integrate their actions within the framework of actuaciones of the program established by the sports institution. In general, the SP must undertake the job of Formation, Orientation, and Counseling with parents, regarding the relationship with their children, coaches and management, their behavior in competitions, and their “role” in the academic formation of their children.

Within professional sport, the SP must keep in mind and keep vigilant about the familial situation of the athlete. Aspects such as couple conflicts, children’s academic performance, or the need to change schools, a particular situation of a family member, etc. can negatively affect the athlete.

#### 2.5. Collaboration with the medical area

It is known that certain psychological factors (e.g., stress) can facilitate injuries, delay recovery periods and make return to the sports activity more uncertain (Buceta, 1998). The SP has the valuable task of collaboration with doctors and other health professionals regarding prevention, recovery, and relapse prevention in sports injuries (Olmedilla, 2005).

Another important aspect is the athletes’ diet. Diet is one of the basic aspects in the performance and physical and psychological wellbeing of the athlete. The sport exigency itself, the coach’s style of communication (punitive), the excessive weight control of the athlete, etc., can influence in the development of an eating disorder (Sánchez, Vila, García-Buades and Domínguez, 2005). The SP can collaborate with other professionals (doctors, nutritionists, etc.) in the development of healthy eating habits in the athlete (Olmedilla and Andreu, 2002). The formation, counseling and orientation of the families, the athlete, and coach, the application of techniques such as stimulus

control, the establishment of objectives, etc. are some issues the SP must address in order to create an adequate eating behavior in the athlete (Díaz, 2005).

## 2.6. Collaboration with sport management

The basic objectives are to collaborate in the organizational development and the improvement of the public image of the institution. On the one hand, a practice centered on people is conducted: personal and professional development of the sport management and coordination, human resources management (activities of coexistence and communication, analysis of necessities, etc.), collaboration in the establishment and promotion of values, creation of norms, etc. On the other hand, the aim is to promote the positive image of the institution in society (publicity, media, etc.). In general, this is an important area of work to be conquered by the SP.

## 2.7. Work with referees

The task of the referee is essential in carrying out sports competitions and correct executions in games or key competitions due to the great social and economic impact of some sports. However, this collective of athletes is one of the most forgotten in scientific and professional literature (Guillén, 2003).

From an applied perspective, the SP basically follows two lines of work: training and intervention (Ramírez, Alonso-Arbiol, Falcó and López, 2006). On the other hand, education is an adequate tool for the improvement of performance in sports refereeing, although an overall approach integrating both technical and psychological preparation (concentration techniques, anxiety control, communication, etc.) is necessary. On the other hand, intervention on the specific psychological needs of each referee (stress, re-focalization of attention, management of conflictive situations, etc.) will affect the increase of his/her wellbeing and the improvement of his/her refereeing job.

## 3. REFLECTIONS ABOUT PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN HIGH-PERFORMANCE

The readers can find in the works by Garcés de Los Fayos (2001), Garcés de los Fayos and Vives Benedicto (2005) and García-Naveira and Jerez (2008) a review of the limitations and obstacles that Sport Psychology has in order to become consolidated as an area of Psychology, and its negative repercussion on the psychologists who

work in the sports field. The objective of the following paragraphs is to reflect on current aspects (although these have been present for quite some time), as their attainment would benefit the professional practice of the SP:

- ✓ *Creation of a State Division of Sport Psychology.* No group of professionals who seek to promote their work in a coordinated manner can aspire to be successful if they are not united (Garcés de Los Fayos, Jara and Gómez, 2001). To achieve better organization, management and defense of the rights and interests of Sport Psychology and sport psychologists, the creation of a specific State Division is necessary.
- ✓ *Optimal training.* In order to guarantee that the service provided by the SP is optimal, he/she must have specific and highly qualified training (Martínez, 1995). In this regard: a) the psychologist must be specialized in Sport Psychology (e.g. *Masters*). This program must be taught by psychology professionals of recognized prestige in the applied field, as well as in research and teaching; b) the psychologist must undergo field training supervised by an expert SP; c) the psychologist must increase his/her knowledge of other sports sciences (e.g., physical preparation, technical-tactical training, etc.) and of sport itself (rules of the game, history of sport, etc.).
- ✓ *Creation of a professional accreditation.* There is not yet a system to accredit sport psychologists in Spain. Sport psychologists need to be accredited with the objective of offering a service that is viewed as specialized by the client (athletes, coaches and others implicated in the area) while defending the profession from internal (non specialized psychologists) and external intrusiveness (shamans, mentalists, motivators, *coaches*...).
- ✓ *New knowledge and techniques.* At this time, we are in a period of integration and complementarity of new psychological techniques (Ezquerro, 2008; García-Mas, 1997; García-Naveira, 2009b). On the one hand, there is the incorporation of theoretical and applied knowledge generated by other psychological specialties (e.g., clinical) that have experienced considerable advances in the last few decades, adapting these to the sports context. On the other, there is the integration of knowledge from other disciplines or effective techniques that have been developed or have become very popular in other areas of human knowledge. This could be the case of the psy-

chological technique of coaching. It may possibly be an interesting field of research and development for sport psychologists in the next few years. In addition, it could be included in the subjects of Bachelor, Masters and PhD programs in Psychology.

- ✓ *Ethical-deontological aspects in professional practice.* Sport Psychology requires special attention due to the characteristics of the sports context itself (Ojea and Calo, 2005). Thus, situations that may arise in the context of teaching mental skills in the scope of group work or interventions carried out by sport psychologists in semi-public spaces, such as changing rooms, fields, and even hotels, are atypical if they are compared to those that are more traditional such as individual therapeutic assistance in the closed practice of a clinical psychologist. Furthermore, every ethical approach should systematically fight against many of the problems found in professional sports (e.g., information regarding drug consumption on the part of the athlete).

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