

ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES OF  
SPORT PSYCHOLOGY CONSULTATION:  
EXPLORING A MULTI-SEASON, CROSS GENDER INTERVENTION

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

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SPORT PSYCHOLOGY CONSULTATION:  
EXPLORING A MULTI-SEASON, CROSS GENDER INTERVENTION

presented by Renee Mapes, a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

Applied sport psychology consultations can provide beneficial services to athletes and coaches, particularly regarding performance enhancement. This study examined the experiences of ten wrestlers involved in a long-term sport psychology program through the use of in-depth interviews. Grounded Theory methodology guided the analysis of the data which led to the creation of five main themes: Athlete Characteristics; Intervention Characteristics; Outcomes; Social Processes; and Sport Psychologist. Participants acknowledged their initial resistance to working with a female sport psychologist, based on gender stereotypes and fears of being negatively perceived by other members of the team. Issues around physical attraction and the degree to which a female could be seen as knowledgeable in a male-dominated sport impacted the consultation until services were ended. However, the social hierarchies that at one time prevented athletes from exploring these services eventually helped the team redefine what actions were considered acceptable. Participants developed an understanding of how sport psychology could help them achieve their athletic goals. They emphasized that having a sport psychologist who was at their “disposal” (highly available) and did not require them to censure their behavior or language contributed greatly to the establishment of trust. They also discussed many ways in which they felt that sport psychology had unexpectedly contributed to their lives within and beyond sport; for example, many felt more connected with their teammates after attending team talks. Finally, most participants believed that the most significant outcome of working with a sport psychologist was that of gaining a friend and positive support.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

"You don't look at him as a sport psychologist, you look at him as a friend and that's always been the most important thing to me."

- *Josh Hancock (1978-2007)*

As highlighted by this quote, more and more athletes who wish to improve some aspect of their performance or their experience in sports are turning to sport psychologists as a valuable resource (Haunss, 2005). Examining possible reasons behind how sport psychologists can be a resource is critical to the field's success. For example, sport psychology consultants might be looked upon as a source of support and friendship or as a knowledgeable expert. Both types of roles could be highly beneficial in the world of sports as the pressure to win pushes athletes, coaches, and even spectators to adopt a mentality to "win at all costs" (Bacon, Lerner, Tembley, & Seestedt, 2005, p. 230); this mentality often results in athletes feeling pressured to engage in potentially harmful activities such as drug use or competing when injured.

Sport psychology interventions, however, are a positive tool for athletes to draw on when needed. Interventions implemented by consultants are typically educational

discussions about the mental skills involved in sport (confidence, focus, motivation, etc.) with groups and individuals on a specific team (e.g., Murphy & Ferrante, 1989; Nideffer, 1989; Smith & Johnson, 1990). Interventions can range in length from a single workshop to ongoing presentations that occur over the course of season or longer. Most interventions are highly applied, meaning that they attempt to provide material that directly impacts training and competitive situations; typically, these interventions are crafted around the needs of the team or the interests of the coach.

With increased exposure to the applied world of athletics, the need to evaluate the work of sport psychology consultants has also increased (Botterill, 1990; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1992; Neff, 1990). By more fully understanding the impact sport psychologists make when working with a team or individual, professionals within the field are able to validate the usefulness of the skills they teach and increase their effectiveness for future consultation work. Proper evaluation also provides evidence of the field's dedication to providing the most beneficial and effective support possible, furthering the professionalism of the role.

Some of the information about successful sport psychology interventions comes from the perspectives of consultants working in the field who wrote about their work as a way of informing other consultants about the type of programs they implemented (e.g., Gardner, 2001; Gordin & Henschen, 1989; Salmela, 1989). These researchers and consultants emphasized the characteristics deemed critical to their success in the field. For example, many consultants noted that learning the culture of sport was a key factor in their ability to work with and be beneficial to a team (Gardner, 2001; Halliwell, 1990). Consultants also observed that strong communication skills and a willingness to learn

from their clients enabled them to work more effectively with coaching staff and athletes (Botterill, 1990; Orlick, 1989; Salmela, 1989). Being able to provide concrete feedback with little to no preparation time was another critical ability according to others (Gardner, 2001; May & Brown 1989; Orlick, 1989). Consultants felt that these and other qualities were viewed as important by the recipients of their services and, hence, responsible for the consultations being successful.

Applied sport psychology investigations have also examined the perspectives of athletes receiving services. Many of these studies use quantitative measures to rate the effectiveness of the consultant and the importance of learning psychological skills. They distinguish how various athlete populations might rate services or consultants differently (e.g.: Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May; 1991; Khelifa; 1997; Martin, 2005; Orlick, 1989). Measurements of consultant effectiveness are the most typical types of investigations. For example, Partington and Orlick (1987) created the Sport Psychology Consultation Evaluation form to create a model of effective consultations. Brewer and Shillinglaw (1992) found that college lacrosse players showed significant pre-to-post test changes in their knowledge and use of mental skills following a brief mental training workshop. Gould et al. (1991) reported that a large sample of Olympic athletes labeled their respective consultants as effective, and 79% wanted to retain their consultant for future work.

Applied research has also examined the differences within athlete groups as to how they do or don't value or accept of sport psychology. For instance, non-starting athletes, younger athletes without previous exposure to sport psychology, male athletes, and athletes competing in contact sports typically rated sport psychology as less

important than other athletes (Khelifa, 1997; Martin, 2005; Myers, Peyton, & Jensen, 2004). On the other hand, athletes in starting positions, athletes competing in individual sports, older athletes, and female athletes are generally more receptive to sport psychology (Khelifa, 1997; Martin, 2005). These differences highlight the issue of within group differences in working with athlete populations and should be a point of reference in reviewing any research in applied settings.

Another line of research may provide some answers to this question. The idea that athletes experience degradation, teasing, or harrassment for consulting with a sport psychology professional, also known as the negative halo effect, is important to understand. The negative halo is a factor that influences both the likelihood that athletes will confer with an individual outside of the coaching staff and the manner in which they rate sport psychology professionals (Linder, Pillow, & Reno, 1989). Initial findings regarding the concept of the negative halo have yielded mixed results, however. Some groups rate fictional athletes lower for consulting with a sport psychology professional while actual athletes rate working with a sport psychology consultant as acceptable, but working with a therapist is not acceptable (Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte, & De Lange, 1991; Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1992). In the 15+ years that have passed since these studies were conducted, societal opinions have no doubt changed because of additional exposure to the concept of sport psychology services. However, the manner in which society holds groups (i.e., men in combat sports) to certain expectations and in turn how such groups interpret these messages may impact how open these individuals are to sport psychology.

Examinations of applied consultations are difficult to implement, and answers to research questions are elusive. While quantitative measures are assumed to have increased generalizability and scientific rigor, it is challenging to validate the claim that measures “[provide] an accurate reading of how athlete perceive [sport psychologists] as people and as consultants” (Partington and Orlick, 1987, p. 315). Some researchers (Brewer & Shillinglaw, 1992; Martens, 1987; & Statler, 2001) have promoted using different investigative methods, such as in-depth interviews and qualitative studies, as more suitable approaches to ascertain how athletes perceive sport psychologists. Krane and Baird (2005) stated that “putting sport psychologists in the thick of the data and truly hearing the voices of the athletes and coaches with whom we work will deepen our understanding of their experiences” (p. 104). They argued for increased variability in research methodology. Indeed, while the field has a solid understanding of which groups of athletes are accepting of sport psychology, it does not know *why* these differences exist.

Thus far, however, only a few qualitative investigations have assessed applied sport psychology services. Orlick and Partington (1987) utilized qualitative methods to engage athletes in a discussion about what made a consultant effective or the experience beneficial. Greenleaf, Gould, and Deffenback (2001) found that positive factors influencing Olympic performance were associated with the use of mental skills like maintaining high confidence levels, creating plans for effectively coping with distractions, and goal setting. Statler (2001) explored the sport psychology interventions from the perspective of the consultants, attempting to define what sport psychologists

actually do, what they believe is effective, what characteristics they saw as preferable, and guidelines that they would recommend for other consultants.

Currently, however, there are no qualitative investigations that openly explore these questions from the perspective of athletes. In fact, many studies have struggled to move beyond studying the dichotomy of measuring effective or ineffective consultations. This is an important bias to be aware of because it could be argued that in order for consultants to be effective they need to be seen as a valuable part of the team (not an outsider) or as friends (highly trusted with multiple layers of personal information) before they can be considered credible sources of information. At this time it is difficult to say what athletes consider most important qualities in a consultant, if there are prerequisites to effectiveness, and how the culture of the team influences the experience of a sport psychology consultant.

Another area of interest in the evaluation of applied consultation is exploring the potential impact of gender of the consultant on the sport psychology intervention. Noting that almost all of the knowledge that has been gathered to date has been written by male researchers and consultants (Gardner, 2001; Halliwell, 1989; Neff, 1990; Orlick & Partington, 1989) raises several questions. First, would female consultants as the investigators approach this research in a way that is different from that of their male counterparts? Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, what is the impact of gender on sport psychology consultation relationships?

More inclusive research emphasizes the need to represent all groups and critically review the questions that are being asked (Whaley, 2001). Leahy (2001) furthers this view by also emphasizing the need to reevaluate current knowledge through the

experiences of women – perspectives that have largely been ignored or minimized within the realm of sport and sport psychology. Some authors point out that women have to overcome many additional barriers to working in applied positions such as difficulty fitting in the traditionally masculine sports world and staying true to one's gender without being seen as inferior (Greenleaf & Collins, 2001; Roper, 2002). However, it is unclear whether being a female consultant is entirely negative. For example, Yambor and Connelly (1991) have found that while some male athletes viewed female consultants as less credible, others felt that women could be more nurturing and accepting of displays of strong emotions (i.e., it would be ok to cry in front of a woman but not another man). With the increasing numbers of women becoming involved in applied consultation, understanding how gender impacts applied sport psychology consultations is becoming more important.

So how does the field attempt to sort out the issues raised by Major League pitcher Josh Hancock's quote – what qualities of consultants are critically important and how do athletes experience these characteristics? While past research has done much to advance the field, gaps in our knowledge base still exist. The voices of the athletes themselves have often been overlooked in an effort to demonstrate quantifiable effectiveness, and the impact of gender in consultation interactions has been fundamentally ignored.

Qualitative investigations, while laborious are an appropriate way to develop knowledge about work in applied settings. These types of methodologies can assess the impact that a sport psychology intervention (and the actual consultant) has on individual athletes receiving services. For example, in trying to assess how sport psychology can

truly benefit athletics, it is important to include information about the context of the intervention such as the culture of the sport and team, and this is a strength of qualitative methodology.

The purpose of this study is to investigate one specific sport psychology intervention, focused on the experiences of an all male team working with a female sport psychology consultant. Several questions arise when attempting to explore this issue. Specifically, how did the athletes experience the role of the consultant, the messages being delivered, and the importance of the relationship they were able to build? What were their initial impressions and how did these develop over time? What are their beliefs about sport psychology's ability to help them achieve individual and team goals or develop strengths? Finally, what were the experiences of the athletes in regard to the gender differences between themselves and myself as the sport psychologist? These questions and others, along with a detailed description of the proposed methodology are discussed in the following methods section.



## CHAPTER 2: METHODS

As discussed in the introduction of the literature, there are a variety of reasons for examining consultations in applied sport psychology settings. In many ways quantitative methodologies were stereotypically considered to be more rigorous in past sport psychology and counseling research. However, this viewpoint does not seem to be congruent with the emphasis on understanding the experience of the individual – which includes awareness of multicultural identities and sociocultural influences – that are stressed in the field of counseling psychology and are repeatedly called for by practitioners and researchers alike from the sport psychology field.

While it is understood that certain methodological approaches are effective in ascertaining answers to specific research questions, thus far, much of the research reviewing sport psychology consultations has focused on only one question: measuring perceived effectiveness of the consultant or the intervention. Very little research attempts to study the nuanced factors that contribute to ratings of effectiveness or look for other concepts of interest within applied consultations. For example, while gender is an undeniably powerful social dynamic in the creation of working relationships between

teams and the consultants who work with them, the literature addressing gender in sport psychology interventions is almost non-existent.

Patton (2002) outlines two critical implications of the qualitative method that strongly impacted the design of this study. First, that it is imperative to know how people interpret the world and what they experience; this statement was a significant point of motivation for conducting the investigation. Second, a phenomenon is best understood if it experienced as completely and directly as possible. This position helped me to determine how the study would be implemented and affected my decision to fulfill several roles within the investigation, as discussed below.

This chapter begins with an overview of grounded theory, focusing on how a constructivist paradigm was applied to the research. It then provides information on the researcher as instrument including (a) a background of my experience and personal interest in the research question, (b) my perspective as both an insider and outsider to the cultural dynamics acting on the participants and research questions, and (c) the use of self-reflective journaling. Next, information about the participants that contributed to the study, their recruitment, and final selection is discussed. Data sources will be discussed next, focusing on how the interviews were planned and implemented and how field notes were created and utilized. After that, an overview of the data management and ethical considerations are discussed. Finally, a review of the data analysis methods is presented, including how the use of a research team, grounded theory, and a research log helped me analyze and interpret the data.

### *Grounded Theory Methodology*

This study utilized grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to organize the overall methodological approach. The definition of grounded theory has shifted over time, particularly in regards to exact procedural requirements (Fassinger, 2005). However, Glaser and Strauss's earlier goal of "developing theories from research grounded in data rather than *deducing* testable hypotheses from existing theories" has generally remained the same regardless of context or purpose of the research (Charmaz, 2002, p. 4). In addition, although a positivist or post-positivist leaning was common in early conceptualizations of Grounded Theory, more recent researchers associate the approach with constructivist paradigms (Ponterotto, 2005).

According to the earliest writings on Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), there is a great deal of flexibility in the approach. At its core, Grounded Theory is an inductive methodological approach. For this project, Grounded Theory was a set of previously developed procedures, such as line-by-line coding and memo writing, applied to a set of in depth interviews. Grounded theory, as described by Charmaz (2006), provided a methodological structure flexible enough to gather data directly from one source of interest, the athletes working with me as their sport psychology consultant, and yet still offered a firm structure of theoretical guidelines and expectations in which to induce meaning from the lived experience of the participants.

This research was anchored within a constructivist epistemology. The constructivist approach to theory formation is not focused on creating universal statements to explain linear relationships between abstract concepts, but rather understanding the significance of multiple realities – both how people create them and

what they assume is real (Charmaz, 2006). This stance was considered appropriate for the type of data that were gathered and the nature of the results that were desired. Moreover, Charmaz (2006) points out that the constructivist theoretical approach is concerned with “learning how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and often hidden positions, networks, situations, and relationships” (p. 130). With the emphasis on understanding gender dynamics between a female consultant and an all male sports team, creating an understanding of interpersonal relationships was of particular importance. Given the study’s emphasis on seeking perspectives of participants with different experiences of the program in order to understand complex sport psychology relationships, searching for a universal “truth” was not relevant.

Thus, the purpose of this research was to illustrate and describe the experiences of athletes who developed a relationship with me as a sport psychology consultant working with their team. As will be addressed more fully below, questions from the interview like “tell me about your experience of having me work with your team” were meant to discover the individual differences and shared experiences that existed within the same team. More will be said about the construction of knowledge below. However, care will be taken to fully describe the environment of the athletic world, the specific sport of wrestling and this particular team so that the information garnered from the athletes of the team (creating the consensus of the informed) can be understood. Patton (2002) writes that truth is as a matter of consensus among the informed; he notes that the context in which the phenomena occur is the only framework that should be used to understand what has been described.

### *The Researcher*

In qualitative research, the researcher is the tool and filter through which all information is viewed. As it would be impractical to simply report every statement made by research participants, scientifically sound qualitative research needs to include strategies to safeguard against an inaccurate reporting of the stories of the participants. Given the subjective nature of the data and the data analysis procedures, activities such as in depth disclosure about the researcher interests and background on the topic of study, examination of the my ability to understand myself both inside and outside of the culture under investigation, and the inclusion of reflexive journaling are all approaches I used to enhance the credibility of this investigation.

#### *Researcher Background*

I view myself as a culturally complex individual and believe that this impacts my role as the lead researcher, the interviewer, and the sport psychology consultant. I identify as a white, European-American, heterosexual woman. Additionally significant to me is my educational status as a Ph.D. candidate, my identification in being from a working class family, and being raised in a rural/agricultural region in the Midwest (Michigan, specifically). Importantly, I was raised by a single father and as such was exposed to a more masculinized way of thinking about and moving through the world than many of my female peers. I am aware of the ways in which some of my identities offer me privilege within this society (for example, my tendency to forget to account for my status as an able-bodied individual) and some of the ways in which I do not hold power or privilege.

The intersection of some of these identities was behind the motivation and personal interest in conducting this study. As a Ph.D. student in a counseling and sport psychology program, I decided to pursue working with the wrestling team at Missouri because I felt that such an experience would most closely replicate and develop skills useful in working with bull riders and/or rodeo athletes as a future professional (this was highly congruent with my rural heritage). In many ways, I felt at ease with the athletes on the wrestling team as I had spent three years training almost daily in another combat sport, Muay Thai kickboxing as part of a gym which competed in regional and sometimes national fighting tournaments, and was personally interested in physical fitness.

My view of myself and my role within this team changed dramatically over time. Initially, I was excited to begin my first “real” work in the applied sport psychology field and even more excited as athletes began to show increasing comfort with my presence. However, as the boundaries in our relationship changed, I also began to experience decidedly less pleasant interactions when athletes would say something inappropriate to me – generally in regards to sexual or physical attraction. With increasing awareness of how personal identities impact social interactions (much of which resulted from consciousness-raising activities common within counseling psychology training), I became more sensitive to the ways in which I felt the consultant-athlete relationship was uncomfortable for me.

Sport psychology as a field seemed to also lack awareness of cultural factors such as gender. I was surprised to learn that very little literature in my professional field addressed the type of experiences that I felt and had in working with an all-male team. Most writings attributed “barriers” in working with athletic teams to being in the role of

sport psychologist. None of the existing research talked about what other potential barriers might be or how to cope with them.

My sense that awareness of diverse identities was a blind spot within the field was highlighted by a critical incident that occurred during a presentation at a national sport psychology conference. During a presentation on how to be an effective sport psychology consultant, a male consultant emphasized the need to travel and lodge with teams using any means possible to show that one is invested in the team – sleeping on the floor of the coaches’ or athletes’ rooms if necessary. I was struck by the fact that he had not considered the implications and perhaps the impossibility of this statement for a growing number of consultants in the room – women working with all male teams. I began to wonder how much of the knowledge that existed about how to be a “good” sport psychology consultant was developed with little to no awareness of this and other cultural identities.

### *Insider, Outsider*

The world of athletics is one that is renowned for differentiating between those who are considered inside and outside the group. My status as a non-athlete, sport psychologist, and woman all separated me from the athletes with whom I worked. When I began working with the team, I was only a year or two older than the most senior members of the team. During the initial two years I was with the team, my role was limited to speaking to the team only a few times a season and was regulated by the interest and needs of the head coach. I spent most of my time observing the team during practice and would occasionally have casual conversations with the athletes who were becoming more accustomed to seeing me in the gym. Over four years and five seasons, I

increased the degree to which I contributed to and participated in the activities of the team.

During the third season with the team I increased the accessibility of the sport psychology program. I began to offer weekly talks, called sport psychology seminars, to a large sub-section of the team who wished to stay after practice. I was also talking with individuals who were interested obtaining extra help on an individual basis. By the fourth season I was with the team, I added group yoga sessions to the activities that were held after practice multiple times a week. Due to my role within the team, I also spent time with athletes in informal settings (down time before practice, while traveling, team barbeques, etc.) and have taught an academic class that four team members were students. Hence, as my relationship with the team matured, clearly defined boundaries between myself and the athletes adjusted simultaneously.

Significant changes occurred in my role during the final and fifth season that I worked with the team. First, I acquired a position within the athletic department that allowed me to work sport psychology performance enhancement services with any interested athlete, coach or team. Second, perceptions of the sport psychology activities shifted dramatically with the addition of new coaching staff. The combination of having less time available to work with the team and new opinions among the team leadership made it impossible to retain my honorary membership in the “boys club.”

Although I felt that I was kicked out of the “club,” I had gained a great deal of information about the culture of this team. I bore witness to hundreds of hours of grueling practice and felt beset with empathy when injury or a lack of competitive success made achieving one’s goals impossible. I can still remember the thrill and joy I experienced



watching athletes achieve goals they had only ever dreamed. During one NCAA finals week, I blissfully existed on approximately four hours of sleep each night and one meal each day. The excitement of the team's success made eating and sleeping feel like only a minor necessity.

Being both an insider and outsider to this team made conducting the proposed research project simultaneously more valuable and more questionable. There are calls for additional work in applied sport psychology for those who actively provide services to serve as a bridge between academic and applied areas of the field (Greenleaf & Collins, 2001; Smith, 1989; Whaley, 2001). This bridge provides a potential opportunity to answer the questions deemed critically important to those who receive services and for the future of the field as a whole. As proposed by Krane and Baird (2005), researchers should avoid attempting to take themselves out of the data - as it is practically impossible to do so – but instead carefully incorporate their perspective of a shared experience.

Thus, it was with my knowledge of this team and awareness of the holes that existed within the sport psychology literature that I decided to occupy multiple roles in the investigation. Interestingly, it is both common and encouraged for practitioners to occupy both of these roles as I did (Gipson, McKenzie, & Lowe, 1989; Greenleaf, Gould, & Deffenbach, 2001; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Partington & Orlick, 1991) although there are, understandably, some notable warnings and reasons for not doing so (see study limitations in the discussion chapter).

I decided to do the data collection and interviews myself for several important reasons. First, as a practitioner, I felt that I had valuable insights into the experiences of the athletes with whom I worked; more to the point, I believed that the current literature

base needed to have additional information about applied sport psychology work from the perspective of the athletes using open-ended interview questions. I also understood that due to the insider-outsider mentality that exists within sports teams, it would be difficult for a person unfamiliar with the team to effectively interview athletes for the study. I believed that my high degree of pre-established rapport, my knowledge of the sport, and my shared experiences with the athletes, and the athletes' preference to share only once they were comfortable with someone, were all reasons supporting my decision to interview the athletes myself.

Finally, as a researcher trained in the counseling psychology field, I thought that the applied sport psychology field had significant blind spots regarding multicultural awareness that needed to be addressed. Loosely defined, this means having a working awareness and knowledge of how the groups and communities that an individual belongs to impacts their values, behaviors, relational styles, and world views. Multicultural identities can be broadly defined, from race and ethnicity, to degree of physical ability, to the extent and type of education one has. Failure to attend to these issues means that consultants are less prepared to understand the individual athletes they work with, which likely impacts the ability of consultants to form relationships and work effectively with teams. It seemed clear to me that having experiences in both research and applied settings helped me to understand and competently navigate the complexity of the situation being investigated much more effectively than someone outside of any of these roles.

### *Research Journaling*

I wrote about my experiences in conducting this project in two research journals. Due to the degree in which I was involved in multiple layers of the study, I used both a

research log and self-reflective journal to record my decision making processes, personal reactions and biases, and timeline of the investigation.

Due to the creative nature of the qualitative research process, the research log was an invaluable tool. I kept a large legal pad with me at almost all times during the data analysis and reporting stages of the project; handwritten information was then transcribed into an electronic file on my personal computer. I incorporated my notes from meetings with my research team (to be discussed below) with reactions that I had in my own coding to create labels and definitions of the themes that emerged from the data. Notes recorded in this journal were often important questions or clarifications that I needed to revisit with my research team during the coding process. Finally, I used my research journal to develop outlines for the memos that I eventually wrote, and this allowed me to keep track of fleeting thoughts that would inevitably occur when I was far from a computer.

I also chronicled the feelings of struggle, uncertainty and excitement that were experienced in working on this project in a self-reflective journal. I found it to be incredibly helpful during this research journey to disentangle concepts that impacted me on a highly personal level from points that were critical to a more scholarly understanding of the research phenomena. These writings, often in combination with discussions that I had with mentors, also helped me to understand how situations that prompted feelings of powerlessness and hurt also provided important information about the culture of this team. Providing myself with a tangible place in which to leave biases and frustrations helped me to better focus on the experiences of the athletes which enhanced the analysis and writing of this study.

### *The Research Participants*

All participants were college-aged males between their second and sixth years with the wrestling team at the University of Missouri-Columbia (MU). This is a large Midwestern Division I university with an athletic department that is considered to be competitive in most sports at the conference level and at the national level. Interviews conducted with ten individual male participants were the main source of data for this study. Eight of these athletes were white, two were African American. The participants came from working class, middle class, and upper class families and from a mix of suburban and rural backgrounds. Their ages ranged from 24 to 20; one athlete had graduated, two were in their fifth year as students, three were in their fourth year, two were in their third year, and two were in their second year.

There were also several important characteristics of the participant group specific to their identity as athletes. Only one athlete was on the team prior to my introduction to the team. All of the other participants joined the team after my experience with the team had started. Five of the participants were starters on the team with moderately successful to highly successful athletic records. The other five were not starters and generally had less successful to moderately successful win-loss records. Finally, I selected wrestlers who were representative of the mix of interest levels in sport psychology that I experienced within the team as a whole; four participants were highly involved, four were moderately involved, and two were minimally involved in the sport psychology program.

Since the time that I started working with this team, the MU wrestling program experienced a steady increase in competitive status at both the conference and national level. Their rankings went from consistently finishing out of the top ten at the national

finals to finishing in third place at the national NCAA tournament. Several outstanding individual athletes were at the center of much of this success, but the program as a whole was developing greater competitiveness, and expectations for achievement were steadily rising during the time that I joined the team.

Although it was originally my intention to collect observational data of the entire team, this was not possible once my data collection period started. Due to the changing attitudes of the coaching staff (and the fact that new coaches were with the team during the team during the potential data collection time period) I deemed it to be professionally appropriate to end my work with the team as a whole. Individual athletes still sought me out according to their needs, but I no longer attended practices or offered group activities. As such, only one observation of the entire team was recorded.

#### *Recruiting & Initial Sampling*

The sample for this study was selected for several specific reasons. In order to gather information that creates a greater understanding of how athletes experience having a sport psychology consultant, data was collected from individuals who directly experienced the phenomena of interest (Patton, 2002). Therefore, it was deemed critical that this exploration of a sport psychology intervention came from the perspective of the athletes who were currently receiving services.

The participant selection process followed several predetermined steps. First, an announcement was made to the team regarding the research project and informed consent prior to the start of a practice; athletes were asked to read over the informed consent page and sign it if they were willing to be included in the collection of observational data (i.e., the field notes that I intended on collecting). It was decided ahead of time that the most

information-rich cases would be those athletes who were with the team (and therefore the consultant) for at least one season at the time of data collection. Therefore, freshmen and transfers for that school year were not asked to participate in the interview portion of the study. From the signed consent forms, I then made a list of the 26 individuals who checked that they were interested in participating in the interviews in addition to the group observations.

The sample of interview participants for the study was chosen using stratified purposeful sampling. It was decided that this would be the most effective method to select insightful participants to provide rich and perspicacious data (Patton, 2006). After reflecting on the range of data that different members of the team could provide, several criteria were created to select the research participants from the larger volunteer pool. Selection criteria were based on the desire to both gather data that was representative of the team as a whole and also emphasize a range of cultural identities; selection criteria were arranged along a hierarchy of importance according to the degree to which I believed they would contribute important information about the sport psychology experience.

Criteria of high importance included program involvement, academic class standing, and racial identity. I consulted attendance records for the seminars that I had kept from several years of working with the team and my recollection of who had sought me out individually for help or discussion to determine their degree of involvement. Initially, I attempted to interview equal numbers of athletes who were highly involved (attended most group activities and worked with me individually), moderately involved (attended many group activities), and not involved (rarely used any aspect of the sport

psychology program) with me and the sport psychology program to solicit a range of information dependent on how familiar athletes were with the program. As academic year determined the length of time the athlete was on the team and often this influences what type of role the athlete occupies within the team (i.e.: younger athletes are less likely to be team leaders), it was important to have at least two participants from each academic class, sophomore through fifth year senior to provide a range of viewpoints that were dependent on time factors. In a sport dominated by white athletes and because of the fact that I am a white consultant, it was also of high importance to include in the interviews at least one athlete who identified as a racial minority.

Other selection criteria were important and were to be met after the criteria above were attained. Although most of the athletes come from middle class backgrounds, I attempted to pick participants that represented lower, middle, and upper class social-economic status groups. This determination was based on my knowledge of the athletes' families, their parent's occupations, and information athletes had shared with me over the years. I made final selections on the basis of filling any remaining spots in the participant group with starting or non-starting individuals, depending on which group was less represented.

From the pool of potential interviewees, I selected twelve individuals for actual involvement in the interviews. I also created a list of alternates to contact if the originally selected interviewees were unable to participate or wanted to withdraw from the study. It was estimated that it would be necessary to interview 10-12 participants, until the point of data saturation or redundancy was reached which is defined as a point in the data

analysis when no new insights or properties about the categories are reached with the inclusion of new data (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2002).

### *Theoretical Sampling*

Due to projected time constraints of the project, I had not initially planned on utilizing the grounded theory procedure of theoretical sampling. Charmaz (2002) defines theoretical sampling as a strategy researchers can use to select additional participants with the intention of refining and more thoroughly defining theoretical categories that are thin and underdeveloped. My use of theoretical sampling did not follow the strict guidelines delineated by Charmaz (2002) but was instead considered to be an example of “modified grounded theory” as described by Fassinger (2004, p. 70).

After several participant volunteers decided to withdraw from the study, I went back to the initial volunteer pool to select at least three additional participants to be part of the interview process. My knowledge from the initial coding showed that previous interviewees had struggled to name or denied that there were limitations of the program. Therefore, I utilized theoretical sampling to choose the three new interviewees who would be most likely to give me information about their perceptions of limitations of the sport psychology program or provide data that highlighted reasons why they did not seek my support more frequently. The three new interviewees were all individuals with whom I had a positive personal relationship but had rarely, in one case never, talked with me about mental skills training.



## *Data Sources and Management*

### *In-depth Interviews and Procedure*

In-depth interviews were the main source of data for this investigation. I originally intended to conduct a short pre-interview meeting to discuss the nature and purpose of the project as recommended by Moustakas (1994); however, limitations of the participants' schedules prohibited face to face meetings. Nevertheless, I was able to follow Moustakas's (1994) suggestion and use a pre-interview email to prime the participants to think reflectively about critical incidents and their general experience. In instances where the participant had not seen the email, they indicated that simply scheduling the interview time had caused them to begin thinking about working with me.

Interviews were conducted in my office in the athletic training center, a space familiar to all of the participants. At the start of the interview, I reviewed confidentiality and other ethical considerations that were part of the informed consent that was signed previously. Participants were encouraged to provide the most honest answers possible in the spirit of helping me to fully understand all aspects of their experience. This was emphasized due to the issue of my multiple roles within the project; I did not want participants to forego sharing potentially critical feedback because they were afraid that I would react negatively or be hurt. Interviews ranged in length from 48 minutes to 120 minutes; however, most were 60-75 minutes long

Due to the nature of our pre-existing relationship, rapport building was not a concern during the interview process. All of the interviews proceeded in a manner that suggested both parties were relaxed and comfortable. In many cases, the participant and I shared an extra office chair as a foot rest and spent a little time at the beginning of the

interview talking about what was “going on” since the last time we had seen one another. Indeed, many of the interviews also contained moments of laughter, joking and informality that was representative of our interactional style outside of the investigation. In some situations, I was forced to make changes in the interview process for the benefit of the interviewee; for example, two participants needed to break in the middle of the interviews to get dinner from the cafeteria before it closed as they had met me coming directly from practice.

Once I began the audio recording, I asked the questions contained in the semi-structured interview; a copy of the interview questions is included as appendix B. For example, the questions “how did the experience affect you?” and “what changes do you associate with having me work with the team?” helped the athletes more fully describe the type of impact my presence made. I used the questionnaire to make notes about responses that I wanted to return to and kept track of which questions were answered as the flow of our conversation often caused the athlete to speak about topical areas before I asked about them.

To ensure quality interviewing procedures I conducted a practice interview with one participant. This individual’s answers were included in the interview data because he provided a significant and unique perspective; failure to include this information would have negatively impacted the study. However, I also used this first interview to provide me with an opportunity to review the interview questions for any confusing wording or misleading stimuli. I continued to revise the interview protocol until the interviewing was completed. This revision process allowed me to engage in theoretical sampling at the data collection level, another common use of this grounded theory strategy (Charmaz, 2002)

as I shifted the focus of some of my questions to gather additional information about areas that were not thoroughly explored by previous interviewees.

To bolster the project's ability to gather rich and theoretically focused data, I had originally hoped to conduct follow up interviews with participants. Formal follow up interviews became, however, impractical and were not seen as a necessity. With a research question as broad as was investigated in this study, there were many topics of potential interest to be investigated. Nonetheless, many significant points were discussed and these will be reviewed in the upcoming results chapter.

#### *Field Notes*

I anticipated writing extensive field notes on practices where I was able to come early and leave late (due to NCAA rules, I can only interact with athletes before and after practice) until the end of the last season I worked with the team. However, as was discussed earlier in this chapter, my work with this team changed significantly between the time of the project proposal and data collection. As such, I recorded only one field observation as official data for this study. This field note was presented to my research team as I had originally intended -- to supplement their knowledge of the investigation environment and as a strategy to promote my own examination of outsider/insider perspective. As it became clear that I was not going to use field notes for this purpose, the self-reflective journal became my outlet for examining observational data from interviews and/or personal interactions.

#### *Personal Knowledge*

Without the use of observational field notes, it was necessary to supplement with other sources of data. To this end, I drew upon my extensive personal knowledge of the

team and team culture to provide insight and facts that supported data gathered in the interviews. The effect of my shared personal history with the team was twofold. First, during the data collection process I frequently used historical references to prompt the interviewee's recollection of specific events so that they could then describe their resulting personal experiences or reactions. Secondly, my knowledge helped to provide a historical timeline around which the shared experiences of the participants were organized. This was particularly beneficial in linking the athletes' experiences of social processes such as team leadership and how influencing each other changed with the introduction of different sport psychology activities.

### *Data Management*

#### *Recording and Transcription*

The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recording device and saved as a password protected audio file on the researcher's personal computer. Audio discs of each interview were created for transcription purposes, and the discs were saved in a locked file cabinet in case the computer files were lost or damaged. Paper copies of the transcribed interviews were provided to the individuals on the research team for coding purposes. Team members were Counseling Psychology students familiar with the issue of confidentiality and were instructed to keep their research binders on their person or in a secure location at all times. At the end of my work with the research team, I collected their research binders for archival purposes and will destroy old physical data at the end of the project.

For both financial and research purposes, I transcribed all of the interviews. Express Scribe transcription software was used to aid in the transcription process.

Although time consuming, completing the transcription myself helped me to become more familiar and immersed within the data. In addition, due to the public nature of lives of many participants, I felt that it would be difficult to trust another transcriptionist with this duty and still feel that confidentiality could be maintained.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Permission to conduct this research was granted by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Missouri, and a letter of authorization was obtained from the head coach. In accordance with IRB standards, informed consent was acquired from all athletes on the team. The risks and benefits associated with participating in the study in the team observations and the interviews were clearly outlined. Because direct quotes were used, details that identified a specific individual were changed; for example, details about a particular time or event were altered and identifying information such as weight class or academic year was not included. Moreover, participants were informed that their team (but not individuals) would be identified.

Due to the overlap in research and consultant roles, I explained that athletes were not expected to volunteer their participation to maintain a working relationship with me. Several athletes declined to be interviewed but continued to interact with me informally or in seeking out sport psychology services. Participants were also informed that I analyzed the data with the help of a small research team consisting of two other graduate students.

### *Data Analysis*

Following the transcription of audio data into written format, participant interviews were uploaded into the qualitative research software NVivo 8. This research

program provided a structured method of storing, organizing, and editing information from the data analysis. For instance, NVivo provides tools for coding and sort codes, linking memos with participant interviews, and creating graphic representations of the emerging themes. In many ways, NVivo made the management of hundreds of pages of data much more streamlined and efficient and likely contributed to the thoroughness of the resulting analyses.

### *The Research Team*

A research team was formed to assist in the data analysis process which occurred from the start of the winter semester of one academic year and ended at the conclusion of the summer semester of that same year. This team consisted of three graduate students from the counseling program at the University of Missouri. One of them was able to meet for the duration of the analysis process, and two others split the coverage of the data analysis between the first and second semesters. Due to the importance of rigorous data analysis in qualitative inquiry, members were carefully selected to ensure responsibility and investment in the project. In one case, research credit was given for the time spent on the team. During the first semester of the analysis process, incentives for participation were meals served during our team meetings and the provision of knowledge on conducting qualitative research. When I received a research grant at the start of the summer semester, I offered my research team financial compensation.

Procedural details regarding the research team experience were designed to contribute to the neutrality and sensitivity in which the data was examined. To start, I trained the research team in the process of coding and provided them with a general background in the grounded theory approach. This training emphasized attending to the

language of the participant and language used to code; focusing on strategies that helped identify significant social processes; and engaging in the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, I provided an explanation of the current literature, my rationale for conducting the study, and encouraged them throughout the analysis process to ask questions about athlete references or aspects of the sport that seemed unclear. Many times, these questions were important points for personal reflection in my research journal.

The research team was responsible for reading interviews transcribed verbatim and coding for important actions, feelings, language and experiences. The two team members alternated weeks in which they were required to fulfill two different expectations. During their “off week” the team member was required only to read the section of interview that would be coded during our meeting. During an “on week” the team member was expected to have coded a section of interview data independently prior to our meeting.

At the start of each meeting I asked for general feedback, questions or thoughts about the data we were working with for that day. I then asked the team member who was “on” to share in leading the discussion for the duration of our meeting. The team member leading the discussion would propose conceptual names or labels and provide rationale for how and why they coded information in a particular manner. This aided greatly in the construction of creative and thoughtful data codes. The “off” team member was expected to contribute their opinion on the accuracy of the coding. If there were disagreements about the integrity of a particular code, we continued our discussion until an agreement was reached. I also asked the research team to verify that the diagrams of the theme

families and definitions of the individual themes were representative of their knowledge of the concept. We engaged in lively debate around concept definitions, and this was highly beneficial in helping me further refine project data.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

The data analysis most closely followed the guidelines established by grounded theory as explained specifically by Charmaz (2006). This included everything from coding procedures, the use of memo writing and theoretical sampling, to final report writing and theory creation, except where practical limitations made it impossible or unnecessary to do so.

Coding procedures were carefully followed as this was a foundational step in the analysis. Line by line coding was used initially to highlight action, language, assumptions of the data. Although time consuming, I wanted to take steps to avoid the possibility that my extensive personal history of the sport psychology program would cause me to overlook critical meanings or experiences. Line by line coding forced an intentionally slower pace and was used throughout the entirety of the first two interviews and into the first half of a third interview to establish an initial set of codes and concepts to work from. Line by line coding was stopped once these initial concepts were in place, although it was used informally when the interview data presented a particularly complex or relatively unknown issue.

The next step in the data analysis was focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). Significant or frequently used codes from the first round of coding were distilled into more conceptual and abstract terms to explain or represent larger amounts of data at one time. Again, codes were compared to original data to assess for appropriateness of fit as



part of the constant comparative method. When necessary, the original data were re-assessed to sharpen the accuracy of larger code groups and/or labels.

Main theoretical categories were then developed from within and across interviews. The research team as a whole made decisions as to which categories were selected for development and how relationships between themes created larger theme families. This process was ambiguous and required deviation from more comfortable patterns of linear thinking. During this time I was also engaged in the process of memo writing, reflexive journaling, and transcribing the next interview. As such, it was important for me to engage in detailed note taking to track where my ideas were coming from and continue to engage in the constant comparative method in a scientifically sound manner.

Memos were one way of pausing within the analytic process to record associations and questions and from the data while outlining future directions to pursue (Charmaz, 2006). Early memos were used to record what the research team saw happening in the data and helped delineate important processes to be examined in more depth. Advanced memo writing augmented the process of comparison between specific categories by providing a place to expound plausible links relating categories, theories, or processes within a larger social context. In the more developed stages of the data analysis, memos were used to provide conceptual categories with specific definitions, detail specific properties, supply descriptions of the conditions under which a category exists, and how note how it relates to other categories.

As new understandings and questions were raised during the data analysis, theoretical sampling was utilized as a process to help ensure that emerging categories

were fully explicated and robust (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sampling involved seeking data relevant to the refinement of categories, particularly if categories were considered significant but underdeveloped or thin. Theoretical sampling in this study involved selecting additional participants on the basis of collecting additional information about a particular theme and also involved revisiting previously analyzed data for additional information. Theoretical sampling also occurred in the process of coding and general data analysis. It was particularly useful to revisit interviews analyzed earliest in the study to strengthen concepts that emerged later in the analysis process.

### *Developing Theory*

Finally, memos, research journals and collections of coded data for specific themes were sorted and integrated in the process of constructing an emergent theory (Charmaz, 2006). I used the memo and categorical titles to show the flow of empirical experience into important clusters and inter-relationships. I found that I needed to sort some of the themes multiple times in an attempt to find the most appropriate arrangement of theme families.

It is critical to note that the term theory in this study refers to the process of explicating, organizing, and presenting the data - rather than discovering quantifiable order within the data, as might be the goal in most other research projects. For instance, while positivist theory seeks to provide prediction or explanation, the constructivist grounded theory approach used in this study emphasized understanding, description, and connections between the essences of intimate and communal social processes. Arguments were ultimately constructed as a way of asking “so what?” in regards to what important processes the theory should address. There were frankly, too many interesting points to

be covered in one study. However, it was found that the concepts like gender stereotypes and hierarchical relationships within the teams were highly significant and insightful in ways not previously considered by other researchers. As such, I purposely chose to focus on some of these concepts which have not been explored in a scientific manner (moving themes that arose from the data that had little to do with the initial research question) in the hopes of truly extending the field's knowledge base.

## CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Data gathered from interviews with the ten participants and observations of wrestling practice generated a significant amount of information about the athletes' experiences of working with a sport psychologist. The results chapter is divided into five theme families, Athlete Characteristics, Intervention Characteristics, Outcomes, Social Processes, and Sport Psychologist. In this chapter the themes are defined and sub-themes are explored. In the quotes included below, deleted words and/or sections of text are marked by ellipses while a break in the athlete's train of thought is marked by a hyphen.

Throughout this results chapter, different aspects of sport psychology are referenced and a brief explanation of program activities is necessary. The sport psychology seminars are group discussions held after practice to talk about a specific mental skill (see appendix D for handouts that the athletes received during these meetings); typically seminars occur once a week and are focused on an area of current concern or importance. During the last full season with the team, I also offered group yoga sessions after practice on days when we did not have discussions. Individuals with

needs outside of these two activities talked with me one on one before or after practice, and typically I was available during both times.

### *Athlete Characteristics*

During the interviews, athletes described personal traits, belief systems and life experiences that impacted their experience with me and the sport psychology program. These attributes, collected under the label of athlete characteristics, covered a wide range of personal qualities. The degree to which athletes sought out sport psychology activities (athlete behaviors), were open or limited in the time they spent (schedule), and accepted or questioned the benefits of mental skills training (self-description) were all seen as critical characteristics.

### *Athlete Behaviors*

Participants discussed the ways in which they were proactive, reactive, or inactive in pursuing sport psychology knowledge and exposure. This was seen as significant as the time spent engaging in sport psychology activities impacted our relationship. Over the course of the consultation the level of involvement shifted from entirely inactive to reactive and even proactive; the participant group was representative of the team's involvement levels.

One athlete was seen as being highly proactive by himself, myself, and other athletes. He frequently sought me out to talk about his "thoughts and theories" on mental training after reading the biographies of high achieving athletes like Michael Jordan and Steve Prefontaine. This athlete wanted to better understand how great athletes think about sport performance and wanted to apply such knowledge to his training and performance. He saw "no barriers" in working with me and stated, "if you're not there and I wanna talk

to you I'm going to call you. If I wanna talk to you and you're there then I'm just going to talk to you." This athlete reached out for the support he desired (sending text messages, attending seminars, talking with me individually) and did so more frequently than any other individual on the team.

Other athletes rarely contacted me away from typical settings in which we interacted (before or after practice) but believed that attending the sport psychology seminars was "beneficial." These behaviors were labeled as reactive and indicated a willingness to participate without a desire to take control of the types of activities or interactions we had. One participant said that it was a "no brainer" to listen to something that had the potential to "make [him] a better wrestler," and many other participants echoed this statement.

Not all of the athletes used the sport psychology program. A small but interesting group of athletes labeled as inactive seldom interacted with me during team activities and did not seek me out for individual consultation. One participant stated, "the thing is truthfully, I've seldom used you, you know?" It seemed these athletes were not interested in strengthening their mental skills, did not believe that I could help them, or found other sources of information that led to improvements.

### *Schedule*

A central concern for these athletes was carefully managing overwhelming academic, athletic, and social schedules. The participants spoke numerous times about the struggle of time management and how this impacted their ability to be involved in sport psychology activities. Time commitments during regular season play was approximately 30 hours per week; 20 hours mandated by coaches and additional time spent "staying

after” in practice, weight training, injury rehabilitation, and reviewing videos or competitive strategies.

The sport psychology activities needed to fit the limited time of the team. Unfortunately, athletes were choosing between attending team discussions and other obligations such as showering, eating, or attending study hall immediately after practice. Schedule changes also made it difficult to hold seminars on regularly scheduled days. As time was seen as a very precious and limited commodity, athletes were deciding if losing time for other activities was a worthwhile “cost” of staying after practice to learn about sport psychology: “I gotta ton of stuff I gotta do. This could hurt my other stuff which may indirectly hurt wrestling.” A group of ten to fifteen athletes managed to stay regularly, with other teammates coming less consistently. One participant pointed out the pattern that he saw within the team:

I don’t think you really had a lot of ... flexibility in the schedule to present things to us. A lot of guys would miss out on your after practice sessions or the yoga sessions. And then it would just become habit for them to miss out on it.

While the starters on the team usually made time to stay after practice for activities that I planned, non-starting athletes were more typically in the “habit” of missing seminars. For the athletes I interviewed, non-attendance appeared to be a result of an over-booked schedule and not necessarily a dislike for myself or mental skills training.

Other sport psychology activities also created time conflicts. During one season, I asked the team to respond to weekly goal writing assignments via email. As one participant said,

I just didn't feel like I had time for that - The concept wasn't bad... maybe if it wasn't so like, so much of a task. You know, it was type it out, you know, email it to you. Which really didn't take that long if you really think about it but, when you just got so much school work to do that's the last thing you want to be thinking about doing.

Clearly, time conflicts had the capability to turn athletes away from potentially beneficial mental skills training. Athletes often felt conflicted or blameworthy for not being able to stay for seminars; they wished the coaches would have prioritized the program differently to encourage more involvement.

### *Self-Description*

Participants shared aspects about themselves that influenced their experience of the sport psychology program. This included self-concepts around gender roles, what they wanted from wrestling, and the history of their personal experiences in sport.

Self-concept was an important aspect of the participants' self-description, specifically, identification with qualities of masculinity and/or being an athlete. One participant explained how he was able to maintain the balance between being seeing himself as a strong, independent man and also someone who was willing to learn from a female sport psychologist. He noted that he was "nice and kind and generous and happy and easy going" when talking to me and then needed to "flip a fucking switch and go try to kill somebody when I'm on the mat. Cause that's what I'm supposed - men are supposed to be warriors." The influence of physical aggression and physical training was prominent. Therefore, balance between the need to engage in physical and mental training was closely scrutinized by all participants.



Other participants shared the reasons they did and did not like being a wrestler during the interview process and how this impacted the manner in which they perceived the sport psychology program. One athlete clarified, “I really don’t like wrestling that much - I think it has great value in it and I think it’s a great sport, I just don’t enjoy it that much.” But he also emphasized that being around particular teammates in the seminars was rewarding and prompted him to think more specifically about his approach to the sport. Another participant shared how the approach of the coaching staff impacted him as a wrestler, “we never really got any positive at all last year... I told coach I quit and he’s like ‘well, do what you want.’ And I came back the next day. But I just got sick of it.” Comments like these were critical because the athlete’s attitude towards wrestling as a whole impacts the motivation they have to engage in supplementary sport psychology activities.

Participants also discussed life experiences that made them more or less likely to engage in the sport psychology program. One athlete commented that his first thoughts about having a sport psychologist were, “that would be interesting, I’ve never really had anybody to really talk to.” Other participants talked about their comfort interacting with women and their preference for men as their sport psychologist, “some people are afraid to talk to girls, I don’t know - for me, I would say it’s easier. You know, than to talk with some guys. Especially for me, if it’s a guy that’s very successful in wrestling.”

### *Intervention Characteristics*

Participants frequently engaged in defining and describing the sport psychology program and the role of a sport psychologist. Athletes saw characteristics that were labeled as both positive and negative. In the next section, I will review characteristics of

the sport psychology program that were seen as being important; this includes the degree to which I was accessible, the program changes that occurred over time, the credibility of the sport psychology field, the delivery methods that were and were not successful, the definition of my role within the team, and an appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

### *Accessibility*

Knowledgeable mentors, one of whom continuously emphasized “becoming part of the woodwork” in working with a team, guided the development of this sport psychology program. Attempting to fulfill this expectation, I logged over a 1000 hours with the wrestling team during the five years that I worked with them. The participants noticed my commitment as they talked about the varying levels of accessibility they had to sport psychology support. They labeled accessibility as important because “the more time you spend around somebody the more comfortable you are. The more time - you know, you have to talk.”

The degree to which I was accessible to the team changed over time. During the first four seasons together, I worked exclusively with the wrestling team and modified my academic schedule around practice time and competitive events. This was seen as important because “if you’re just simply there you’re experiencing what they’re experiencing. And with that you can relate.” Another athlete observed that,

It helps because you were available. And we didn’t have to search you out because you were there. I think that’s important, that’s real important - to know that you were there, you know, there for our disposal...It wasn’t wasted time, let’s just say that.

Participants also noted that they saw a uniform amount of access offered to the entire team regardless of team status, “you paid everybody attention. Anybody who wants to come and see you, you’s available. You know? And I think you need that to have a successful program.”

Accessibility was not limited to conventional “office hours.” One participant recalled a time when we had met during an unusual time, “you were someone to talk to because I didn’t have anyone else to talk to at the time...At the time I didn’t want to talk to anyone else on the team about it that specific topic.” He acknowledged that although there were some barriers preventing me from being with the team at all times (e.g., I typically did not travel to away events with the team), he was not deterred from contacting me when necessary.

Athletes did not always have the accessibility that they desired, however. During my last season with the team, my accessibility was limited by my new role in working with other athletic teams and a significant shift in coach interest. This was problematic as one participant notes,

Think, I think the most important, the main reason that we were such a good team [last season] was because of all - because of the people we had access to. And even this year we had access to you, but we had to seek you out.

Another concern was accessing services in front of other teammates as athletes would commonly ask me questions at the end of practice when teammates were able to witness our interactions. “It seemed like you could never really, like until this year, be in an office. Could never really get you alone.” Overall, while I was able to be part of the

“woodwork” of the team, accessibility limitations were also experienced as a problem and impacted the participants’ experiences.

### *Chronology*

Chronology was defined as the timeline of changes that occurred during their involvement in the program. Chronologically, athletes’ experience of the program was divided up into four time segments, which are explored below. The effect of time was highly significant on the relationships I had with members of the team and their impression of sport psychology services.

The first time segment is that of pre-exposure to the sport psychology program. Although the athletes had never worked with me, many received important messages about gender roles and the mental skills needed to be successful in wrestling. These messages impacted how they initially thought about the program and my presence with the team. Several athletes talked about having a high school coach who was “very involved” in mental training due to his recent graduate school education. Less “unique” was the experience of having previous coaches who were very intensive physically and less supportive emotionally.

My wrestling coaches were always very -you know, ahh-what do I say? Just, pretty, kind of mean, you know? And always - it’s always just “what’s wrong?” You know, how you’re doing wrong, “this is what you need to improve on.” “You’re worthless.” ...And through, you know, degradation I guess-degrading and I guess malice, you try and break a person down so that they just get tougher.

Other pre-exposure scenarios were shared and included a wide range of experiences. Many participants had “never been exposed to nothing like that.” Another participant had visited an Olympic Training Center (OTC) and met with the sport psychologist there. He commented, “It was interesting. I mean, it’s weird because you always like, think about things like what you want to do, but then they also bring up other questions like ‘what do you think about when you step on the mat?’” Participants shared how the attitudes of their parents and even the writings of famous athletes encouraged them to use any tool possible to improve themselves as athletes. Others acknowledged that they had “grown up to think, like ‘if you need help, you’re bad!’”

Initial reactions to the program and to my presence with the team were highly varied. Some of the participants expressed that initially their reactions were negative. One athlete stated that his first thought was, “I’m never going to need her. I’m not mental.” He defined a mental athlete as “somebody who needed a sport psychologist was somebody who wasn’t stable mentally. So they’re just like, would always whine and cry all the time.” He, like other participants, talked about this attitude as being pervasive in his previous sport experiences. Athletes also talked about their fears that as a woman, I would be “too girly,” “huggy,” and make it mandatory that they work with me. Several participants commented that they had found me attractive; however, another athlete talked about the difficulty in placing a woman in a role on an all-male sports team. “It’s kind of weird that you were a girl... I always thought that was like ‘who is this? Is this one of the girlfriends?’ ... Truthfully, I didn’t know if it was normal for you to be a girl. I swear.”

Some reactions were neutral to positive and resulted from a general lack of knowledge about what a sport psychologist does. One athlete commented that he was “along for the ride. Definitely. I didn’t really have a whole bunch of expectations or expect a whole lot.” It seemed that athletes were open to discovering how sport psychology might benefit them, but there was an initial period of coming to understand what these benefits were. “I wanted to do it, but I didn’t know how I wanted to do it or what I was going to do with it. I just wanted to be involved, but I had no goals or plans for it.” Some saw me as a source of help and thinking “not sure exactly what type of help I was getting, but I know I was getting help. Help is never bad.” A few participants were excited to have new training opportunities like learning yoga, while others thought of the sport psychology program as a “status symbol.”

Hell, our team has their own sport psychologist. I always just thought of it as, hell, one of the perks of being part of the best team. I thought it was like “Yeah! We have a sport psychologist. We’re kind of cool.”

For several participants, working with me was about “trying to get us as much as possible from it” and hoping the coaches would incorporate more mental training into their regular practices.

Athletes experienced a time period that was the “cream center” or central time period of when we worked together. During this time they engaged in development of a working relationship with me and learned about the sport psychology program. Athletes emphasized that it was “a long process” to develop the comfort around conversations about important or personal subject matters, but many participants eventually became highly at ease with my presence. A more comical example was that many athletes came

to think that flatulence in front of me was funny (versus embarrassing) or didn't matter; many would ask me to "rate" how good the sound was. These exchanges and others highlighted how many individuals on the team came to see me as "one of the guys," that I "didn't just help specific people," and that it was "ok to be different" and talk to me even if others perceived it negatively. Athletes were able to gain a better understanding of how they wanted to use the sport psychology activities to their advantage, and these observations make up the bulk of the Outcomes section of this chapter below.

A final acknowledgement of time focused on the ending of the sport psychology program. My final season with the team was remarkably different compared to those prior, and participants recognized their reactions to "losing" the sport psychology program.

I felt like this year, we forgot how we got there last year. You know? Like, "we're good now, we don't have to do all the stuff we did last time." And that's your foundation, you know? Like, you know, that's what got you here, now you build off that. You don't take it away – scrap it start some new thing because you think you're here now...And I think they just scrapped everything. And the things that they scrapped seemed to be the most important.

Another athlete stated that, "it makes me upset to think that...something that's helped me so much could be viewed as a negative thing. Or that they might be getting in the way of such a great resource. And keeping it from individuals." Other athletes talked about what they would take away from the program. This included being able to better lead and teach others as a coach and other professions. Since ending my work with this team, I have

continued to be in contact with several members of the team. One individual sent me an email detailing how he was able to use the relaxation skills he had learned to prepare for an important interview. Others simply want to know how my new job is and tell me about their lives. It would seem that there is no true end point to the relationships that were established during my work with this team.

### *Credibility*

Participants often talked about how they saw the sport psychology program as being credible or not – if it could help them or hurt them. However, it was also incredibly difficult to disentangle their perceptions of how sport psychology from their perceptions of me and my gender. It seemed that the value they placed on the acquisition of mental skills greatly impacted the degree to which they found the program credible. I will say more about my impact on the credibility of the program below.

Athletes defined credibility by the degree to which they believed that sport psychology helped them achieve their athletic goals or have a more enjoyable athletic experience. Questions from our seminar discussions were seen as important, “you get to thinking about - well, I did wrestle better this time than this time, why was that? ...My training, focusing on different things, relaxing is a big thing for me.” This participant and others acknowledged that their initial reactions had been challenged by the program, “I didn’t really think I was going to get anything out of it. I just thought you were going to sit over in the corner and be fun.” At the time of the interview, the participants talked about how they had “underestimated a ton” of how much they would eventually gain from participating in the sport psychology activities.



I always believed that you were doing the best things that you thought the team needed as far as, well, “what if I teach a seminar on this or a seminar on that?” And the yoga with relaxing and bringing it down. And stretching - all positive things.

Athletes noted how sport psychology provided them with an “advantage.”

Participants frequently commented on the mental skills topics that had been the most helpful for them, citing the training around visualization, self-affirmations, and concentration most often. Athletes also acknowledged that one unique activity, yoga based in Mindfulness meditation, was an unexpectedly positive resource. “People don’t realize how important flexibility is for you know, wrestling or whatever. So I thought the yoga was good for the flexibility and just, like, relaxation and like time to work out the kinks of the body.” One participant recalled the degree to which he and his teammates became irritated if people talked during the relaxation time that I had created for the team (literally yelling, “guys, shut the fuck up!”) because they so desired those 15 minutes to breathe and relax at the end of practice.

Athletes also saw how the program’s credibility was impacted by their teammates. One participant emphasized that the best way to engage athletes in learning about sport psychology topics would have been to have a “leader, the alpha male of the group” provide the teaching. He felt that as a sport psychologist, I did not have the ability to show someone how to be more confident, for example, and that athletes could best learn this skill from emulating others who are already confident. The understanding of program credibility continues in the discussion of my knowledge and skills as a sport psychologist and in the influence of social processes on the team.

### *Delivery Style*

Athletes had distinct impressions about the manner in which the information in the sport psychology was presented. In talking about what helped them learn, athletes appreciated the fact that the seminars were not mandatory. Several participants pointed out that “a lot of wrestlers - especially the more success you have - they don’t respond well to being forced to do something.” Athletes also responded positively to the group discussion format in which I hold the seminars.

I think where I got a lot of the knowledge was through discussions...So someone else could learn from my experience and I could learn from their experience. And then I can learn a different way to do it...change that, come back, talk to you about it.

Participants often focused on the description of the seminars being an “open format” for discussion. They emphasized how they saw that “each person was able to voice, you know, how certain things affected them as opposed to just being categorized” and that they could “bring their own” information and additional questions to the group.

Other beneficial aspects of the delivery included feeling that many activities provided “hands on” learning opportunities (having the team visualize their conference matches or doing deep breathing exercises) and making sure that the handouts I provided were visually appealing and “snazzy.” They also talked about enjoying the video I created for the team and referenced this learning tool numerous times throughout their interviews. Finally, athletes felt that the sport psychology program was “customized” to both individual and overall team needs and provided a “buffet” of information about

which they could choose to learn. Being sensitive to team needs also included bringing new information to the team at an appropriate pace.

Slow and steady wins the race...so if you do little by little, they realize that it's probably not that much and get used to it and have a quality time.

You might have to put in more time, you might have to do more things but, you know, the long run it's probably going to help you a lot more.

There were aspects of the program's delivery that athletes did not find as beneficial; interestingly, what was considered preferable by some was labeled as ineffective by others. For instance, some athletes thought that making the team talks mandatory would have been beneficial. This applied to individual work as well. "If we had to go talk to you I'd probably get more out of it... If you have to - you - it could be like 'crap, I have to go listen to her, I might as well listen to her.'" Some athletes felt that the handouts were unnecessary and/or unhelpful, "I honestly never really used the paper. Like that was just kind of like 'cool, paper. Another one, woo.'" With so many different needs and learning styles, it was important to use a variety of delivery approaches.

### *Role Definition*

Throughout the interview process, athletes spoke frequently about the responsibilities that they believed sport psychologists and a sport psychology program have within a team. In this way, participants were defining the role of sport psychology and sport psychologists. Some of these beliefs were based on what activities I provided to the team and needs that went unmet in their experience of working with me.

One of the most emphasized roles for sport psychology within the team context was that of helping athletes achieve performance goals. Many saw this as occurring

though teaching and providing information. As one athlete said, “help us get better at wrestling. Give us stuff that we can say ‘oh, I understand.’ That’s the greatest thing you could ever do, that’s the greatest present you ever do.” Participants talked about the value of having complex issues simplified into more manageable constructs, and one athlete recalled how this happened.

I: So I think that you broke down a lot of things that are said by coaches maybe, like a coach’s coach or a coach’s...

R: Interpreter?

I: Interpreter, yeah...he says something, but what does he really mean? What does he really want from you? Which sometimes coaches don’t know what they mean or what - cause they’re crazy - kind of freaking out.

(laughing) ...yeah, I think a coach’s interpreter more or less.

Athletes noted that in both individual and group contexts teaching involved getting “feedback from the athlete” and asking questions to determine what information needed to be taught.

Athletes also believed that psychologists need to assist with problem solving and providing support. Stated plainly by one participant, “a sport psychologist is there to help people with mental deficiencies to perform their best.” Athletes noted that having someone to meet this need was particularly important because attending to mental or emotional issues was “not a big, a big project on the coach’s mind.” One athlete went as far as to call me an “advocate” in working with the coaching staff to address problems about which athletes felt uncomfortable discussing. Support was seen as being focused on concerns directly related to athletics and general emotional well-being of the athletes. I

hypothesized that the provision of support led to increased athletic success while the lack of support potentially disrupted the athletic success of past athletes and/or teams.

Prior to coming out I heard of a lot of guys quitting and a lot of guys going through a lot of stuff. And I think of in wrestling, these are all guys who are all amazing wrestlers but... [former wrestlers] they went through a lot of things off the mat. I think having somebody you can talk to, you know, would have been very beneficial for those guys. Not saying it would have been a cure-all, but it would have been very beneficial.

Again, athletes noted how, in some instances, the support they received existed only because of the sport psychology program, “just having someone to talk to about the little stressful events or just talk about...wrestling in general...having an outlet was amazing.”

#### *Program Appraisal*

Throughout the interviews, athletes engaged in a process of critiquing the sport psychology program. Although there was no longer an active program in which they participated, athletes still seemed invested in examining the ways in which sport psychology was beneficial and contributed to the team and the ways in which it had not. In this section I will first discuss the limitations and then the strengths of the program that are acknowledged by the majority, if not all of the participants.

Participants discussed the manner in which the sport psychology intervention did not address their needs in mental training. Many times, athlete commented on the lack of power that the program possessed. As one athlete observed, “it was a good message but if it was more...delivered more often, stronger manner throughout the team...” Other

participants noted that the program appeared to be “extra-curricular” and it was problematic when only part of the team stayed for seminars.

Other problems with the program were issues that were inherent to the field as a whole. For instance, sport psychology is not a cure-all that can fix every problem. In helping athletes with problems that could be fixed, teaching important information was often complicated. One athlete stated that “you can’t tell people what to think, but more or less you have to show them through or make them actually do what they need to think without actually telling them that.” Another athlete felt that because sport psychology is not a hard and fast science I had the capacity to be dishonest. “Everything you say we have to take at face value ‘cause there’s no defined answer. 2 plus 2 doesn’t equal 4 in your profession.” Another problem was that athletes could not be forced to “buy in” to the sport psychology program; that it is, it was not possible to make uninterested athletes understand how sport psychology might benefit them.

Keep offering them, you give them cd’s, you give them - you keep talking to them... They just might not realize the importance of opening up the mind. They may not realize how beneficial it might be. So I don’t think you should ever write off somebody completely... There’s only so much you can do. There’s a point where you can’t totally hold their hand any more.

Finally, it is important to note that several of the athletes were prompted multiple times to list a limitation of the program.

Many of the strengths of the program were discussed in other sections of this results chapter, such as the section on Outcomes. For the sake of brevity, a short list is

provided here and the reader is encouraged to explore the rest of the chapter. An important strength noticed by many participants was being able to talk with teammates and learning how to improve their mental skills through team interaction. Athletes also commented that sport psychology actually helped them achieve athletic goals while learning valuable skills that could be applied to their lives outside of sport. One participant noted the high degree of relevance that the program had in helping him address current difficulties, “it seems like every single time we had a talk it seemed like it was something that I was dealing with right then.” Another participant pointed out that during my last year with the team, it was beneficial that I finally offered individual time in an enclosed office, which increased his comfort in working with me.

#### *Outcomes*

Athletes were highly interested in discussing outcomes that resulted from participating in the sport psychology activities or from interacting with me as the sport psychologist. A key point to acknowledge was that the majority of my time spent with the team was directly focused on the effects or outcomes, such as learning about a particular sport psychology topic or helping the athlete to overcome a specific mental barrier to improved performance. The major themes in this area included: achieving performance goals; experiencing a change in affect; having enhanced life experience in areas beyond athletics; changes in team culture; learning that occurred; receiving guidance, advice, perspective, and support (GAPS); increased team interaction; and general stress reduction through Mindfulness-based interventions.

### *Achieving Performance Goals*

Participants talked about how the sport psychology program was able to help them with the important tasks of reaching both specific and general performance goals. In fact, it could be said that one of the main reasons why an athlete might work with a sport psychologist is to help them achieve performance goals.

In this study, all of the athletes emphasized that being a mentally strong athlete was a pre-requisite to reaching performance goals. They spoke about wrestling-specific demands that made possessing strong mental skills more important than if they were in another sport. One athlete commented, “you know, wrestling, boxing, mixed martial arts and a few others are definitely unique in the sport psychology field... Mainly because you’re going against another person’s will.” This athlete and others believed that engaging in direct combat with an opponent made possessing mental skills more valuable. Increased competitiveness was another reason why sport psychology was significant for these athletes. An athlete expressed that “mental is like 88% or, fuck, who knows? It’s high up there because everyone’s skill level is somewhat comparable.”

All but one of the participants discussed ways in which they felt sport psychology was directly or indirectly responsible for enhancing their performance. Athletes talked about learning skills like positive affirmations, mental toughness, mental preparation, goal setting, and confidence through the sport psychology program that helped them become better able to perform effectively.

If you hadn’t been there, I’d probably be in a lot different place because I know you shared techniques with us that you know, got us to do more positive mental thinking... And the seminars that I really used and the



goals that we do every week now. It just makes you think more, become in tune more with what's going on with your body... To get to my best there are certain things I need to do in order to be at my best every time. And I think I've gotten to that point consistently a lot because of the things that you've shared with us.

The sport psychology program facilitated “connecting the dots” in understanding themselves as athletes. For one participant, the seminars helped him to “make sense” of how his training impacted his performance; he also felt that our discussions helped to alleviate the tedium of physical training which resulted in positive performance gains. Another athlete observed that he “never had to second guess” himself in a competitive situation due to the additional time spent learning mental skills and becoming highly prepared. For other athletes, increased attention to their strengths and “maximal potential” adds to their confidence, motivation levels, and ability to experience flow, which were all related to enhanced performance.

Individual differences were a central aspect of the intervention, and the manner in which performance was improved varied across the participants. For some athletes, a collaborative process between sport psychology/sport psychologist and their own thoughts and beliefs was the means through which they reached performance goals.

I've always said that one of my strongest parts of my athletic ability was in my mind. And between talking to you and talking to [coach] last year it all just became, you know, apparent. Like before it was subconscious now it's conscious... My senior year in college I know I'm going to beat

everyone just because I know I'm going to beat everyone... Like I'm saying in my mind "no one has a chance."

This participant's comment embodies the type of single-minded confidence that almost every high achieving athlete possesses. It is with this level of confidence that he was able to be fearless and even enjoy the intense combativeness of the sport; this makes the experience of intense concentration more likely to occur. Our sport psychology conversations help him to understand the level of skill he had in being confident, and his achievements continued to grow throughout his college career.

Other athletes had few or no pre-existing thoughts about how to use mental skills to improve their performance. The sport psychology program helped to enhance performance with these athletes by providing novel, perspective changing information and/or challenging old belief systems that prevented better performances.

I'd be walking, pacing back and forth before a match with my brace on and my knee would be just throbbing. And I would mentally have to push myself and block out the pain and just, even - not even block out the pain. Just say "I'm going to kick this guy's ass whether my knee hurts or not!" And having those meetings really helped step up my mental aspect. Make me mentally tougher. Make me - my mind to push my body to do things that I didn't think my body could do... I had never written down self-affirmations, either... When I did that, you know, it went from me being, you know, losing probably 12 matches my freshman year to only losing 6 my sophomore year. That was a huge part of it. You know, having those self-affirmations hanging on my window every morning. "I have the

strongest grip in America.” “Nobody can take me down.” “No one can stop my leg attacks.”

This participant was referencing the work we did in one seminar which focused on having a positive mindset and surrounding oneself with valuable self-affirmations. Although I can clearly remember the athlete looking uncomfortable about these statements during the team discussion, they apparently had a very positive impact on his ability to attend to his strengths. Focusing on strengths led to increased confidence and success in general.

### *Affect*

Many of the athletes in this study labeled emotionality as problematic or detrimental to their ability to be a successful wrestler. As an aspect of their sport culture, this is discussed in more depth later in the results chapter. However, they also discussed their perception that my involvement with the team impacted their feelings in ways that felt positive – a surprise for most.

The most frequent emotions discussed were that of happiness and enjoyment. Athletes talked about experiencing happiness when they were able to share information with me that they could not discuss with anyone else and laughed thinking about the yoga sessions when they would struggle to hold poses or stretch in ways that they were unaccustomed. An important quality of this team that athletes often commented on was that they did better in practice and competitions when they were able to relax and “goof off.” Some team members incorporated seminar materials into their pre-performance routines in a highly comical manner, over-exaggerating Haka dance moves they had

learned. In this way, I was seen as contributing to their ability to relax and enjoy themselves before a competitive event, which was highly positive.

Other athletes expressed feeling happy that we had been able to establish a relationship and highlighted other emotions that resulted from this connection.

Happiness, glad. Something I value a lot in my life is relationships I have with people. And I'm really glad that I got to know you and that you've helped me so much and this team... Feeling of openness and I can let my guard down and I don't have to be someone who I'm not. And it really makes me feel at home when I can talk to you about some things - when I know that you're not going to judge me or something like that.

This athlete and others spoke about feeling cared for and comfortable in a manner that they wouldn't otherwise experience. Their responses were reflective of my goal to provide positive support whenever possible.

Truth - I don't know. I guess it's a pick me up. That's what you are. In this sport of dismal, you know, fighting all the time and competition, you're like a little shining light. It makes it so you'll feel happier sometimes.

Responses also focused on the excitement they experienced when we discussed, as a group or individually, the possibility of accomplishing significant athletic goals. They talked about getting "goose bumps" and "the chills" during some of the sport psychology activities, which provides evidence that our discussions had a tangible impact on them.

Athletes also expressed feeling frustrated that during our last season together I worked with other sports within the athletic department.

I was kind of angry that we were sharing you with people. I'm serious. I'm like 'why she talking to golf or tennis people? She's ours.' And everybody stealing our ideas. Seemed like everybody else got more of you than we did. Kind of jealous.

They also express frustration in perceiving that their coaches' reactions to the sport psychology program were less than supportive. "It makes me upset to think that something that's helped me so much could be viewed as a negative thing. Or that they might be getting in the way of such a great resource. And keeping it from individuals."

### *Beyond Athletics*

The participants noticed that their experience with sport psychology impacted them outside of the athletic realm or in athletic endeavors of which I had no part. In this section, I explore a wide range of experiences or future life events that participants feel are changed due to their involvement in the program. I also highlight how the specific sub-themes of Mentorship and Perspective fall under the larger umbrella of Beyond Athletics outcomes.

As there are no professional ranks to reach within wrestling, many of the athletes I worked with understood that they needed to be successful in their respective future career fields. Many athletes considered coaching at the high school or collegiate level and felt that what they learned in the sport psychology program would benefit them later. As one athlete said, 'well, obviously I'm going to go into coaching... Now I'll be more aware of what the issues are... It'll make that transition easier and make me a better coach.'" One athlete talked about reading literature related to his career field and sport psychology so that he would be more prepared to take on leadership roles. While writing

this results section, I received an email from one of the participants explaining how he had utilized the relaxation skills from our sport psychology discussion to calm his body and reduce anxiety before an important job interview. Finally, the sport psychology program provided some athletes with ideas for new career paths they were previously unaware of: becoming a sport psychologist themselves. One athlete described this new awareness as a “major change in my life.” This comment speaks to the far-reaching impact of the sport psychology program.

Interestingly, athletes also remarked on how experiences in the sport psychology program contribute to changing their relationships with others or changing their social routines. One participant aptly captured the sentiments of several other participants,

Interacting with you on a, like friendship level, a personal level. And it's like a professional level, to... I think those types of situations where I'm like “man I've got a problem, let me go talk to Renee about it” and then afterwards you feel like you got something accomplished. I think that builds on your maturity as far as just conversation in life in general.

Another participant felt that enhancing his mental skills helped him to better balance his training regimen and enjoy more socializing, which led to feeling more like an average college student.

Athletes also spoke to the changes that occurred after being able to “practice” interacting with their teammates in a different way. Athletes stated that learning new relational styles had a very positive effect on some members of the team.

Bringing it up with other people and taking different viewpoints and opinions and that, I think that helped me. Just kind of see where other

people are coming from, which is something that is hard for me. I'm really not very good with other people's viewpoints or empathy. Getting where other people are coming from or how they're feeling.

The program also changed the athletes' problem solving tactics and/or help seeking behaviors. Participants talked about generalizing specific sport psychology lessons to their lives.

“The conversations that we have with the positive self-affirmations, applying those to other facets of my life. “I'm a good person.” In general things, not too detailed. Just applying those concepts of setting goals, believing in yourself, having confidence. All those other things that do well in any area of life that you go to, besides sports.”

Athletes shared that they had developed new perspectives from the sport psychology activities. One individual talked about trying to apply “the Buddhist's” approach in welcoming all life events labeled as good or bad. He noted that this point had often surfaced in our conversations and recognized that “for a long time I would have thrown it in the closet and not thought about it.” Now he felt more motivated and comfortable in examining the “skeletons in the closet” that bothered him. Another participant saw that “applying those concepts of setting goals, believing in yourself, having confidence” helped him to grapple with issues in both the present and the past that could sometimes felt overwhelming.

One athlete acknowledged that his relationships on the team often fueled thinking about relationships, particularly those between different racial/ethnic or social economic

status groups. He talked about our individual discussions in referencing his perspective shift.

I guess, making sure that I saw everything from every angle instead of my own. I didn't look at it from the point of view of a white guy who has money or the point of the black guy who doesn't, or the point of view of a white guy who doesn't have money. I looked at it as real life and how everybody plays a role. Just basically how everybody fits into that. You know, I just...I didn't want to look at from my own standard point of view, nobody else's. Just look how everybody else looks at their situation. And it's helped me to realize that. To not be biased.

While touching on topics such as this were not originally part of the plan for the sport psychology program, it is impossible to ignore the impact of sport psychology for personal growth and reflection.

Participants defined Mentorship as an outcome of helping other, typically younger, athletes learn and use mental skills. The term "mentorship" was created to encompass the idea that a mentoring relationship exists between participants and their teammates and between members of the team and other athletes not on the team. A leader within the team conceptualized this interaction as "semi-[working] as a team" to bring emphasis to developing mental skills. This mentoring role became part of the team dynamics as new team leaders embrace attitudes towards sport psychology that have been assumed by previous leaders.

You know, I want people to follow me. It's like "I stay after because I personally get something out of it." And then if I personally get something



out of it and, you know, some of the guys who I wrestle with who look up to me - like, if they would stay after because I'm staying after then I'm kind of like [influential teammate] then they're kind of like the person I used to be.

One athlete shared that he pushed his teammates to try even the most unusual activities. "He didn't want to do yoga, he did not want any of the yoga. So I made him do it and now he does it with me at home. So, he likes it."

Participants are also able to talk about the ways in which they took their mentoring relationships beyond the team. One athlete talked about teaching his younger brother to use self-affirmations.

I just want to give him the advantages that I was given. And I was able to do that and trying different things... And then to come home and see his little list of good things that he says before he goes to bed every night. I see the things that he writes down. It's just funny that he does that at such a young age. Which is just going to be remarkable. Because I feel like he got a jump start in - he's CHEATING!

Another participant recalls how he "broke it down," and encouraged his brother to think about more than just "hopefully [getting] into finals. You're good enough to win everything." His response highlighted the ways in which he actively adopted the mentality stressed within our discussions, emphasizing the desire to "battle" an opponent with excitement and fearlessness.

*Changes in Team Culture*

Shifting cultural norms, seen as changing expectations for behavior and relationships, occur each season for most athletic teams. The influx of new team members, changes in coaches and even movement within national rankings all contribute to both planned and unplanned changes within team cultures. Although my initial objective was only to engage the athletes in learning about sport psychology topics, many of the participants felt that noticeable changes in the overall team culture also occurred. For comparative purposes, it is beneficial to review the “sport specific culture” discussed under the theme of social processes to more fully understand the pre-existing culture of the team within the larger culture of wrestling.

One of the significant cultural shifts that occurred was coming to see sport psychology as an acceptable resource to use. Initially, fears of being perceived as “weak” or “needing help” kept those who were curious about the program from interacting with me. During my second season with the team, however, two athletes began to interact with me differently. Due to their status as leaders on the team, other athletes followed their example.

Getting people that I, I looked up to and that were also doing it really made a difference in how I think the perception was that - it was, you know, normal and healthy and growing, learning, rather than looked at like “phhhh - What are they going to talk to Renee about? There must be something wrong with them.”

The athletes also talked about how their problem solving approach changed within the new culture.

Cause you made it ok to talk about, like, problems or stuff we wanted to get out into the open. So I can just go up to [teammate] and be like “hey, I don’t like how we’re doing this.” And he’ll go and talk to coaches and get feedback and not just sit there thinking “man, I hate this.”

The second significant cultural shift that occurred enabled athletes to have a more relaxed and relationally connected team experience. One athlete spoke to the sense of safety that had not existed prior to my work with the team.

You keep everything to yourself - you don’t want to open yourself up to other people, because especially with that, with the competitiveness of our team - our team’s ruthless about - it’s always trying to be better than somebody. Either that’s putting someone else down or making fun of them, doing better than them in anything - in class, in picking up girls... You’re always trying to establish yourself as better than someone else. You know? And so for us to all get in a group and be equal and being able to talk and everyone’s opinion is valued is different and it’s nice. It kind of showed you different sides of people you didn’t normally get to see. I think it was beneficial.

For this participant, it was helpful to hear the perspectives of others, but even more important to feel that he had equal status with other teammates. Other athletes also felt that “it was nice to hear that other people had the same problems or conflicts, you know? ... You’re all there and going through the same things.” Seemingly, a sense of community was developed by acknowledging common experiences they had never previously discussed.

Within this all male team, athletes also derived enjoyment in feeling that their experience within wrestling had been altered as compared to previous years. “I guess the yoga part, after practice, made practice seem like it wasn’t that bad. Cause, like, we go through hell and then we ended it. You know what I’m saying? We’d be smiling and laughing, smooth music.” Eventually coming to embrace even the most unusual aspect of the program – yoga – speaks to the significant degree of change that did occur within the team.

### *Friendship*

My dedication to becoming “part of the woodwork” eventually resulted in positive sport psychology talks (i.e., the athletes are attentive and asking questions) and less formal interactions. From both the formal and informal interactions, friendships were developed between me and athletes on the team. Examples of informal moments included being invited to birthday parties (I didn’t attend), getting calls over the Christmas holidays to see if I was having fun at home, or sitting with team members while watching sporting events of another team.

In very practical terms, being seen as not just a friendly individual but an actual friend enhanced the work that I was able to do with the team as a sport psychologist. Participants enjoyed closing the distance – in an appropriate manner – between the professional and the athlete.

It’s kind of a bad thing to be like someone sits in an office and comes in and tries to tell the team what to do. Then be like ‘hey, you should stay after. It’s kind of like, ‘whatever, go away.’ But if you’re there watching everything and hanging out with the team and build friendship - like you,

you're part of our group. And so we'll listen to you. Like 'hey, you need to stay after.' It's like one of your friends saying 'hey, you need to stay after.' Its like, 'ok, I will. I'll hang out.'

Attendance for any of the sport psychology activities was voluntary; therefore, it was important to be seen as both knowledgeable regarding sport psychology and a person the athletes actually wanted to spend time with. Several athletes went as far as to replace my label within the team from sport psychologist to that of friend.

You have all the book smarts and you have the street smarts and you have a friend. A friendly aspect, you know like, when I think about you, you could be at practice and could help with wrestling but also, like, after practice or something if I saw you out I'd be like "yeah, that's Renee. She's my friend."

They talked about their perception that I likely thought, "these guys are weird but I love 'em." Ultimately, I continue to stay connected with many team members through social networking sites like Facebook and short phone calls.

### *Learning*

Under this outcome, several interesting sub-themes are described to capture the full range of learning types that occurred within the team. Some instances of learning compelled athletes to think about becoming successful using different techniques and signified a change in wrestling schema. Athletes also discussed the information and/or skills they acquired about sport psychology concepts. They engaged in self exploration and/or reflection to find new ways of learning or gathering information by learning from themselves.

*Changes in wrestling schema.* Similar to the changes that occurred within the overall team, individual athletes experienced a change in the way that they thought about wrestling and how to be successful. The first significant shift that athletes discussed was coming to see the importance of incorporating mental skills into their overall training program.

All the coaches that I had wrestled or played football or ran track for all just went on the notion that if you push yourself physically, mentally everything will fall into place. Then nobody ever needs to worry about mental things. And if you needed to talk about any emotional or stressful situations you were just being weak.

Athletes saw that the mentality of focusing solely on physical training was only part of the work that they needed to do and there were additional skills they could learn to increase their success.

Athletes also spoke of adopting new ways of looking at situations in wrestling. For example, athletes often struggled with anxiety around competitive performance. A key topic of our discussions was teaching athletes how to distance themselves from thinking about the consequences of winning or losing – to instead focus entirely on wrestling. In this instance, the choice of mastery or performance goals had an impact on attentional focus.

I wouldn't call it a bad nervous, I guess it was just normal nervous...But you realize that, you know, you win, you lose. If you lose, that's the worst that happens. You know? I would say it's liberating...it was very liberating.

Another athlete saw a similar change in the way of thinking about injuries or illness:

Yourself and everybody else thinks “ok, he’s going to have a bad day or he’s got the flu or he’s injured.” But I think you brought, you brought - you don’t have to have a bad day to the table. You could have the best day of your life if you’re sick. It’s just all about that attitude.

Individuals found themselves thinking about a variety of other wrestling experiences in new ways. While one athlete talked about the importance of choosing better language to convey positive self-talk, others discovered that their self-talk needed drastic changes.

Thinking about “oh, I gotta beat this guy - well how am I going to beat this guy?” How am I going to get better? And being realistic, “alright, this is what I’m good at. This is what I can do.” And “why did I lose this match? Oh, it’s because I suck.” No, it’s not because of that, “it’s because you did this.” You know? Fixable. You’re not inherently bad.

Athletes noted that they were also better able to cope with a loss. As one athlete said, “maybe you wouldn’t win the match, but you’d be ‘ok, so I did this right, did that wrong. We can work with that.’ ... You know, rather than before you’d be like, you’d only focus on the bad.” In effect, changing their thoughts allowed athletes to change the experience of a loss. It also allowed them to change their experience of another grueling aspect of their sport: practice.

I don’t have, like, enormous amounts of fun at practice... But it was less of like, a job after we talked about stuff. And more of, like, ok “let’s go do

this for the tournament coming up.” I’ll improve this, and I think you learned. I learned to pat myself on the back sometimes.

Challenging assumptions athletes had about practice or their potential allowed them to have experiences that were fundamentally different from previous sport experiences and allowed them to have experiences that were otherwise taboo. As one participant recalled, “I’ve done yoga with the third place team in the nation, you know? And look back and having it be a great memory.” He and his teammates were able to redefine what was acceptable, helpful or the expectation for what their experience would be – and this was very much a process for learning new thought patterns, behaviors, and social norms. This athlete went on to say that “you never stop learning. And maybe at a point I never really thought that. That you can always learn new things and better yourself in new ways.”

*Information and skills.* The sport psychology program was geared towards teaching specific skills and providing information to improve the mental aspects of performance. One possible measure of success of the intervention was that the athletes were able to recall what they learned during the sport psychology seminars and also describe objective and subjective ways in which the information was beneficial.

Interestingly, the athletes found themselves learning information from several different sources within the team structure, both from myself as the individual in the role of teacher and from their teammates. “I wanted to hear about what other people thought... I wanted to see how these guys were thinking, how they go about their daily - how they come to practice, how they roll.” Participants also talked about the specific information they were able to gather from the sport psychology seminars. For instance, I



always brought short, handouts on the topic. As the team talked, athletes shared how they implement mental toughness into their training program and competitive approach.

Athletes remembered learning about mental skills topics such as visualization, mental toughness, positive thinking or self-talk, and flow. For one participant, the significance of the team seminars was evidenced in that he was able to recall, word for word, the script of a visualization talk. This athlete felt that the “visualization thing where you could read and you know, get you really excited and just keep your mind on wrestling” was a beneficial skill that he later used. Another athlete spoke of the benefits of the body awareness and meditation exercises in that it “helped me know what intensity I needed to be at to compete at my best... And then the breathing exercise like I said before. I used, like, keep myself in the moment, come back to my breath.”

The topic of positive focus was one of the most popular skills that the athletes remembered learning from our seminars. One participant developed our discussions on positive self-talk into a visual metaphor:

You taught us that there’s always these negative things that REALLY do have an impact and it really does matter... whether it’s your coaches or your teammates or people outside the sport or your family... if it’s peers, if it’s ...rankings or... I don’t care who you are, I don’t care how strong you are. It’s going to have a psychological toll on you. And if you just kind of block that out and surround yourself in that bubble I guess - then you have all kinds of - surround yourself with positive people, reinforcing people. They’re supporting you and you yourself believe then, I mean, there’s no, I mean, there’s no one who I guess can stop you.

One participant acknowledged the novelty of positive focus, “things were new to me. Like I’d never heard of, I mean I’d heard positive self talk but not like writing down positive attributes and stuff like that.” Another acknowledged that he thought about being positive in a new way.

I guess you can say, you really articulated the, the value of having positive reinforcement. And, umm, and it just sort of just, you know, put a lot of weight behind that theory and that approach... It’s not just something you’re supposed to think, you’re supposed to about – that attitude you’re supposed to go about - it’s like, there’s meaning behind it.

Participants talked about how the sport psychology program challenged and changed pre-existing ideas about positive and negative focus. One athlete saw teammates encouraged to “really focus on their strengths as opposed to focusing on their weaknesses. Or watching themselves be great as opposed to watching themselves lose.” This participant felt that the change was associated with adopting other mindsets or attitudes such as the “warrior mentality,” that leads to greater confidence and more competitive success.

Arguably, one of the most significant indications that learning occurred was the ability of the athletes to generalize information to new settings. One athlete talked about how he was able to experience flow while Frisbee golfing one afternoon.

I was like “wow! How did I?” But then you go back to how we’ve talked about this before. This like, how did I do that? ...I never really believed you. I was listening, but it was like, didn’t know how to apply it. You’re like “be in the moment.” And then I finally started realizing how... I was

like “that’s a nice tree right there, I’ll try and plant it right by the tree.

Alright, I’m 30 feet away, put this in - chain.” You know? And then I

started “yeah, you were in the moment.” And it was kind of weird.

Similar examples of this degree of learning were when an athlete used the mindfulness relaxation skills to calm down prior to an important interview and other athletes discussed how they shared sport psychology lessons with others who also participated in sport.

*Self-exploration and reflection.* This sub-set of learning represented instances of when athletes were able to learn about themselves as wrestlers through exploration-focused discussions or reflective questioning. For many, if not all, of the participants I spoke with, the sport psychology intervention was the first time that they had been prompted to *think* about their challenges and strengths as athletes – as opposed to acting or working on areas for improvement.

I think it’s just opened my eyes to the idea that sports can be - also includes thinking about it. Mental preparation. You know, just thinking about it, you know, like sport. Thinking about “oh, I gotta beat this guy - well how am I going to beat this guy?” How am I going to get better? And being realistic, “alright, this is what I’m good at. This is what I can do.” And “why did I lose this match? Oh, it’s because I suck.” No, it’s not because of that, “it’s because you did this.”

“Mental preparation” became a popular label for this cognitive process, although the phrase is used in the sport psychology field (by professionals) in a more specific manner.

While one individual found that increased self-awareness enhanced skills he already possessed, most of the athletes were becoming aware of mental skills, in a very overt manner, for the first time.

When you broke it down and told me what a self-affirmation was and the concept of it. I knew that, but when you just said “self-affirmation, do you have any self-affirmations?” I was like “I don’t know what self-affirmations mean, and if I don’t know what it means it’s probably a good chance that I don’t have them.”

Athletes were also learning how to be reflective. One participant recalled how he felt encouraged to be more intentional in using practice time through the self-reflection of goal setting.

I kind of like the way that you made us work on specific goals and that kind of stuff. But what it did was it got me thinking about stuff, what I needed to work on. And I did it. And I thought about it, like “ok, today I’m going to really work on this.” And I would.

Another talked about the process of comparing himself to a teammate and using self-reflection to decide what style of competitive preparation was most appropriate for him instead of doing what another person had modeled.

Lastly, while most self-exploration focuses on competitive or practice situations, one participant spoke about the way in which he became more reflective on not just his mental skills or competitive style, but also his role within the larger team dynamic.

You learn things about yourself like, you know, how do you interact as - with the group as a whole. Because that was something I kind of struggled

with, too, as a captain. Being vocal and not being afraid to talk to people... Interacting in those small groups, I think it's good to learn about yourself. Or it's more of a - it's preparation for... learning better social skills. Better leadership skills.

### *Mindfulness Skills and Exposure*

One of the most untypical aspects of this sport psychology program was the inclusion of Mindfulness training. Mindfulness training involved, among other things, the learning of mental awareness and concentration skills, yoga, and deep breathing exercises. It was my goal to utilize yoga to help athletes to better stretch and relax after practice (with the potential to improve balance, core strength and kinesthetic awareness) while also using the body scan meditations to assist athletes in developing concentration and focusing skills. General stress reduction was frequently a pleasant side effect of these activities.

The coaches asked everyone stay after practice for the first yoga session to develop an understanding of how future sessions would work; all of the coaches stayed after as well – an event that did not occur once before or after that first yoga session. Understandably, some athletes had a skeptical attitude towards yoga. As one athlete said, “Well, at first I’ll be honest I thought it was weird. I was like ‘we’re a bunch of dudes, I mean, come on.’” Other athletes talked about their initial lack of knowledge about how yoga and Mindfulness skills could benefit them. One participant stood out in discussing his interest in doing yoga with the team, lamenting that it had been difficult to learn yoga from a book as he had previously attempted.

As the team became acclimated to doing yoga and deep breathing exercises, they began to notice the benefits that come with this training. They talked about their belief that yoga increased their flexibility, labeled as a clear asset for wrestling. One athlete pointed out that “[working] out the kinks of the body” was advantageous, and many other participants noticed a decrease in injuries across the team when yoga was a part of regular training.

Perhaps more importantly, however, was the fact that engaging the team in yoga and meditation sessions allowed them to experience wrestling in a significantly different way from which they were accustomed.

It was peaceful. I would have never thought that after wrestling practice that everybody’d be having the lights off and people laying around sleeping. I thought that was cool and we were goofing off doing yoga and trying to balance and everybody’s playing around after practice. I mean, if I ever would have thought that it would have been like that this year, no way.

For many participants, the time spent doing yoga and relaxing were some of their favorite memories of the sport psychology program and wrestling as a whole. As one athlete saw it, there were “a lot of guys around, smiling, stretching, standing on one foot trying to have balance, looking stupid. You know, there’s no humility.”

Athletes took their new found Mindfulness skills outside of wrestling as well. They talked about teaching their mom or brother about yoga and impressing women that they met with their ability to complete a series of poses called the sun salutation. However, they also acknowledged that learning how to “tap into developing your mind

and what it's going to be before a match, after a match, before a...during the season, whatever" helped them to restructure the way they thought about other aspects of their lives.

### *Receiving GAPS*

One of the most popular outcomes that was discussed by the participants was that of receiving guidance/advice, perspective, and support (GAPS) from me as the sport psychologist. Although it is also possible to think of providing GAPS as part of the defined role of a sport psychologist, participant statements more accurately place this theme as an outcome of information or support that was received.

Athletes often sought guidance or advice from those seen as being knowledgeable and approachable. After some time with the team, I was able to establish a relationship with many of the team members that facilitated this type of interaction. One athlete described how he received the guidance he needed in his role as a captain on the team.

So I can tell you what I'm thinking at that time with the team. Tell you what I'm trying to do as far as leading the team...and ask for support and ideas. Different ways of attacking things as far as the mental aspects as well as, you know, confidence and things like that. And so, a resource is the best way to describe it.

Another athlete sought me out for concerns related to his personal life outside of sport and it appeared that receiving advice or guidance was just as important in this area.

Well, the only time I've ever asked you about something I think was with my girlfriend. And I had always thought about it - there was something really wrong with me. I guess not, you know? And you weren't just

blowing smoke up my ass “ah, she just didn’t know what she had!” It was like “no, people change.” That’s good.

Athletes joked that even when they thought “man, Renee shouldn’t know this stuff” they were able to gain information about wrestling or general life problems and then “have a bunch of different outlooks on different ways of looking at things.”

For these participants, being able to obtain a perspective outside of their own, their teammates, or their coaches was highly beneficial. Athletes felt that not having wrestling experience provided me with a fresh and different perspective to share with them, and as one athlete explained, a new perspective was the most important message that he took from his time with me. Interestingly, my lack of wrestling experience seemed to make the perspective I provided even more helpful. To be an outsider and still notice the qualities needed to win consistently “shed a light” where there had previously been repetition. “To hear it from somebody who doesn’t really wrestle...who can just sit there and observe it and know what’s going on. You know? It hits home a little better than somebody who wrestles all the time.”

Finally, athletes described how and what kind of support they gained from working with me. One participant labeled this outcome as “mental support - just confidence, you know, caring - what else can I use? Trust. I would say love sometimes” and emphasized that without this support, more athletes would be more likely to quit the team. One participant specified why he felt that support was needed and how he felt truly supported.

I could come to you and you just didn’t care about anything else that was going on. You didn’t judge me for nothing. And when you have somebody



like that in your life, it helps you cope with everything...wrestling is so mental. It is so mental. And if you don't have any mental support, you done. I don't care how good you are, if you don't have it you done. Even for the guys that we have that are All-Americans, they could be better if they had better mental support.

As these comments suggest, participants view support as an essential but sometimes overlooked interaction that helped them enjoy their athletic experience more thoroughly and even improve their athletic performance.

#### *Team interaction*

Participants felt that sport psychology program provided new opportunities for interaction with teammates. Interestingly, most observers (including myself) might believe, after careful examination that the team is quite close already; many teammates live together, have the same classes, attend the same social events, and obviously train together for wrestling. However, almost all participants spoke extensively to the increased team cohesion, communication, and bonding they experience as a result of the program.

Adding to the uniqueness of having sport psychology topics to learn about was also changing the opportunities athletes had to interact with their teammates.

You think of wrestling and you gotta go out there and you gotta work hard, you gotta work hard, you gotta work hard. But we could make gains sitting on our butt thinking about it, talking about it. I learned things about my fellow captains or like the freshman all the way along, all the way down the line, you know. Sitting there talking to them... You learn things

about yourself like, you know, how do you interact as - with the group as a whole.

Participants felt that increased communication led to team bonding which occurs directly as a result of participating in the activities I organized. A critical step in the process of becoming a team, this bonding opportunity applied to coaches as well. "I just think that guys grow closer to the coach that does come to it. Guys can connect more."

Changes in communication patterns also changed what information was shared within the team. Participants felt that they were able to use the team interactions to enhance learning sport psychology information. One athlete commented, "I think where I got a lot of the knowledge was through discussions." He went on to explain, "someone else could learn from my experience and I could learn from their experience. And then I can learn a different way to do it...change that, come back, talk to you about it." For a different athlete, the team interaction allowed him the opportunity to hear from another team member about how he was perceived.

He told me when we got to college and we were no longer competing against each other that he used to hate wrestling me. And that made me feel good because I was a fierce competitor I felt like... When a few of those things came out in the open discussions, really eye-opening and growing for [me] to see how other people could see that, too.

Ultimately, most participants saw the increased team interaction as enjoyable and engaging. For one athlete, this was linked to his ability to spend time with teammates, talking about their shared goals for the success of the wrestling program as a team.

It's just interacting with the team and everybody being on the same page and everybody, like, mentally being on the same page as far as "wow, I really, really want to win a national title" and have the guy next to you like "man, I really want to win that, too." It was kind of like a team unity, a team bond thing.

Another participant spoke about the importance of acknowledging that his team was more than just the ten starting athletes.

We have a lot of people on the team, it brings a lot of different stuff. Makes it a lot more fun... You meet a lot of funny people; meet a lot of stupid people to laugh at.... You know, like wrestling would not be very much fun if you didn't have any friends.

Understanding the importance of friendships helps to define why having just one more opportunity to talk with or laugh at his teammates is so valuable. For him, the sense of teamness was what made wrestling fun.

#### *Training alternative*

The physical demands of wrestling are great and require extensive cardiovascular endurance, mastery of difficult kinesthetic technique, and pure muscular strength; it is not surprising that both coaches and athletes develop the belief that physical training is solely important. However, the sport psychology program was seen as a beneficial supplement to the rigorous physical training program. In addition, some of the commentary of the participants indicated that athletes also saw the sport psychology program as a training alternative; that is, they came to believe that mental training was an important activity

separate from physical training. One athlete discussed how his belief systems around this topic changed after his involvement in the sport psychology program.

When you growin' up you hear the saying "oh, it's 90% mental, 10% physical." And if you really sit down and think about it, a lot of it is mental... I mean, it really sheds light to a whole 'nother area of sports that's like a new toy almost... Because, I mean, you can do a lot of workouts and stuff. But things start getting mundane if you don't ever talk about, like, mental aspects of sports. Work on physical and work on mental activities. So when you finally learn how to do the mental thing, it gives you even that much more of an edge.

Other participants talked about the benefits they saw in "breaking the monotony" of "beating each other up all the time." They believed that being able to work a variety of mental skills was just as likely to improve athletic performance.

The final realization for many of the athletes with whom I spoke was that attention to both mental and physical skills, depending on individual needs and areas for emphasis, made them as prepared as possible.

Like, you tap in, you tap into what your mind - you tap into developing your mind and what it's going to be before a match, after a match, ...whatever. Then you can make a lot of strides and you can make a lot of improvements. And I think that really, that's for me is what kind of opened my eyes to, to sport psychology.

All participants acknowledged that without mental skills, they would have little to no success as athletes.

### *Social Processes*

The social processes that occurred within the context of an athletic team are arguably some of the most complex and interesting entities to be examined in a project such as this. These processes highlight how relationships between the members of the team influence, for example, the creation of a team history, behaviors that are considered acceptable or unacceptable, and the meaning that is assigned to specific roles on the team. In trying to understand the experience of athletes involved with a long-term sport psychology program, it was important to acknowledge that social processes play a chief role in every aspect of the experience. Perhaps even more significant, however, is the fact that most social processes occurred below a level of conscious awareness, many times in unseen and covert ways. It is also noteworthy to acknowledge how much each of the other four major themes was impacted by social processes.

#### *Athlete Influencing Athlete*

Participants discussed the ways in which they influenced their teammates or are influenced by their teammates to participate in the sport psychology activities. Participants noted their perceptions of the acceptability of the program were influenced by specific individuals and the mentality of the entire team. A discussion of who was seen as influential and why is included in the sub-theme of Power Differentials and Hierarchies below.

Initially, sport psychology as a field needed to develop acceptance or credibility within the team. However, as the sport psychologist I also needed to gain confirmation as being credible through the influence of the athletes. This was at least partially accomplished through the social influence of members of the team.

So I thought it was cool and, you know, just the fact that, like, after practices or wherever I would hear you interacting with the older guys that you actually knew. And I'd be like man that's kind of cool. If they have problems they can go talk to her about it or you can just talk to her about positive stuff, you can talk to her about negative stuff.

Within the team structure, athletes were routinely looking to their teammates for indications of how to behave or taking social cues on how a novel social script (i.e.; how to interact with the sport psychologist) could be enacted.

With time, athletes were influenced by the leaders on their team to see sport psychology as being not only acceptable, but a key component in any athlete's plan to achieve performance goals. One athlete discussed how he came to see working with me as being more than an enjoyable social encounter, but also a means to a valuable end.

I was a big believer in just do...whatever they do because those are the most successful guys on the team... Seeing those guys stay after with you, you know, participate and actively participate in your seminars. You know, vocally and -yeah, the team leaders, the team captains. Knowing that if they have a vested interest in what you have to say then I definitely should.

One of the participants shared that specifically he "wanted to see how [high achieving athletes] were thinking, how they go about their daily...how they come to practice, how they roll." In this way, the effect of the athletes also occurs as a result of a specific cognitive belief (i.e.; a pre-determined idea on how this athlete could learn from his older teammates) and not simply "monkey see, monkey do."

Other times the influence within teammates was seen as being much more directive, but in a manner to which athletes responded well.

After talking with some of the guys, they told me it was a good idea to stay. They didn't tell me I had to stay, you know, they didn't make it like it was an obligation... And when most of the guys who were successful like [teammates] would tell me "it's a good idea if you stay and stretch and do yoga with the team." You know, I look up to those guys, so that's what got me to participate in the yoga after practice and stuff like that.

Other memories were equally encouraging, ranging from being highly directive ("So it was mainly just the guys, kind of push us into doing. It was like, 'you better stay after! You better stay after!'") to simply enthusiastic ("And then everybody's like 'yoga's fun!"). Interestingly, one participant saw his involvement with the sport psychology activities as a way to "prove" to his teammates and coaches that he was invested in becoming a better wrestler and that he "belongs" on the team. "So yeah, if [sport psychology] is going to get me better, I'm going to do it. If it's going to make me more favorable to the guys, I'm going to do it. This comment demonstrates the degree of importance that this athlete believes his teammates place on participating in all of the training opportunities available.

Participants who identified as being in positions of leadership helped to further define this concept. These individuals noticed teammates who did and did not engage in the sport psychology activities and wanted to encourage the team as a whole to be involved.

I can specifically remember in our captain's meeting...saying "we need to make sure that we mention something to the guys - the team to come to Renee's things." And I always wanted to have all the team starters there. You know, because the ten starters are the guys who are number one on the depth chart, but if other people want to strive to be like them, they need to try and do what we do.

Influence also occurred on an individual level as athletes often sought each other out for support or guidance. One participant recalled making the suggestion that a teammate should work with me, "times where I was just like, 'hey, why don't you just talk to Renee about that? It would be more of her expertise.'"

Lastly, it is acknowledged that most of the comments included under this sub-theme speak to the promotion of sport psychology within the team; however, it appears that participants also noticed their teammates prioritizing other activities above sport psychology time.

I mean, there really wasn't anything like "don't do that, it's stupid."

But...some of the guys would just be like "let's just go eat instead." ... But really wasn't against yoga or against staying after they just wanted to go do something else.

It appears that athletes were not influenced to avoid the sport psychology activities, but that it was difficult to keep over-booked schedules from decreasing motivation to attend seminars.



### *Athlete Bonding*

One type of social script or expectation that existed was labeled as “athlete bonding” and delineated how athletes expected to form relationships with others on the team including coaches, teammates, and even sport psychologists. Participants talked about the types of social interactions that helped them to feel closer to or more distant from “outsiders.” One athlete discussed what type of individual was accepted and able to “bond” on a personal level and what type was not.

It depends on what kind of male you were. If you are cool and could bond with the guys you would be brought in really fast. But if you were a nerd you probably would have been farther...probably would have been cut off if you were a male who couldn't fit in. But a male who could fit in would be involved in all the locker room quote unquote talk and all that good stuff.

While the idea that being a “nerd” was detrimental to one’s ability to create relationships with the team, they also noted that it felt “inappropriate” talking about sexual “stuff” with me, which impeded relationship building in a culture that values being “able to share everything.”

For some, it was important that they did not have to change themselves in a manner that felt uncomfortable or inconvenient if a new person joined the team. In referencing the fact that the team shared many personal details (i.e.; stories of sexual encounters, flatulence around each other) and commonly used profanities in the practice gym, one participant commented that being unaccepting of athletes would be harmful to the relationship building process. “To have somebody who is offended by stuff like that -

if you make that apparent to me ‘oh, I don’t like hearing that’ then you’re making the gap even further.”

Successfully navigating this process, which is not overt or objective in nature was difficult. A participant spoke to the ways in which he thought that I athletes’ expectations for building social relationships.

You kind of, you know, make people realize that you’re not a threat. That you’re not here to call people out who fart or are shitting their pants...and people who swear around you and stuff like that... I guess if you’re pointing out that, I would argue that you’re not doing your job very well. If you’re there to point out that and you’re a threat then people won’t talk to you about other shit.

However, another athlete disagreed with teammates who wanted to do or say everything and anything in my presence. It was his opinion that gender differences between myself and the rest of the team should be acknowledged and that it “bothers” him when one coach promoted “being a dirt bag” in talking about sex with a date or otherwise be sexually promiscuous.

It’s just a respect thing, it’s not that you’re a woman and we’re better than you or you’re better than us. It’s just sort of like, you ARE different and we just try to be respectful and gentlemanly like. I know some of the cruder people on the team might communicate certain, certain, I don’t know - expletives, sexual adventures and all that. Which you can’t really do that with a female that much.

For each athlete on the team, there were different definitions of what it meant to feel comfortable around support staff. Athletes' typical means of building relationships were challenged as they decided how to incorporate a novel role and individual (i.e., woman) within the team.

### *Coach Influencing Athlete*

The participants also discussed the attitudes that their coaches embodied towards sport psychology and how different coaches had increased or decreased their desire to participate in the sport psychology program. It is important to point out that during my time with the team, the wrestling program had maintained the same head coach, but nine different individuals served as assistant coaches. Participants observed that in allowing me to work with the team, the head coach had influenced them to be involved with the sport psychology program. Athletes said that by granting me permission to work with the team, they perceived the head coach to value and/or believe in the positive effects of sport psychology. After this initial influence, however, athletes reported seeing a wide range of attitudes and degrees of influence from their coaching staff.

In my earlier work with the team, the participants thought that the coaches said and did many things that encouraged the team to utilize the sport psychology program. This ranged from statements encouraging the team to stay for post-practice seminars (“[the coaches] always told us to stay after, too. They were like ‘yeah, you should stay after’”) to seeing coaches stay for the seminars themselves. One participant recalled that “[coach] ... would actively participate in those things, too. And that was really cool. So I really liked being able to hear his opinion of things ‘cause it’s not all the time that we get to talk to the coaches.” Another participant acknowledged that having the coaches show

support for the sport psychology program was “comforting” even though he already planned on exploring the program.

Positive encouragement towards the sport psychology program was not the only attitude the athletes reported seeing, though. Throughout the five seasons I spent with the team, several athletes felt that the coaching staff also discouraged involvement with the sport psychology activities by taking a neutral stance towards participation.

They’ve been pretty indifferent. Obviously if they had been more...I guess given the athletes more demanding issues to stay and listen to you, you probably would have had a bigger audience. Um, so I feel that they were in a sense negative but their being indifferent to it kind of lead to you not having as much of an influence.

One athlete commented on his interest in seeing if sport psychology would be “incorporated into practice time or something that would be done as extra-curricular” while another observed that “it didn’t seem like [the coaches], they didn’t apply, you know, I don’t know if they ever took a sheet you had to apply it, whereas they probably could.” It seems that athletes commonly used behavioral cues to determine the opinions of the coaching staff.

Participants also reported instances when they felt that one or more coaches opposed my presence with the team or the activities I that I offered. One athlete remarked that he had seen a change in the coaches’ attitudes during the last season I worked with the team.

You weren’t wanted there. I mean, the words did not come out they mouth, but you could say things more ways than one. And I mean, there

were a few times when I overheard, you know, something about, you know, guys being babies and crying to you. So I'm pretty sure that's negative...towards what you do.

It appears that associating emotionality with the program is a signal from coaches to the athletes to avoid the program. Participants noticed the attitude held by one coach in particular as being highly opposed to the sport psychology program. "He's all about 'oh, you're a pussy if you cry or feel sad or anything.' ... It was more of an emotional type thing with the sport psychologist thing instead of physical. And he feels like anything emotional's SOFT."

Interestingly, in spite of the perceptions of the coaching staff's attitude towards the sport psychology program, most of the athletes maintained the degree to which they were involved with the program. (Regardless, the change in the coach's attitudes did result in a decrease in opportunities for me to work with the team.) In fact, more than one of the participants interviewed expressed a negative reaction to their coach's perceived disapproving attitude towards the sport psychology program.

It makes me upset to think that...something that's helped me so much could be viewed as a negative thing. Or that they might be getting in the way of such a great resource. And keeping it from individuals...cause they might not have this resource for very long.

It seems that a coach expressing an opinion that is contrary to the team's collective decision (and perhaps individual decisions as well) has little impact on athletes' beliefs. For example, this athlete and others had decided that sport psychology was beneficial to their training and they were not deterred by the coach's opinion. Interestingly, coaches

labeled as most influential on this team are also those who have a very positive outlook regarding sport psychology.

### *Openness Momentum*

In attempting to better understand how relationships were established between the athletes and myself, a noteworthy concept was discovered. Openness momentum was seen as the process of slowly becoming more open to a relationship with a new person or role (in this case, myself), by first experiencing a relatively safe interaction (e.g., making small talk) as rewarding and gradually becoming more open to questionable activities (e.g., doing yoga). The types of interactions were seen as outside of the realm of conventional and/or acceptable behavior defined by the culture of the team.

Within the team setting, there was potential to develop several different types of relationships. It seemed that in large part, the type of relationship that was established depended on the needs and interests of the athletes, and the interpersonal style, competency and/or skills that I possess. Congruent with the purpose of my role with the team, participants talked about how they first established a working relationship based on learning and teaching sport psychology topics.

I think the first couple times, you know, when I was very young, I was just getting a feel for - I wanted to do it, but I didn't know how I wanted to do it or what I was going to do with it... Then as I came more, I felt like I needed to be more involved, do more things... I felt like "if I'm going to be here I might as well make the most of my time." If I'm going to show up I might as well, you know, do it all. Go all out. Be more involved and start thinking more. Being involved more.

Increasing familiarity with the role and coming to understand how it applies to an athletic experience were both important becoming more open in working with me as a sport psychologist. “So if you do little by little, [athletes] realize that it’s probably not that much and get used to it and have a quality time.”

Each individual had his own timeline for developing any type of relationship with me. Several of the participants discussed how establishing a working relationship (i.e.; sport psychologist – athlete) helped pave the way for more personal relationships to develop.

I was definitely hesitant at first. And then you started doing the seminars.

It would be you talking at first and then kind of opened up to discussion...

And finally from the group discussions and things like that, I could talk to

you individually and tell you what I was feeling - different things like

that...talk to you maybe about things that didn’t involve sport psychology

but it involved the team and things like that.

This athlete and others felt that after determining that they enjoyed or benefited in some way from talking about sport psychology. They were willing to slowly share more of themselves. Again, participants pointed out how the connection between us was built gradually, according to their comfort.

You kind of share small talk at first and stuff like that. And then if you

have a long conversation, you have a long conversation. But it’s not like

someone jumps out of the blue at you, you know?

### *Power Differentials and Hierarchies*

Within the environment of this specific sports team, the concept of power was deemed to be highly salient, and was discussed numerous times during the interviews. The discussion of power dynamics and hierarchies is included in this study because the vertical organization of the team strongly impacted how the sport psychology program and myself as the sport psychologist were perceived by the team. Power differentials and hierarchies were seen through exemplars of who is powerful or not powerful within the team and how this impacted the distillation of ideas, beliefs, and attitudes about the sport psychology program.

To begin, it is important to understand how athlete rank is determined within a team. A customary method of categorization that exists is that of seniority; this approach was seen within the wrestling team as seniors typically “out-rank” under-classmen. Perhaps even more important on this team, however, was athletic achievement. Every participant talked about seeing high-achieving athletes (or those with at least high potential) as being higher up on the team’s hierarchy, regardless of class-rank. One participant perceived the high-ranking members of the team to possess both objective and subjective qualities that he respected.

Well, they’re good at wrestling and they just have a confidence around them. That they know what they’re doing. So it’s like “ok, well, I’ll follow you.” And like, if, let’s say [names teammates-lower achieving non starters] or somebody’s like “let’s just stay after.” Then I’d kind of be like “ahhh, I don’t know.”



Athletes believed that my ability to connect with powerful athletes on the team was significant. As one athlete said, in order for my message to be acknowledged – that is, to effectively encourage the team to improve their mental skills – I needed to be connected with “the leader, the alpha male of the group.” He went on to state that,

Have the leader of that group carry out those qualities that you need. You know, confidence, persistence, those certain qualities then you are going to be successful as a sport psychologist. But I don't think you can pick off an unimportant member of the group and - if you can make him perfect and he's an unimportant member of the group then so what? Cause it's not going to carry throughout the whole great role because no one cares what he says or what he does.

For this team, athletes who were considered to be lower on the team's hierarchy looked to the team leaders before engaging in atypical activities such as working with the sport psychologist.

Athletes felt that there were several qualities that I possessed that limited the degree to which I was seen as a powerful, important contributor to the team. Gender and experience were two of the most commonly discussed. One participant noted that the desire to be seen as “macho,” and consequently more powerful, kept some athletes from working with me. He hypothesized that athletes might perceive me (as a woman) as having a lesser intelligence level and not worth listening to. Again, flagging gender and experience, another participant observed that the degree to which it was believed that I had something beneficial to share with the team was reduced. “No matter what you do,

it's always going to be 'oh, what's she really done?' Now, if Dan Gable came and said the exact same shit, you know, it'd be written down on stone."

The ways in which the coaching staff encouraged/discouraged participation in the sport psychology program also contributed to the rank that I held within the team – and interestingly, perhaps their own rank within the team. As coaches also appeared to compete for power within the team hierarchy, one participant observed that "it was interesting, you know, cause coach put aside his pride and having you come in, to a certain extent, to talk and work with us." It would seem that inviting an individual outside of the team to come and contribute to the training of athletes could be interpreted as acknowledgement of failure or incompetence by a coach.

Occupying a lower hierarchical status on the team was not always detrimental. Particularly in my work with individual athletes, I was seen as non-threatening.

I think that helps a lot of guys feel good when they can sit there and sit down and talk to you about stuff that they would feel too vulnerable to talk to big bad coach or, you know, a captain, or even an older guy. You know? Or any other wrestler.

In some ways, I was perceived to be working outside of or ignoring the typical hierarchical arrangements of the team. One participant acknowledged that it was a pleasant change to be treated as equal with everyone else on the team.

Somebody, I felt like, did believe in me. I mean, and for the most part I didn't feel like, you know, I didn't feel like I had to compete for your support.... But you's just like, you really didn't care if he was the best or

not. It just seemed like you still supported us whether or not we was real good or not.

Several other thoughts emerged on the concept of power and hierarchies. A few athletes believed that having a sport psychologist work with their team meant that their team was special. Another athlete saw “with the more status I guess you have on the team the easier it would be or the more entitled you would feel to your help.”

### *Sport Specific Culture*

Culture refers to the norms or expectations for behaviors, customs and traditions, and shared language of a particular group. Culture is explored here as it provides a backdrop for understanding how the athletes I worked with responded to the sport psychology program and to me. This is especially true as, perhaps mostly due to intense public scrutiny, athletic teams often present much differently to “insiders” than they do to “outsiders.” Changes within the team culture are discussed under the theme of Outcomes.

Participants frequently referenced the culture of the larger sport of wrestling and their specific team. Many of them believed that they are a different type of athlete because the demands of the sport are different than less physically demanding sports. They also believed that other sports were likely more open to sport psychology and/or a woman working with the team. In trying to understand these beliefs, it was necessary to explore the system from which they came. This exploration includes examining the mentality of the coaching staff, general expectations for behavior, and beliefs about athletes who use sport psychology services.

Many cultural expectations and customs are taught and emphasized by coaches. There was a distinction made between those who were seen as “old school” and coaches

who were not labeled as such (there was no label for these types of coaches, but presumably they could be called “new school”). One athlete explained what typified an “old school” coach:

Hell, you’ve seen every single practice, our coaches calling people worthless. You know “you’re worthless, get the F--hell out of this practice!” ... “you get the fuck out of here!” You know? “You never wrestle hard. You’re disgusting to me!” You know? Coaching against other kids while they’re wrestling. You always see that, they always coach the starter against the kid he’s wrestling. “Beat him! Beat him!” It’s like, “do this to him, do this to him!” Telling the guy, you know, how to beat the guy he’s wrestling.

He went on to state his belief that “wrestling is a horrible sport if you think about it - because you *break* [italics added] people. You break their spirits, their mentality, you break their bodies.” Another athlete shared his perception of why coaches utilized this approach stating, “through, you know, degradation I guess - degrading and I guess malice, you try and break a person down so that they just get tougher.”

Other coaching styles were seen as more likeable and approachable to the athletes. Participants regularly referenced coaches whom they believed were “cool,” “relaxed,” and even a bit of a “goof off.” Coaches who did not regularly loudly yell at athletes, use fear as a motivation, or speak in demeaning ways appeared to be more respected and were sought after by athletes for performance enhancement advice and general relational connection.

There was a sense that the coaches use a predictable interpersonal approach. One participant captured the sentiments of his teammates when he said that “when you have a meeting with your coach you’re expecting to get talked to. You’re not expected to, you know, open up and have conversations about, you know, everyone’s personal feelings. And how they feel and what they mean.” Because some coaches so effectively minimized the acceptability of talking openly, they were not seen as people with whom to communicate regarding any topic. This participant went on to state, “I would never go to [coach] to talk about wrestling, about technique and stuff like that - I don’t think I’d ever go to either of them to talk about mental stuff.” Other participants recognized that in “being so strict, so stern” many athletes were “afraid” to talk with the coaches. Coaches being seen as “problem solvers” and not listeners or “the father figure that, you know, always beats your ass” also provided a significant framework for my role with the team.

An additional quality of the “old school” coach is that they are perceived to have little interest in promoting mental skills training in an intentional or open manner. An athlete commented on how this facet of the wrestling culture impacted his view of the sport psychology program, noting his “surprise” that I had been allowed to work with the team at all.

Within this very small community, there were specialized expectations for behavior and a very narrow tolerance for what was seen as acceptable. Adherence to these standards was closely monitored. One athlete eloquently depicted the attitudes held by many on the team,

“We gotta keep it in. We have to just keep pushing forward.”....

Everybody has the feelings, it’s just like, “ah!” you’re supposed to be the

all-powerful male. You're not supposed to feel pain or be sad or anything like that.

Several participants acknowledged that they felt like a "robot" within the team environment. Others depict it as a "macho... caveman-brute" mentality, "womanizers," and "aggressive meatheads." In the words of one participant, "welcome to the jungle... a room full of guys who beat each other up for a living."

Athletes note associations between the team culture and the type of physical training that was used. Participants talked about the expectation to engage in constant physical aggression with/against their teammates and address the struggle that existed to meet these expectations.

It's always a competition... Because if he's smaller than you, then you better be beating him. And if he's larger than you, you still don't wanna lose. And he's got a chip on his shoulder because he wants to beat you even harder because you're smaller than him.

This mindset of constantly needing to "grind against" others to elicit improvement was pervasive throughout the team. This grinding was seen in one athlete's experience as the only method for "sharpening steel." This is a very telling metaphor that illustrates the culture of the sport.

With strict expectations of what constitutes appropriate behavior clearly in place, there was very little latitude to stray from the aforementioned team culture. In many ways, my presence with the team triggered the apprehension that if they were not going to adhere to stereotypical "robot" conduct they would be perceived negatively. Sport psychology literature refers to this as the negative halo effect and many participants

spoke to the risk that they felt was involved in working with me. This fear stems from the belief that sport psychologists work with people who aren't "stable mentally," have "mental deficiencies," or are "head cases." These terms conveyed a clear connotation of weakness and inability that were unacceptable to most athletes – particularly those who come from a culture which values strength and domination.

Having a female sport psychologist seemed to elicit even more fear that softness or a lack of toughness would have "adverse effects" on the team. For example, an athlete expresses his fear that I am going to be "too squishy," "huggy," and not treat him as the rest of the team would ("not punching me or something"). His imagined response was to say, "go away, I'm not a pussy." He and several other participants openly use the term "pussy" to refer to weakness and failure to achieve what was expected of a man by equating this man to the status of a woman. Indeed, "squishy" is quite the opposite of "steel." My presence causes other significant reactions:

I was a little bit of a brute, so my initial thought was "what's this woman doing?" You know? I don't got time for this, I'm a wrestler. I'm tough, I'm not no wimp. I'm not going to be sitting here talking to her. You know? And it was just, like, I was being - not an airhead, being...pro-male. Pro-male athlete. Anti-sensitivity.

This participant and others use the term "fag" in referencing the expected perceptions of others if they work with me. Again, being associated with the sport psychologist appeared to instill fears of being emasculated, and by association a lesser athlete, in the eyes of others. Only two participants denied feeling any fear of negative evaluation in deciding to work with me.

As discussed previously, the culture of the team does change over time. Athletes who joined the team after I was more established within my role seemed to have fewer fears of negative appraisal for working with me. However, possibly due to the culture of the sport in its entirety, there was some degree of initial hesitancy to seeking out sport psychology services regardless of how well favored my work was with the current team.

### *Sport Psychologist*

The final major theme that emerged from the participant interviews was that of Sport Psychologist. In this theme, the athletes' experiences of me as a person and as their sport psychologist are delineated. It is clear that the sport psychology program was more than learning mental training skills; the individual offering these opportunities was also highly important. In fact, it seems that without the right person in the role, very little learning or change had the chance to occur. To understand what helped to make me the right type of person (and times when this was not the case) aspects of my personality, my knowledge about sport psychology and the sport of wrestling, my perceived investment with the team, and my gender are all discussed at length.

### *Conduct and Characteristics*

Participants acknowledged that they have a significant interest in determining who I was as a person because this impacted their desire to work with me. Frequently, they talked about how they used my personal conduct and/or characteristics to provide this information. Note that most of our conversations and interactions were focused on them and were not an even exchange of interpersonal information.

Athletes' experience of me as a communicator was one of the most frequently cited characteristics. The athletes with whom I spoke felt that my ability to listen was one



of my greatest strengths. One athlete observed that “you let people talk and it’s tough to dislike someone if they’re just simply listening.” The participants noted that “a person who’s a listener above all else” was important, and talking freely with the athletes was the second half of being a good communicator. In the words of one participant, “you just gotta be good at talking and shooting the shit with people.”

Well, you’re going to be critical, but you’re going to be more understanding. And you were going to be effectively communicate, you know, ways to deal with it without coming off as offensive or making us feel like we can’t go to talk to you again.

Additional ways of seeing this skill involved contrasting my communication style with the style of others, particularly some of the coaches with whom athletes worked over the years. Athletes were quick to develop short scenarios that illustrated their perspective.

You kept it real. You didn’t beat around the bush but you didn’t do it in an offensive way. If you felt that somebody was not doing as well as they could have, you would tell them but you wouldn’t try to do it in an offensive way. When you would talk to that person themselves, you wouldn’t say “you’re a piece of shit, get your ass in gear!” It would be just “hey man, you need to step it up. You know, you need to hold yourself accountable.” You’d keep it real, but you’d be very assertive and tell them what they needed to do.

The ability to “keep it real” was a valued characteristic to these athletes and another area in which they thought I was effective. Participants defined “keeping it real” as “not afraid to say the truth” about ways in which an athlete might need to make

improvements or what was happening with the team. They emphasized that “if you’re not honest with the athletes then they’re going to see right through you.” My ability to “[take]the good, shake off the bad...and [apply] the things that you said” cemented the belief that I was being honest and teaching skills in which I believed.

Honesty was also desired in making claims to improve performance. One athlete stated emphatically that, “if you come in on the first day and you’re like ‘Oh, I can solve all your problems right now,’ you can go fuck yourself.” He stressed the need to first spend time with athletes before commenting on what could or could not be fixed and appreciated that I had taken the time to get to know the team before making promises about how I could help them.

Numerous times throughout the interviews, athletes commented about my personality and interpersonal style that helped me develop a positive working relationship with individuals on the team. Participants stated that I was “outgoing - not shy,” “non-threatening,” “easy going,” and “definitely easy to open up to.” Athletes also talked about the ways in which they experienced my enthusiasm for working with the team. One participant described me as “chipper, very go-go-go exciting. Eager, you know? But in a good way. Just eager to help and you love to involve everybody, which is a good thing.” While I was seen as “passionate” about my work, I was also seen as willing to meet athletes where they were and be “just a little pushy.” According to one athlete, “a good thing you did was you were patient with guys. Maybe, I think...patience like a kindergarten teacher probably... And it may even be harder than that because you’re trying to break bad habits.”

Interestingly, participants also noticed how the qualities I possessed matched the characteristics of the team as a whole. During one of my first observations of a team practice, an athlete commented to me that “wrestlers are just weird compared to any other athletes.” From costumed dodge ball practices to dancing in the middle of the warm up run, I observed it to be a point of pride for multiple generations of this team to be out of the ordinary and “goofy.” One of the less expected characteristics that stood out to the team was the way in which I fit with the team’s shared definition of itself.

You might be a little bit goofy so it’s easy for you to relate to wrestlers.

Let’s be honest, we’re all a little fucking crazy...Everyone’s just a little bit strange, a little bit goofy, a little bit crazy. And got something wrong with them. I’m not saying that you’ve something wrong with you (laughing).

But you’re definitely a little bit weird... Not that it’s a bad thing, I think it’s a good thing.

Other participants acknowledged that I was “quirky, but a good quirky” and “very different” but also emphasized that this helped me be seen as part of the team.

Finally, despite my apparent “weirdness,” athletes spoke about how I acted in a professional manner in working with their team. The participants defined professionalism as maintaining appropriate boundaries as a female working with an all-male team. Many participants remembered testing these boundaries when a teammate asked me if it was ok to engage in sexual intercourse the night before a competition (he had been told that having sex could potentially decrease performance). A participant recalled his reaction to the interaction:

The first time I heard them ask I was like, I was wondering if that was appropriate. Maybe that was another thing you did, too, by bouncing it off and not like, it was like “oh, look at that, she’s cool with it.” Not that, I’m not that she’s with cool with the subject but ah... It wasn’t like (flirty voice) “ooh, I don’t know [name].” You know what I’m saying? It was like you kept it professional. And I think even though you developed personal relationships, you kept it professional.

Other ways in which I was seen as being professional included challenging attitudes or norms that were incongruent with the message of the sport psychology program. An athlete noted that he “never had to question” that I was “someone who’s going to stand up and...for what they believe in. And you know, do what’s best for the team.” This was evidenced in the choice of seminar topics or other learning activities. Another participant labeled this as “[fighting] the system in an appropriate way” and maintained that

You practice what you preach as in - there’s a coaching staff or if there is someone on the team or whatever that is going against what you believe, your research, your studies, and the way you believe a team should mentally and psychologically go about their business, you try and fix it. As in, you get upset and you try and change it, you try and change what you believe is wrong in a respectful manner.

### *Gender*

The impact of gender was discussed throughout this results chapter as it related to many other themes. However, it is within this sub-section that the gender role

expectations, gender stereotypes, and interpersonal interactions between myself and the athletes (such as physical attraction) are more fully explored.

Participants explored a wide range of initial responses to learning that the sport psychologist was female, and many of them experienced negative reactions to this news. Much of this was due to the pre-existing stereotypes around gender. One athlete shared the types of concerns that men have in working with a female sport psychologist.

Like “I wonder if she’s going to be weak sauce, she’s going to be soft. She’s not going to know what we’ve been through, she’s not going to know the hardships we went through.” You know, it’s just, and then guys in general they like think that when it comes to hardship sports, women have no idea.

“Weak sauce” was defined as an insult for being delicate or unable to meet socially constructed rules around physical toughness. An example of this expected rule-breaking occurred when it was automatically presumed that I was “consoling” an athlete who had a difficult practice.

Participants acknowledged that “especially for a woman” it was harder to both earn and keep respect in the eyes of the team. One participant linked this reality to cultural standards within the larger society, “because that’s human nature for men...because men consider no matter how much you know, guys think - they’ll always consider women subservient to them. And they don’t like women telling them what to do.” Another participant also commented that in working with “aggressive meatheads” a female sport psychologist has to “constantly like...act accordingly and [you] have to

conduct [yourself] professionally to gain that respect.” He noted that it might only take one small mistake to lose any respect that was cultivated.

A few athletes felt that they did not have any initial concerns in working with me due to gender. One participant remarked, “female or male I couldn’t really give a shit, but maybe that affects some other people.” This mentality was reflected in the actions of the athlete as he was one of the first individuals who sought me out for sport psychology focused discussions. Another athlete acknowledged that sexism likely existed for some of his teammates with the “old mindset” and that they were “going to be very stupid about it.” However, he believed that some of his teammates were also going to be “very receptive” as he was to a female sport psychologist.

For many, the experience of working with men in the world of sport prompted them to believe that a male sport psychologist would be problematic. As one athlete stated, “like you’d be able to talk to more things with a guy at the beginning but then, like, the woman graph eventually goes above that.” This athlete drew a graph during the interview (in the air) suggesting that comfortable levels working with a man would initially be higher than comfort levels of working with a woman. However, over time the imaginary graph showed the comfort levels of working with a woman would rise significantly, while comfort levels in working with a man would stay the same. Another participant noted that it “felt good because then we didn’t have another dude yelling at us again.” Many of the athletes report that in being a woman, I was seen as more distant from the coaching staff. This is also a positive attribute of the sport psychology program as there was a sense of neutrality in not being aligned “on their side of the coaching staff.” One athlete provided a scenario he fears would occur if a male sport psychologist

worked with the team: “having [a] sport psychologist that was a guy - I could easily see coach going ‘hey, what are those guys saying? Are they being pussies?’ ... And that guy would be like ‘yeah, they’re being pussies.’” He felt that in this even being a possibility, athletes would be less likely to confide in a man.

There were many who felt that a female presence was beneficial for the team as it was a type of “motherly” or “mother goose” role. Athletes emphasized that as a woman, I was “less threatening,” “more accepting,” and that they felt “it’s easier to talk to a woman about your problems. I think, in general, women are probably better communicators as far as like talking about feelings and emotions.” One participant said that in being “more understanding,” I could “effectively communicate, you know, ways to deal with [problems] without coming off as offensive or making us feel like we can’t go to talk to you again.”

Evidence of gender-based stereotypes was also seen in athletes discussing the ways in which they saw me breaking expectations – essentially recognizing my individuality beyond the binary of male or female appropriate ways of being in the world. One participant shared,

We talked about like dudes farting in the room when you’re in there and then you come back with the soccer team farts louder than we do or something. That’s the kind of thing where it’s like “ok, she’s one of the girls that I can say different shit to. Like, I don’t have to process what I’m going to say before I say it.”

Over the years, the team and I developed a system for them to be able to share “locker room talk” if I was present. An individual would shout “ear muffs” indicating that I

should avoid listening to the conversation. One athlete recalled that I used a light-hearted approach to remind one offending individual that I did not want to hear everything the team talked about, “you only made him run a lap, you didn’t yell at him and stuff like that...that’s kind of funny and different.” This athlete was referencing one of the few times where I did, in fact, have a reaction to something that an athlete did or said in my presence.

Other examples of breaking stereotypes were discussed and focused on the idea that I did not ascribe to being overly feminine. A participant stated that he was initially “shocked” that as “a girl in a man’s world” I felt free to be “standing out there, like punching the guys and messing around.” He feels that seeing me “goofing off” with other teammates “made it easy to listen as weird as that sounds. It was, you weren’t like a little girly girl, you were more of a tom-girl so that helped out.” One participant talked about attributes he felt contributed to my persona in a positive way.

You dealt with a bunch of bull riders and you grew up in a culture where you knew what, you know, pansy was and what a real guy was. And so, you’ve done some kickboxing and you’ve been on a wrestling a team for a while. So you know what a male athlete in a male sport should be acting like. What is acceptable and what is going to gain respect and everything.

A discussion of gender within the sport psychology program would be incomplete without exploring the dynamic of physical attraction. Several participants acknowledged that they experienced feelings of sexual attraction towards me. This is particularly true during the times when I had instructed the team in weekly yoga sessions.



I: Cause if you were 40 years old, overweight, I don't think we would have given you much time of the day. But since you're pretty good looking, you know? Guys naturally want to listen to the good looking people, good looking girls. You know, I'm not going to lie, during yoga half the guys, were fuck... some of the times I was just there to -

R: Staring.

I: Yeah, I'm sorry.

Other athletes also noticed that many of their teammates took the opportunity to be “just doing stuff they shouldn't be doing.” Seeing their teammates looking at me as an object or person of sexual interest was “funny times, those were good times, those were team times.”

Due to my appearance, I was also seen as “more approachable” and instinctive social preferences are to spend time with people who are physically attractive. One participant noted that it was “definitely helpful to be good looking girl... You're not getting anywhere if you're ugly.” One athlete clarified that he although he found me to be attractive, he “didn't allow [himself] to look at [me] like that, just out of respect.”

Participants acknowledged that the disparity in our ages and my relationship status are details of interest about me because of the attraction that existed.

In summation, gender differences had a dramatic impact on the sport psychology program. It was clear that participants had to navigate several layers of societal messages and/or stereotypes before they truly began to build a relationship with me. In some instances, the initial barriers that resulted from gender were not overcome; the participant who shared the most critical feedback with me during the interviews felt that gender was

the most significant reason why I did not garner respect from the entire team. He went on to say that, “it’s always going to be that way. But the thing is you disprove them by being good at what you do.” However, he also paid me one of my hardest earned compliments,

So the real thing is you being this young woman, you know? ... I think it’s important. I think you’re doing good work, you know? ...I recognize that you’re pretty brave to be in wrestling and in this unknown territory.

### *Knowledgeable*

A significant piece of the team’s experience of working with me was the determination of how they saw me as being knowledgeable or not. One athlete shared his reaction to working with someone who was inexpert, stating “I don’t want just some random Joe telling me, “hey, you need to calm down” or something like that. You have no idea, go away.” Although knowledge can have many different sources, for this team, it was impossible to overlook the fact that I was missing a critical subset of knowledge – that is, that I lacked the experience being a wrestler. All of the participants pointed out that because I never wrestled I was less effective in my role. One athlete summed up his initial beliefs about having me as his sport psychologist.

You talk to a sport psychologist and she’s a female, I mean, chances are she’s not going to know anything about wrestling...about any kind of rough sports. And they can try and read books and they can try to talk to you and there’s no - the medium there is almost pointless. Because she has no idea where you’re coming from, there’s no empathy there

whatsoever... You can't get that message across to someone if they haven't walked in your shoes.

For this athlete and many others, textbook learning was necessary but not sufficient to be considered knowledgeable and able to help athletes perform better.

However, I was able to change the degree to which I was seen as knowledgeable. For many participants, time that I spent observing practice provided me with valuable awareness. One athlete observed that I have a "willingness to learn about the sport" and another delineates how he felt I became knowledgeable in my role.

When you talk to us, you tell things and show us examples. And then from you showing examples from what you observed in practice, that gives us the opportunity to rate those and judge them to see if your judgments that you ascertained from those observations are true.

Participants spoke about the importance of understanding their experience in being able to work with them beyond performance enhancement.

You know, you're a sport psychologist but you're almost a counselor, especially with wrestling...but you're better than a counselor because you understand...what goes on in wrestling. I remember going to counselors and going, like "you have no fucking idea what you're talking about because you don't know what's important to me."

For this athlete, it was essential to not offer support without first understanding his values and his experience.

Athletes' perceptions of my knowledge changed as they came to know who I was and the background in which I was raised. For example, athletes felt that in looking "fit,"

I portrayed athleticism and understanding of their experiences. Another participant felt that because of my background in a combat sport (kickboxing), I knew “what a male athlete in a male sport should be acting like. What is acceptable and what is going to gain respect.” Yet another athlete felt that because my “credentials” involved working with people from the athletic department (coaches of other teams, staff members in the strength and conditioning program) whom he knew and respected, I “knew a lot of people who knew stuff.” All of these markers taken together seemed to contribute to the sense that I was able to understand what athletes need from a sport psychologist.

Some participants believed that being a knowledgeable sport psychologist was not dependent on being part of the wrestling world. One athlete explains this view thus:

Sports are sports. You have to work hard in every sport to be good. You need to be confident mentally to be good. And you’re not coaching us, so you not being a wrestler, has nothing to do with it. You’re professional sport psychologist, not a sports wrestler. You know? And I think you not being a wrestler helps out a lot, too. Just because you don’t have to show favoritism... I think that if you were a wrestler it would impair your judgment of our certain situations.

Other participants supported this opinion, emphasizing that I was able to understand what someone was going through without being involved and “see other aspects of it that [they] didn’t.”

### *Perceived Investment*

In the development of any social group, there is a period of group formation in which group members act in ways that establish their commitment to the group according

to appropriate social norms. Within sports teams there were official and unofficial initiation benchmarks that needed to be met in order to be a member of the team. In many ways I was an “outsider” to the wrestling world, and this significantly impacted the ways in which I showed my commitment to the team. Realistically, I had limited means to make my allegiance to the team known.

According to my observations, it seemed that there are a series of concentric circles delineating boundaries between outsiders and members of the team. At the very core of the experiential circles were the athletes, individuals who intimately understood what it meant to be an athlete on this team. In the next slightly wider circle were the whole team, coaches and athletes, and sometimes the support staff members who were highly familiar with the events and shared history of the team. Beyond this boundary were the parents, friends, partners, and less connected support staff who did not possess a first-hand understanding of the team’s daily experiences. In the outer most space outside of the circle was the general public who knew the team’s win/loss record but little else.

During my time with the team, I had moved from the outermost layers of the experiential circle to the point where I was seen as a member of the team. It appeared that the most significant factor in this process was the amount of time that I spent with the team.

It built trust because you were there. You were seeing what was going on.

You had a feel for the team, like, what was going on with team dynamics.

What was happening with all on the team. You were there on an everyday

basis, seeing how people were working out, things like that. So it really

felt like I could relate to you because you knew what was going on. I didn't have to explain myself a lot.

To one athlete, the relationship between giving time and valuing someone was “obvious” and “the way you show caring is by putting in time.” He acknowledged that while he rarely used the sport psychology services, he believed that I was dedicated to the team.

Putting your heart and soul into it. I don't think there's anybody on our team that would say that you don't care about what you're doing... They can say they don't agree with you. They can say that you don't know anything. But I don't think anyone can say that you haven't put in the time and the effort, the research, and that you truthfully are passionate about what you do. And you know what, for a lot of people - for me, that carries a lot of weight.

Other participants disclosed that “badgering the coaches” for additional time for sport psychology activities, sending emails to check in with athletes (particularly if I suspect they are struggling with an issue), and remembering the content of conversations we had from week to week were all ways in which I was seen as being invested in the athletes who made up the team. Athletes emphasized that they believed I “want the best for [them]” and that if I help them with a problem it is because I “wanted to see the smile on [their] face.”

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

In this chapter I provide an overview of the findings. Then I explore the connection between this project and prior research. Next, I discuss implications for future research and practice. Subsequently, the limitations of this study will be explored. Lastly, closing summary and final conclusions will be shared with the reader.

### *Overview of the Findings*

This study focused on a broad initial research question: what are the experiences of athletes working with a sport psychology consultant? Answers to this question were made more complex because I am a woman and the athletes that I worked with were all men. I used qualitative methods to gather data on how athletes conceptualized the relationship they developed with me as the sport psychology consultant and how they associated these relationships with perceived effectiveness of the consultation.

Participants shared that their initial reactions to the sport psychology program and sport psychologist were neutral to significantly negative. One reason for this was that they associated the concept of psychology with being “crazy” or “weak,” and my identity as a woman intensified these stereotypes. Athletes within this sport have a continual drive

to present themselves as strong and capable; the physical demands of the sport require an extremely high degree of physical toughness. This need to appear tough bleeds into every aspect of their existence.

My femaleness and role as sport psychologist stimulated fears of being seen as un-masculine for many athletes. Participants believed that they would be called a “fag” or a “pussy” if they were seen working with me. This belief was reflective of how athletes were impacted by the culture of their team, sport, and societal cultures and is known as the negative halo effect. There were specific expectations for behavior and athletes felt they would be perceived negatively if they failed to meet these expectations (i.e.; what it meant to be a strong athlete). The drive to display strength and adherence to narrow standards of masculinity prevented athletes from engaging in behaviors that they did not define as acceptable within their team culture.

Within this all-male environment, hierarchical status on the team was important. Athletes acted in ways that they felt were congruent with cultural expectations around strength and toughness in order to maintain or increase their status within the team. Many respondents commented on one athlete on the team who’s social hierarchy of the team was secured because of his undeniable physical talent and because he was seen as a leader by others. Interestingly, he was the first individual to start working with me. His security within in the team’s social structure gave him more latitude to test the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behavior by his teammates. As he reported, he felt “no barriers” in deciding to work with me. This athlete also has a great deal of personal interest in sport psychology; he read biographies of world-renowned athletes and wanted to be able to discuss “theories” related to the mental aspects of his sport. This pre-existing



curiosity coupled with his coaches being “old school” who rarely discussed mental training resulted in the athlete deciding to talk to me. I was seen as the appropriate “sounding board” for his ideas.

Interestingly, the social hierarchies that initially kept athletes from interacting with me during the first season came to serve as a catalyst in promoting the sport psychology program. After athletes saw a highly respected teammate seek me out to talk about mental skills, they began to question how emulating this behavior might help them improve as well. Many participants also wanted to attend the seminars so that they could “listen to what he is saying” and “get inside of his head.” This one athlete’s comfort in interacting with me helped to transform the definition of working with a sport psychologist for an entire team.

Change across time was one of the most important aspects of this study. Due to the fact that I worked with the team from the spring of 2004 to the early months of 2008, athletes had ample time to redefine their stereotypes about women, psychologists, and in some ways themselves. The term Openness Momentum captures this gradual cultural shift. As the team’s experiences with me were initially positive, perceptions of participating in the program change and athletes were more willing to try even less conventional types of interactions with me. As athletes started to recognize how the skills we discussed applied to their sport experience, the sport psychology program gained credibility.

My ability to demonstrate my commitment to the team also depended on time. Participants noticed the time I spent observing practices and emphasized how “putting the time in” showed them that I was invested in the team and “not someone outside the

room.” Time spent with the team helped to build feelings of comfort and trust, and I was seen as being at the team’s “disposal” and highly accessible.

Participants felt that our interactions led to unexpected benefits. Athletes said that while I was a catalyst who provided important questions and information during post-practice sport psychology seminars, they also learned a great deal about visualization, confidence, and other performance enhancement topics from talking with their teammates. Participants shared that they deeply appreciated having space to openly talk with teammates where “everyone’s opinion was valued” about topics of shared interest. This space also allowed them the opportunity to “learn things about [their] teammates” and feel “more connected” to their coaches. Athlete’s had no other place to interact with their teammates in this manner, although they did spend the majority of their time inside and outside of wrestling with their teammates.

Along with practicing “being human” in talking with their teammates, participants discussed the unexpected ways that they are impacted by the sport psychology program outside of sport. Some athletes gained a more balanced personal identity between athletics and the rest of their lives while others felt more comfortable talking and interacting with their teammates. As I provided guidance and support to many individuals on the team, athletes saw our relationship become a friendship based on my investment in their success and well-being. As one participant said, “you’re actually invested in our team and you want us to do well because...you have accepted our weirdness or whatever and it’s like you’re a part of Missouri wrestling.” Many felt that developing a friendship with me was the most important aspect of the sport psychology program. This point challenges previous literature findings that emphasize the importance of teaching mental

training skills (i.e.; visualization, confidence, etc.) or general life skills development as being of the utmost importance.

#### *Connection to Previous Literature*

Clearly, this study covered a range of topical issues important to the field of applied sport psychology. While the data substantiated some of the previous literature, it also challenged other research. Moreover, there are several aspects of this study that have not been formally investigated in an applied setting. Partington and Orlick (1987) and Whaley (2001) called for research to better understand how sport psychology can best contribute to a team while concurrently incorporating the cultural identities of both the participants and the researcher. This research begins to address these issues.

To date, most research in the applied sport psychology field has focused on measuring consultant effectiveness in teaching a variety of life development or performance enhancement skills to athletes (e.g., Danish, Petipas & Hale, 1993; Partington & Orlick, 1991; Orlick, 1989). In these studies, pre and post-intervention evaluations measured the degree to which athletes felt that the sport psychology program helped them learn new mental skills or whether they wanted to work with the consultant again; this information was most typically represented with percentages or Likert scale averages and based upon questions created by researchers.

While athletes in this study spoke extensively about the importance of learning new skills in working with me, their commentary added new depth to this literature. For instance, the participants as a whole believed that they learned more about mental skills from having a space to talk and share ideas with each other while I facilitated the discussion than from the information that I provided during our seminars. They also felt

excited to learn with their teammates in an environment that minimized power hierarchies within the team. The trap of using quantitative measures of effectiveness is that researchers are unable to expand their understanding past the questions they formulate; thus the impact of team interaction has been overlooked. Leaving questions open ended allowed this study to examine the ways in which a sport psychologist's presence changed important social dynamics on a team; in this case that the less powerful members of the team now felt that their opinions were "valued" and listened to in a way that had not occurred previously.

The need for sport psychology to examine how different cultural identities impacts work in applied sport psychology settings has also received attention in the literature, but in limited ways. Orlick (1989), Salmela (1989) and others report that being culturally competent within the world of athletics is necessary to work effectively with a team, as based on informal self-studies of their experiences. They talked about needing to understand the demands of being an athlete and knowing how to share information in a way that athletes can comprehend (i.e.; not using jargon). Botterill (1990) in another self-reflective writing discussed how as a sport psychologist he needed to successfully navigate initial "rookie" period to be seen as part of the team as an example working in a culturally aware manner. Meanwhile, Gardner (2001) emphasized that there were many potential barriers that maintain the viewpoint that consultants are outsiders but did not elaborate on what these might be. A discussion of culture beyond being inside or outside of athletics, however, was not addressed, and an awareness of how gender impacts the consultant-athlete relationship remained unclear.

As was seen in this study, athlete-consultant relationships were impacted by cultural identities, specifically gender. Participants talked about how they would be more accepting of someone who appeared to be highly similar to them. In many ways, similarities were determined according to gender stereotypes and their definitions of masculinity. They commented on how men perceived to be “nerds” and women in general were seen as lacking the social skills or experiences necessary to move beyond the label of “outsider.” Participants emphasized that there was a preferred way of bonding and interacting with people on their team and felt that they could not “share all of it” with a woman. This meant that telling jokes or stories of a sexual nature felt “inappropriate,” and this discomfort increased the amount of time it took to establish a relationship with me.

Related to understanding cultural variables, team social dynamics that impact applied consultations have received little to no attention in the literature. Past research (Myers, et al, 2004; Van Raalte, et al., 1992) has asserted that sport psychology is sometimes associated with the concept of the negative halo. This is typically defined as an athlete who works with a sport psychologist being seen as a lesser or weak athlete. However, this research was conducted using non-athlete populations while inquiring about hypothetical situations – college students reading a vignette and rating the acceptability of a football player who is working with a coach, a sport psychologist or a counselor to address performance issues.

The present study more accurately reflected the real world impact of the negative halo. It was found that the majority of athletes feared that their teammates and sometimes even their coaches would label them negatively if they worked with me. As one athlete

said, “it all came back to perception” that he was being “soft” if he worked with the female sport psychologist. It is also important to point out that while other studies addressing the negative halo can substantiate its existence, none explain it. In this study it was found that social hierarchies, in combination with socially constructed definitions of acceptable behavior and the demands of the sport determined the prevalence and strength of the negative halo effect. Athletes were seen acting in ways that were congruent with social expectations in order to maintain their status within the social ranks, and as social expectations changed, so did their behavior.

Additionally, no previously existing literature addressed reasons why negative halo within a team might change over time. Interestingly, social hierarchies – which were one of the most significant reasons why working with me was initially seen as risky – was a significant reason why the sport psychology program was eventually perceived to be beneficial. This study showed that through the interest and leadership of one or two highly respected athletes, many other athletes started to feel that it was acceptable to become involved in the sport psychology activities.

Clearly, these team leaders initially thought about the sport psychology program differently than other members of their team; this calls attention to additional within-group differences found by other researchers, particularly around the issue of acceptability of sport psychology. For instance, Khelifa (1996) and Martin (2005) surveyed athletes of large university athletic departments and found that women, starting athletes, and older athletes were the most open to sport psychology. Participants in the present study helped to provide a possible reason for this difference as they talked about a learning curve that existed in understanding “how mental this sport is.” They referred to

the freshmen on the team as “babies” who do not understand what is required to be a successful athlete. It was then the senior members of the team who influenced, due to the team’s social hierarchy, younger teammates to attend activities and learn what they had already discovered about mental skills training.

This study focused specifically on the subject of identity differences between athletes and the consultant, specifically gender. This is an important area to understand as sport psychologists become a more diverse group; yet to date there are very few studies addressing gender in sport psychology consultations. Yambor and Connelly (1991) hypothesized in their self-reflective writings that there was the potential for both negative (gossipy, manipulative) and positive (more nurturing, supportive) stereotypes for women working with all-male teams. Roper (2002) speculated that similar to the desire of male athletes to work with male coaches, male sport psychologists might also be preferred by male athletes.

The individuals on this team carried a variety of stereotypes about who I was and how I would act based on gender role expectations, and these changed over time. Unlike the descriptors of “manipulative” and “gossipy” put forth by these researchers (Yambor & Connelly, 1991, 307), athletes on this team feared that I would treat them in ways that would decrease self and others’ perceptions of how masculine they were and otherwise be “too girly.” They also assumed that I lacked knowledge about their experiences and therefore, who they were. With the passage of time, participants come to believe that female sport psychologists were more “accepting” and open to talking about emotions than a male sport psychologist would be. Once I became a solid member of the team, athletes said they preferred working with a woman over a man because they believed that

women are more caring and less likely to become aligned with harsh coaches who don't want the athletes to be "coddled."

Interestingly, not all athletes saw being a woman as initially negative in my work with the team. Several participants observed that working with a man or someone who has extensive experience in wrestling would be more intimidating and stifle conversations about emotionally distressing situations. One participant commented that being female was one of my biggest assets as a sport psychologist.

The final link to prior research was seen in regards to the amount of time I spent with the team. During their work with elite sports teams, Murphy and Ferrante (1989) speculated that being frequently available increased informal service seeking while May and Brown (1989) hypothesized that seeing a consultant at practice reminds athletes of their mental skills training. Meanwhile, Halliwell (1990) proposed that being around a team too often could be potentially harmful to the athlete-consultant relationship (but did not specify how or why this might be the case). These thoughts were based on self-reflective writings or part of the discussion of a quantitative program assessment following a consultation with a team.

Similar to Murphy and Ferrante (1989), participants in this study emphasized that a high degree of accessibility meant that they were not obliged to search me out; having the opportunity to engage in informal discussions was a highly positive aspect of the program. Most athletes denied noticing my presence while training, and NCAA regulations prevent actually working with athletes during official practice time to remind them to use mental skills (any type of interaction during practice time would violate NCAA regulations that determine how many coaches a team can have as I would be



counted as another coach). In addition, athletes felt that my frequent presence helped to build a perception that I was becoming more knowledgeable about the sport and that I truly cared about the athletes on this team. As one participant said, “the greatest gift” I could give was my time.

### *Implications for Future Practice and Research*

*Implications for Future Research.* In conducting this investigation, several important areas for future consideration in the applied sport psychology field were noted. First, it seemed that the emphasis for conducting research in applied sport psychology consultations has waned considerably over the past two decades. Much of the literature reviewed for this project represents a special time period when applied work was just starting to gain recognition; after some important progress was made, further examination of applied consultations stalled. The field would likely benefit from a renewal of interest in studying applied work because the direct provision of sport psychology services is a foremost and growing area of the field.

Several areas of interest could serve to re-energize the literature. For example, research emphasizing a multicultural or Feminist-oriented framework is greatly needed, as sport psychology is a culturally rich field in which to work. For instance, participants in this study regularly discussed how power hierarchies impacted their decision to reach out or avoid the sport psychology activities. Feminist research paradigms in particular could greatly improve this field’s ability to understand the social dynamics around power, communication within teams, and definitions of acceptable behavior that significantly impact consultants in applied settings.

Failure to acknowledge to cultural variables within research results in questionable, if not irresponsible creation of knowledge. In many ways, the current literature base asserts knowledge about applied sport psychology work from the perspective of individuals with power (white, male researchers) and does not acknowledge potential areas of bias. Athletes in this study showed that as a female consultant, social barriers in applied settings more negatively impacted me than a male counterpart during my initial work with the team.

Additionally, there has been a continual call to expand the diversity of research methods within sport psychology (Martens, 1979; Whaley, 2001). The field is remiss to avoid new approaches because they are “a pain in the ass” (Martens, 1979, pg. 98) or lack generalizability. Qualitative research methods are some of the best tools researchers can use to understand highly complex social processes and give voice to powerful individual experiences. In this study, it was important to see how perceptions of my knowledge changed over time; the use of numerical data would likely fail to capture this time-dynamic experience or explain *why* this occurred.

In the case of this project, athletes stressed how participation in their sport changed who they were as athletes and therefore, how as “meatheads” they perceived sport psychology. It is reasonable to argue that if these athletes were in a sport where coaches freely provided emotional support and encouraged connecting experiences within the team, my ability to provide these things would not seem so novel and/or beneficial for the majority of the participants. In addition, the need for support was not uniformly important for all members of the team; using qualitative methods allowed for

the understanding of different experiences and/or needs to be expressed and not lost in a team average of “what is most important.”

Finally, qualitative work needs to be carried out in an appropriate manner, avoiding the replication of quantitatively-focused questions and research design seen in the past. This includes fighting the reactionary urge to judge qualitative work based on quantitative standards of generalizability or numerical evidence. One example from this study showed the limitations in previous research design: the use of qualitative methods to examine only the factors found to be significant in quantitative research (consultant effectiveness) could have led to overlooking aspects of the sport psychology experience that were labeled as “most important” by the athletes. In addition, the failure of past qualitative research to report specific methodological approaches makes it difficult to ascertain their degree of rigor

*Implications for Future Practice.* As this investigation is based in a very much “real world” experience, there are a great many suggestions for future practice. First, it is acknowledged that not all consultants can spend over 1000 hours observing a team. However, it seems that spending as much time as possible with a team is advantageous in developing athlete-consultant relationships and possibly overcoming negative stereotypes or myths. Consultants with time limitations would likely benefit from creating an intentional plan for how to best use their available time. This could include coming to training sessions at a variety of different times, at the start of practice to engage in valuable small talk with athletes and at the end of practice to observe the most intensive training or scrimmaging. Consultants can also benefit from keeping up with media

reports of the team's competitive events as this helps the consultant to be aware of future needs, such as preparing for conference finals or rebounding after a difficult loss.

In examining my work with this team, it appears that a very real case can be made for avoiding one-time or sporadic work with a team. Particularly within groups that are acutely aware of differences between outsiders and insiders, irregular consultant attendance could negatively impact effectiveness of the sport psychologist because athletes might interpret a lack of accessibility as a lack of caring or knowledge. Consultants who do pursue time-limited work should understand the negative aspects of this work and not "over promise to under-deliver." This means working with coaches to develop an awareness of how time constraints reduce the opportunity for informal individual help seeking or decrease the specificity of information that the consultant can present. This might also mean that working with the coach to then teach athletes how to implement mental skills training is a better use of time.

Related to the frequency of interactions is the length of time that a consultant spends working with a team. Awareness of these factors may cause consultants to carefully define their expectations in working with a team with gate-keeping administrative staff; for example, this could mean deciding ahead of time how and when decisions about retaining the consultant for the upcoming season are made. Special attention should be given to deciding how time can best be used if the consultation is for one season or multiple.

As discussed by these participants, the cultural identities (in this case, gender) of the athletes and the consultant are of special importance. Both male and female consultants can improve their work with teams by being aware of how various identities

impact the way they are perceived by athletes and coaches. In addition, working to become more knowledgeable about how a range of cultural identities (racial/ethnic, social economic status, sexual orientation) influences the relationships that are formed likely benefits the overall consultation. In regards to gender, the growing number of female consultants should pay particular attention to how the language and culture of a team impacts them on a personal level. Working with a team that degrades athletes by associating them with traditionally female attributes or treats consultants as objects of sexual interest can be potentially harmful. It is important to be aware of the effects of listening to these messages with little power to change the culture that perpetuates them.

Consultants should be knowledgeable of and if possible, work closely with individuals who are seen as leaders on the team. In many cases, it may be possible to set up a meeting with team captains or those who excel competitively to develop a working relationship and talk about how the consultant and the athletes see mental skills training benefiting the entire team. Meeting with individuals in small groups also allows the consultant to cultivate an understanding of how this group (i.e.: team) defines the role of sport psychology. For example, emphasizing how any athlete can improve his or her mental skills to reach new competitive achievements sounds more positive than commenting on how the sport psychologist is available to work with “head cases.” Finally, working with athlete leaders on the team has the capacity to increase the degree of credibility of the consultant and the field.

Interestingly, athletes in this study tended to label relational aspects of our work together as being more important than what skills I was able to teach them. This speaks to the value of understanding how to best connect to the athletes with whom one works.

However, it also demonstrates that even some of the toughest athletes crave and respond positively to increased relational connection with those around them. Even though the sports world is fixated on the objective of winning, it would seem that the best consultations are those that put the needs of the individual *person* before that of the athlete and team.

### *Limitations of the Research*

The initial research design of this study contains several inherent limitations; in addition, in the process of conducting the investigation, other limitations were detected. Limitations include the issue of multiple roles and resulting bias, the applicability of this work to other applied sport psychology interventions, and inability of participants to recall events or feelings. Strengths of the study include using myself as the consultant and interviewer, utilizing a research team, and working within the guidelines of a scientifically rigorous and multiculturally aware qualitative method. Interestingly, some of the limitations of the study were also seen as strengths.

One of the first limitations of this investigation was my decision to occupy the roles of sport psychologist, principle researcher and interviewer. It is possible that due to the relationship that I developed with the team, participants may have withheld criticism of the sport psychology program because they did not want to speak negatively about me. Undoubtedly, my experience within the team environment influenced the types of questions and follow up probes that I used and this changed the data that were gathered. My extensive personal history within the team context might also be difficult to keep separate from the analysis of the athletes' experiences.

Clearly, this study was centrally focused on the experiences of one team within one sport. As such, the results should not be automatically generalized to other teams, sports, types of consultations, or the work of other sport psychology consultants. It is important to point out, however, that much of the previous literature did not actually apply to my experience as a female consultant working with a particular sport. An awareness of the limitations of the generalizability of this study to other consultation experiences is also a valuable strength.

Schedule limitations affected the data that were gathered as several potential participants indicated that they did not have time to be interviewed. Many of these participants were from the “low involvement” sub-section of potential participants; these were athletes who seldom attended sport psychology activities or interacted with me. It seems that participants with a lesser degree of involvement in the program and/or with me feel less compelled to find the time for an interview. This group is less represented in the study than I originally hoped.

The research timeline of this study and the potential for faulty memories also create problems regarding data bias. As many of the participants were asked to recall events or feelings that occurred years previously, it was apparent that their memories were altered by the passage of time and the change in beliefs during this time.

In this study, limitations were also strengths. One of my principle rationales for deciding to conduct the interviews myself was because I shared an extensive history and relationship with these participants. As discussed previously, athletes tend to be less open with people who are seen as “outsiders.” It was my belief that in being the interviewer, I would gather higher quality data because the athletes were comfortable with me. It was

also important that the interviewer possess a working knowledge of the sport experience and ask knowledgeable follow up questions. Interestingly, the athletes I interviewed did, in fact, share critiques of the program and other potentially embarrassing or difficult to discuss experiences. In asking one participant what it would have been like to be interviewed by a hypothetical research assistant, the following response was given:

I: Probably wouldn't say as much.

R: Why is that?

I: I wouldn't have because you asked more questions like "what do you mean about this, what do you mean about that?" And it's like you remember what it is, I mean she'd probably just ask the questions, I'd just answer and get out of here. Umm, but I can be honest with you and that's easier because I can just - shit just honest. And if it was somebody else, just sitting there I'd probably just be more quiet and not say as good of answers or truthful.

As highlighted by this quote, another positive aspect of my decision to occupy multiple roles within this project was that my ability to recall important events contributed to a richer collection of data. Numerous times during the interview process, I prompted participants to recall specific events or interaction that only he and I knew about; I was also able to recount conversations word for word, and several participants commented on their surprise that I remembered so many of our shared interactions. There are so many of these instances that they are coded by the research team under the title "historical reference" and likely lead to enhanced data as it helped the participants recollect events both recent and more distant.



Other strengths were associated with the methodology and design of this study. In many ways, qualitative methods allowed for the creation of a rich understanding of the athlete's experience because the reader can hear the actual voices of the athletes. During the data analysis, I continually referred to literature on the grounded theory method, kept a detailed research journal and carefully recorded my personal reactions separate from my analytic writing, and utilized a small research team to help me maintain a balanced examination of the data.

In using these approaches, I was able to uphold the rigor of the grounded theory method. For instance, a reflection of how my personal observations differ from those of the participants is found in appendix E. Members of the research team took turns coding interviews before we met as a group, and this allowed for opinions to emerge that were not influenced by my experiences. As bias exists in all research, my awareness of possible sources of bias helped me to more clearly delineate my experiences and ideas from that of the participants in an open and conscious manner.

Two final strengths from this project contributed to recommendations for the future direction of sport psychology literature. My serving as a bridge between academic and applied sport psychology is beneficial to both segments of the field. Because I am a practitioner, my research question was driven by issues important to individuals receiving and providing services in this field. In being focused on maintaining scientific rigor due to my academic background, this study is grounded in the principles of responsible and conscientious science. In having an understanding of both worlds, I was a scientifically minded practitioner and an important curator for the field as a whole. Lastly, this study emphasizes multicultural issues critical to the effectiveness of a rapidly changing field.

The inclusion of cultural identities in the both the research questions and the awareness of the researcher augments the strength of the study significantly.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

This study contributes to the field of psychology generally and sport psychology by exploring the experiences of athletes working with a long-term sport psychology consultant. In many ways and regarding a wide range of topics, it was possible to take the voices of these participants to a much larger audience and better understand the richness of their thoughts and feelings.

Undoubtedly, there is a growing field of applied sport psychology literature that is critical to advancing the profession. Nevertheless, it has also become apparent that past researchers have neglected to ask some critical questions of work in applied settings. By better understanding the impact of various cultural identities on relationships formed in these settings, the field of sport psychology is further able to advance the profession in a responsible and conscientious manner.

As the demands of the sport world increase and more athletes and coaches become aware of the sport psychology field, there is little doubt that sport psychology consultants will become more sought after. With these opportunities, it is the duty of the field and the individuals within it to truly understand the voices of the people with whom we work as this better enables us to provide them with the skills and caring that they deserve. While working to achieving performance goals is undeniably valuable, the consultant who also provides support and positive regard has an almost immeasurable impact on an athlete's life. It is with this point in mind that a consultant is best able to carry out the work of a sport psychologist and "friend."

## EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Introduction*

Few activities are as common to the human experience as participation in sport and recreational fitness. The Running Network (2002) reports that from 1997 to 2002 involvement in high school team sports increased 27%, and there are nearly 50 million people aged 6-17 who participate in organized team sports. Although difficult to estimate, it is easy to imagine that even more recreational athletes participate in sports at the “backyard” level, playing basketball in the driveway after dinner or kicking soccer balls around during recess. Meanwhile, participation in sports continues to grow at elite levels, such as the Olympics, as well. Neus (2006) estimated that 2500 athletes from 85 countries competed at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino, with 6 new sports added since the previous Olympic Games. The world of athletics, and particularly elite athletics, has grown and changed tremendously over the past century.

While many of these changes, such as racial desegregation of sports and legislation aimed at equal access for both men and women are positive, many are also blatantly negative. It is commonly thought that the pressure to win pushes athletes, coaches, and even spectators to adopt a “win at all costs mentality” (Bacon et al., 2005, p.

230). For instance, much attention has been given to drug use in professional and Olympic level sports. Bacon et al. (2005) note that athletes may use a variety of drugs for performance enhancement, recreation, the alleviation pain, or self-medication to help them achieve success in sports or cope with the pressure to perform well. Other issues associated with participation in sports include disordered eating (Goss, Cooper, Stevens, Croxon, & Dryden, 2005) and pressure to compete when injured – sometimes to the point that an athlete’s career in sports is prematurely ended (O’Connor, Heil, Harmer, & Zimmerman, 2005). Even the emotional turbulence caused by retiring from athletics highlights the intensity of the athletic identity and the difficulties that arise when this identity changes or is lost (Levy, Gordon, Wilson, & Barrett, 2005).

The specialized field of sport psychology has developed to help athletic organizations, coaches, and athletes operate more effectively in this high pressure world. Vernacchia (2003) notes that “sport psychology can contribute to performance effectiveness by helping athletes understand the culture, politics, and mentality of their sport, as well as the achievement-oriented world of athletics” (p. 5). The field is making its services known to the world of sports via professional organizations (i.e. The Association for Applied Sport Psychology and Division 47 of the American Psychological Association), connections with professional sports organizations, Olympic teams and national organizations, increased training opportunities for new professionals within the field, and personal communication amongst athletes and coaches who have benefited from working with a sport psychologist previously.

While it is important that sport psychology as a field dedicates itself to solving problems within the world of sports and also serves as an agent to promote athletic

excellence, it is necessary to fully understand the impact the field is making and how this impact occurs. Professionals must understand how they are being effective and what specific actions truly impact the individuals with whom they work (Gould et al., 1991; Smith, 1989; Statler, 2001). This understanding is essential for further improvements and success within the field. Thus, proper evaluation of our methods, attitudes, successes and even failures can help the field develop. Partington and Orlick (1987) view the challenge of assessment of sport psychology consultations as a “clear indication that we are committed to pursuing personal excellence in our consultation field in the same way that athletes are committed to pursuing excellence in their field of sport” (p. 316).

This literature review will discuss several important aspects of growth within assessment in the field of sport psychology and the research that has been implemented thus far. In order to better understand the issues surrounding proper service evaluation, it is necessary to define what sport psychology is and describe the context in which it usually occurs. Hence, some of the typical settings in which athletes are exposed to sport psychology will be discussed. For example, settings can vary from long term work with a consultant as part of an Olympic team (Partington & Orlick, 1991) to a short term sport psychology class designed to engage athletes for the length of a semester (Curry & Maniar, 2004). The setting in which consultations occur directly impacts what kind of information evaluations will reveal and what consultation skills are considered to be particularly important and what the emphasis of the consultation was.

Next will be an exploration of previous evaluation work within the field. One source of information about what happens in sport psychology consultation in the literature is an array of reflective and qualitative writings from those serving in the role of

consultant (Gordin & Henschen, 1989; Halliwell, 1989; Salmela, 1989). These writings have focused on the consultants' perspective, however, and not that of the individual athlete or team. Evaluations of these interventions from the perspective of the athlete have also been deemed critically important (i.e. Brewer & Shillinglaw, 1992; Gould et al., 1991; Partington & Orlick, 1987) and the field has responded in several different ways. One type of evaluation consists of raw and informal assessments of athletes and coaches perceptions (Neff, 1990) while another includes detailed quantitative analyses of the satisfaction with, factors influencing the use of, and measured patterns of usage with a large scale sport psychology service program. An examination of the literature shows that most of these studies have focused on quantitative measures of effectiveness (i.e. Khelifa, 1996; Myers et al., 2004). There have also been a small number of qualitative studies aimed at illuminating what athletes feel makes a consultant effective (i.e. Partington & Orlick, 1991), although these have typically lacked serious methodological rigor and have struggled to move beyond studying the dichotomy of effective or ineffective consultation.

A final area of importance is examining the impact of gender of the consultant on sport psychology interventions. While a slowly growing area of mostly theoretical work seeks to highlight the issues facing women consultants in sport psychology (Leahy, 2001; Roper, 2002; Yambor & Connelly, 1991), virtually none of the assessments have addressed the factor of gender or gender differences between the consultant and the athletes receiving sport psychology services. A case will be made for the need to conduct a thorough and scientific qualitative examination of a long-term sport psychology intervention from the perspective of the athletes, with a specific emphasis on exploring

how gender differences between the consultant and the athletes might have impacted the experience for the athletes.

### *Understanding Applied Sport Psychology*

Sport psychology is a multifaceted intersection of several disciplines, aimed at working in a wide variety of environments and contexts. Professionals who work within the field do not come from the same backgrounds, have the same purpose for working within the area, or believe that there is one unified way of accomplishing a given goal or task. This diversity of values, objectives, and roles has kept sport psychology open to a multitude of people who (after being properly certified in a specific area such as counseling, sports medicine, or exercise physiology) contribute their unique perspective to the synergy of the entire field. For example, the sports medicine trainer can take into account the psychological aspects of being seriously injured and expect that adherence to rehabilitation schedules could be effected (Brewer, 1998) while the counseling psychologist might be concerned with the impact that injury could have on the athlete's feelings of confidence.

One subsection of applied sport psychology research has sought to create a window to describe and examine the different types of interventions that occur under the title of sport psychology consultation. For example, consultations have come in the form of Life Development Interventions aimed at addressing life in and outside of sports (Danish et al., 1992). Approaches like these stress psychoeducation or human development and emphasize topics like problem solving skills, self-reliance, and identity development (Danish et al., 1993), although the degree to which programs like this match the interests of athletes is somewhat questionable. For instance, a collegiate athlete in the

midst of an ongoing competitive season noted that although he lacked guidance in picking an appropriate undergraduate major, he would have not sacrificed his time for anything other than performance enhancing activities like training or working on mental skills that applied directly competitive situations (B. Askren, personal communication, April 12, 2007).

Another approach to sport psychology services was through the creation of training workshops (Brewer & Shillinglaw, 1992) and college classes (Curry & Maniar, 2004) for athletes to increase the knowledge and importance of topics like goal setting, imagery, and nutrition. Some consultants appreciate the importance of exploring athletes' lives outside of sport and competition, and these consultants argue that these training workshops add to athletes' overall well-being. Evaluations in these settings are difficult to generalize to strictly applied settings, although some of the skills may transfer to competition situation. In the setting of the brief workshop or class, however, groups can be divided up into control and experimental groups or more easily lend themselves to pre and post intervention comparisons.

There are also rich descriptions of strictly applied consultations in the sport psychology literature; these writings have helped to illustrate what applied consultations look like. After reading some of these pieces, several patterns are noticeable. Generally material included in a consultation or sport psychology intervention is determined by the needs and interests of coaches or athletes and can take on many different forms. For example, goals of many of these consultations or interventions have included teaching performance enhancement techniques such as visualization, relaxation strategies, attentional focusing, arousal control, pre-competitive routines, and mental toughness



(e.g., Botterill, 1990; Halliwell, 1989; Neff, 1990; Smith & Johnson, 1990). Smith and Johnson (1990) further supplemented more traditional sport psychology materials with discussions on upholding team standards and leadership. Halliwell (1989) distinguished confidence as a top factor in successful performances and helped athletes think about sport psychology as a way of reprogramming one's mental computer for increased performance enhancement.

Along with the differences in the kind or type of information that is relayed to athletes and coaches, there are many different ways to present the information. Nideffer (1989) reports that cognitive behavioral techniques for performance enhancement were usually discussed in a large group format; however, a majority of the consultant-athlete interactions occurred during a one on one meeting. Nideffer (1989) also allowed individual athletes to select topics of interest from a menu of options, permitting a greater degree of individualization during a larger team consultation. Neff (1990) further acknowledges needing individualization in sport psychology consultation, reporting that team oriented discussions were mandatory but performance enhancement presentations were optional. Murphy and Ferrante (1989) described their work in formal pamphlets given to staff members and athletes and primarily used educational tactics (except when a more clinical approach was necessary). Botterill (1990) offered educational information to athletes and general staff members and created small discussion groups for athletes who were working on the same or similar issues (e.g., athletes in non-starting positions).

A final way in which sport psychology interventions can be differentiated is by the setting in which they occur. Consultations, particularly the manner in which consultants are able to deliver the information they deem important and what type of

evaluations can be conducted, are strongly influenced by the sport setting in which the consultant engages the athletes. Consultants working within the Olympic setting typically have less flexibility of time and access to athletes, which is critical in establishing working alliances between athlete, coach, and consultant (Orlick & Partington, 1987). Time spent working with a team that is approaching an Olympic opportunity is highly focused and can end abruptly following the conclusion of the games. At the Olympic and professional levels of sport, coaching and administrative decisions strongly influence the amount of time a consultant has with athletes (Smith & Johnson, 1990). At the collegiate level, new teams are created at least every academic year (with some changes occurring during the year as well) and generally head coaches alone are able to decide who they invite to work with their team. Currently, there does not seem to be one conclusive or definitive way to conduct a sport psychology intervention.

#### *Consultation Evaluation*

Along with the growing prominence of sport psychology consultation comes a need for constructive evaluations on the work that is being done. Gardner (2001) indicates that “in the world of professional sports, sport psychology is essentially in a probationary period, still striving to prove its value and demonstrate its efficacy” (p. 38). It could be argued that in any level of sport where consultations or interventions are taking place, the need for evaluation is very important for several reasons. Partington and Orlick (1987) include four purposes for their investigation of a nation-wide consultation for Olympic athletes: ethical (there exists a duty to provide maximally beneficial assistance to the client); scientific (empirically validated information should be used to enrich our knowledge base); educational (future generations of sport psychology

consultants need to know what works); and professional (constructive evaluations lead to better future experiences for consultants and clients). Our knowledge of sport psychology interventions has grown to include the viewpoints of both the providers (consultants) and the recipients (athletes and/or coaches) of the intervention.

*The Consultant's Perspective.* Sport psychology consultants have an array of experiences from the time that they spend working with a team or individual. Many consultants use the professional literature to write about these experiences and share what they learn with other practicing consultants. Both formally and informally, these articles and book chapters are an important piece of evaluation of the consultation experience from the consultant's viewpoint. There are several important points of agreement that have been made in the reflective literature from the consultant's perspective. To begin, awareness of the culture of sports serves as an invaluable guide for a consultant to gain access to a team and distinguish what coaches, and particularly athletes, deem most important to their performance success. Many consultants also speak of needing to be able to provide helpful information or insights without having been given much (if any) time to prepare in very informal settings in order to be useful in the competitive sport arena (Botterill, 1990; May & Brown, 1989). Most practitioners agree that their best consultations occurred when they were able to listen to and learn from athletes— and created their intervention around this data (Orlick, 1989; Salmela, 1989). Applied experience is a final quality that seems to matter in the eyes of consultants, and many discussed what their experiences taught them about the role and essential characteristics of sport psychology consultants. Finally, disagreements have also been noted in the literature and these will be discussed in more depth.

In order to begin a successful intervention in applied consultation, consultants must build a unique working alliance with an individual or team. Gardner (2001) noted that teams are often enclosed and suspicious of newcomers. Unlike teaching within a typical classroom setting or counseling one individual, strong relationships and team histories are usually already formed and the consultant must find ways to overcome a rookie period and become a trusted part of the team (Botterill, 1990). In addition, the emotional toll of working with a team that does not meet performance or outcome goals can also be difficult with which to cope (Halliwell, 1989). Consultants must become part of the team in order to be trusted and the emotional investment is both essential (athletes do not trust, therefore, do not work well with those viewed as being outside the team) and problematic at the same time (professional distance is minimized and appropriate boundaries can be violated). Gardner (2001) highlights the importance of winning and losing in sports; services are often focused on performance outcomes even when personal issues are likely hindering performance. Consultants who are able to speak the language of the world in which they are working and show understanding of the outcomes deemed most important by athletes might be seen as more credible, hence, more effective in the eyes of athletes.

Other significant consultant traits have been found and self-reported by those immersed in applied settings. For example, it has been repeated by many practitioners that an effective consultant should be able to present a technique or give guidance whenever necessary with no time to prepare (Gardner, 2001; Salmela, 1989). A consultant should be knowledgeable, flexible, and mentally agile in order to be helpful or effective. May and Brown (1989) call this trait “planned spontaneity” (p. 327). Many

consultants a key aspect of good communication, which seems to speak specifically to the necessity of highly developed listening skills and openness to be effective in applied settings. Orlick (1989) comments that consultants must be able to adapt to changing needs and talk with athletes about what they need; precise listening will help consultants know what athlete's goals are or what areas need to be improved. Botterill (1990) felt that to be successful, "consultants should always go in prepared to learn as much or more than they will teach" (p. 359). It is difficult to draw any precise conclusions from this information, however. In the eyes of athletes, a consultant's perceived level of effectiveness might be strongly impacted by the ability to not act like an expert while the consultant might feel highly ineffective if they were unable to show expertise.

Consultants have talked about barriers they face and the role they fill. It is important to discuss what improvements could be made in future consultation experiences, for the sake of the current consultant and others who will follow. Gardner (2001) emphasizes the importance of figuring out how to conduct informal sessions with individual athletes noting that conversations held in hotel lobbies (sometimes while traveling with a team it can be difficult to find appropriate spaces to talk) can be easily disrupted or fail to provide privacy for more personal counseling. Salmela (1989) observes that coaches "should play an integral role" in deciding how services should be delivered and how they will be used (p. 343). A sport psychology consultant cannot expect to implement their own strategy successfully without the coach's cooperation. Certain athletes on a team can also provide a source of leadership with whom consultants can align themselves (Botterill, 1990) and this can help establish an added degree of credibility with other team members.

Significant to those in sport psychology training programs is an understanding of the characteristics of sport consultants beyond elaborating on the techniques that they teach. The subtle factors that expert sport psychology consultants feel are important for any consultant to possess are often difficult to measure or pinpoint with commonly used questionnaires. However, having experience, an athlete-centered approach, a strong sense of self and fulfillment, and external support were all deemed to be important characteristics by a sample of well-known sport psychology consultants gathered using qualitative methods (Statler, 2001). Salmela (1989) also emphasizes the need for experience, noting that the skills a consultant needs to succeed are rarely found in text books but instead need to be learned in the field.

Several conflicting messages have also filtered down through the literature based on the perspective of the consultant as well. For example, Halliwell (1990) noted that he took special care to avoid meeting with a professional sports team too often because he felt that being around the team too much would undermine the effectiveness of the relationship. In contrast to this belief, Murphy & Ferrante (1989) observe that being around all the time increases the likelihood of informal service seeking. May & Brown (1989) also speak positively of consistently being seen by their team of Olympic skiers; they felt that being on the hill reminds athletes of their mental training and thinking positive in demanding situations. While it is likely that the amount of time spent with a team in training or performance venues differs dramatically depending on the setting, performance level, and the discretion of coaching staff, it would also be sensible to assess athlete expectations and desires for accessibility and to acknowledge that one approach will not work with every consultation experience.

### *The Athlete's Perspective*

The field of applied sport psychology has evaluated the consultation experience and/or effectiveness from the point of view of athletes. This has been an important step to take since athletes, and to an extent coaches, are the consumers of sport psychology services. In turn, the field as a whole benefits from focusing on solving problems that are the most significant to these consumers. To date, much of the evaluation data from the perspective of athletes has been gathered using quantitative methodology, including the creation of several new questionnaires designed to measure consultant effectiveness in applied situations. Many of these evaluations demonstrate significant improvements in scientific rigor and validity as researchers point to the need for systematic evidence for sport psychology's efficacy in the field. In general there has also been a need to understand: if athletes felt that seeking sport psychology services created a negative perceptions or judgments; the importance placed on developing sport psychology skills; and how different groups of athletes view sport psychology. Lastly, it is significant to point out a small but significant push for "other ways of knowing" (R. McGuire, personal communication, April, 2006) about how athletes view sport psychology services. This appeal has highlighted the need for using a variety of investigative means to illustrate a more complete picture of how athletes view sport psychology.

*Quantitative Methodology.* Using quantitative investigative methods to assess consultations from the viewpoint of an athlete or a team gained rapid popularity as practitioners began to work more extensively in the field. A logical step in the advancement of program evaluation was to create questionnaires specifically evaluating applied sport psychology work instead of borrowing from related fields such as

counseling psychology. Partington and Orlick (1987) developed the Sport Psychology Consultation Evaluation Form aimed specifically at measuring satisfaction with sport psychology services and assessing services offered to several Olympic level teams. The authors felt that this was an important step in monitoring and improving services (Partington & Orlick, 1989). From this instrument, it was found that athletes felt consultants should have practical and concrete strategies that help improve performance levels, be accessible at practice or competitions, easy to relate to and able to connect with the team. As noted previously, this was deemed to be an important quality from the perspective of the consultants as well.

More assessments were produced with the purpose of finding information specific to working with sports. After creating the Consultant Evaluation Form, Gould et al. (1991) were able to measure effectiveness levels as estimated by athletes. This assessment found that across a variety of Olympic teams working with a sport psychology consultant during a given Olympic year, all had found rated their consultant as effective and 79% wanted to retain the consultant for future work (Gould et al., 1991). Quantitative assessments have been very important in adding to the knowledge of beneficial consultations.

Researchers have attempted to determine levels of social acceptability for athletes who seek sport psychology services. In the past, researchers noted that athletes who seek sport psychology services acquired a negative halo in the eyes of other athletes or by the public (Linder et al., 1991; Linder et al., 1989). The degree to which athletes might feel that seeking sport psychology assistance implies weakness or illness could have a



dramatic effect on their willingness to request help if it is needed or to fine tune aspects of their performance that are currently satisfactory to become even better.

Initial findings regarding the concept of the negative halo have yielded mixed results, however. Myers et al. (2004) found that a sample of NCAA football players rated both behavioral (positive self-talk, imagery, goal setting) and counseling techniques (empathetic relationship building and increasing emotional awareness) as moderately acceptable for a fictional athlete rehabilitating from injury. Linder et al. (1991) found that fictional draftees who consulted with a sport psychologist or therapist were rated lower than athletes consulting with their coaches for a particular issue by general male populations, but not by females. Male athletes, meanwhile, only rated a fictional athlete lower if they consulted with a psychotherapist, not a sport psychologist, and previous exposure to sport psychology experiences did not affect the ratings (Van Raalte et al., 1992). In the 15+ years that have passed since these studies were conducted, societal opinions have no doubt changed with additional exposure to the concept of sport psychology services.

Finally, several trends have been noticed within the literature highlighting the ways in which different athlete populations rate sport psychology interventions or services. It would seem that with age and perhaps exposure (older athletes reported greater acceptance levels than did younger counterparts) comes increasing acceptance of utilizing some sort of mental treatment concurrent to physical treatment. Martin (2005) used the Sport Psychology Attitudes-Revised scale to measure acceptance levels in athletes and found that male high school students were less open to sport psychology than female athletes (high school or college aged) and male college students. Khelifa (1996)

reported similar findings in that most athletes indicating positive ratings of a campus wide sport psychology clinic were those over the age of 20. While seeking sport psychology services might not be viewed in the negative light consultants once feared, measuring the degree to which athletes view the importance of working on their mental game is also important.

In addition to the age differences mentioned previously, some researchers have noticed other group distinctions. In regards to gender, Martin, Akers, Jackson, Wrisberg et al. (2001) found that female athletes had higher ratings of personal commitment to the consulting process than did their male counterparts while male athletes as a whole expected consultants to be more directive and problem solving. It has been noted that athletes in contact sports were generally less accepting of sport psychology (Martin, 2005). Khelifa (1996) also found that athletes competing in individual sports and those in starting positions showed higher usage of the services offered to student athletes. This could be due to the desire of athletes to have as many positive preparation factors as possible prior to competing in higher pressure situations (i.e. performing by themselves or as a star on the team). Martin (2005) also noted that athletes who had previous consulting experience were less concerned about the acceptability of seeking help in the future. Following their second year as consultants for a professional team, Smith and Johnson (1990) found that 77% of the athletes rated psychological skills as extremely important and 15% rated them as fairly important for performance. However, it is difficult to tell exactly why athletes respond in one manner or another based on percentages from these types of studies. Therefore, practioners and researchers alike have moved to exploring sport psychology consultations using different evaluation methods.

*Qualitative Methodology.* While knowledge gained via quantitative means has certainly advanced the field in confirming the usefulness of sport psychology consultations with many different athlete groups and in many different settings, diverse approaches can and should be employed to gather additional data about the experiences that athletes have while working with a sport psychology consultant. Martens (1979) acknowledges that “while [qualitative] research will likely be more difficult to do, while it will be problematical, and occasionally a pain the ass, I also feel that it will be more valid, much more useful, and surely more fun to do” (p. 98). Eight years later, Martens (1987) again called for more variety in the way consultations are studied when he noted that in order to figure out how to best help athletes and coaches, the whole person within the applied context needed to be the focus of study.

Qualitative studies are more able to present rich and distinctive data about sport psychology consultations and move beyond the dichotomy of effective or ineffective interventions. Smith (1989) noted that the important question is not just whether a program is efficacious or not, calling for a collection idiographic studies that would help to understand the important variables in consultation. For example, Petitpas, Giges, and Danish (1999) suggest that a qualitative investigation of the working alliance in sport psychology interventions could impact the more traditional role of educator that many consultants adopt. Krane and Baird (2005) have also emphasized this concept noting that the field needs to understand the culture in which athletes operate in order to understand their mental states and behaviors. While quantitative methods tend to be more generalizable and more easily replicated, the study of human interactions (like a

consultant working with an athlete) or the culture of the sports world does not easily translate to percentages and rating scales.

There has been some degree of interest in conducting qualitative studies, however, many of the studies currently in the literature are riddled with methodological problems and inaccuracies. In one of few qualitative explorations into the experiences of athlete's working with a consultation, Orlick and Partington (1987) focused almost exclusively on how athletes rate the perception of effectiveness, reporting that 98% wanted to have a sport psychologist around for future events. While the study did highlight some of the characteristics that athletes attributed to being a more effective consultant, such as working with athletes individually, listening well, and providing concrete/usable feedback (Orlick & Partington, 1987), important epistemological foundations and methods were not adequately discussed. Krane and Baird (2005) note omissions of this sort are a common problem with many qualitative studies in the field of sport psychology.

#### *Gender in Consultation*

To date, the issue of gender has not been a particularly important aspect in much of the consultation evaluation research (Krane, 1994). However, gender is important to consider as it affects many aspects of applied sport psychology work. It is not difficult to imagine that gender might strongly affect the consultation experience for both consultants and athletes. For the purposes of this paper, it is imperative to discuss gender in terms of the athletes receiving sport psychology services and also in terms of the consultants who provide these services. It will also be necessary to recognize how this discussion is being

guided by a feminist viewpoint as part of the argument to ensure inclusion of gender related factors.

Acknowledging gender differences in respect to athlete populations has been examined to some degree in research evaluating sport psychology consultation, but additional attention is warranted. Whaley (2001) notes the importance of representing different athlete populations in every facet sport psychology research – not just consultation evaluation – as a way of creating sound and more socially and scientifically responsible literature base. She also points out that looking for universal truths (as part of a more orthodox scientific approach) often leads contrasting group differences instead of understanding personal/individual realities (Whaley, 2001). For example, Martin et al. (2001) found that female research participants had a higher personal commitment to the consultation process while male participants expected consultants be more directive and capable of solving problems. On the other hand, Donohue et al. (2004) reported that male and female participants responded similarly after engaging in an interview process aimed at increasing positive perceptions of sport psychology consultation. Besides dealing with the difficulty that arises from making a choice about what to do with the divergent opinions that come from these investigations, both of these studies also suffered from serious methodological flaws. Two such problems were using non-athlete and non-elite athlete populations without thoroughly explaining who the other participants were or how they differentiated between elite and non-elite status. Thus, is difficult to understand how male or female athletes would evaluate or experience sport psychology interventions.

The voices of women working within the world of sport, in academic or applied roles, have often been ignored or minimized. The organization of athletics or sports has

traditionally been highly male-dominated world that places men in the most powerful positions and perpetuates patriarchal systems common in many societies (Greenleaf & Collins, 2001). Additionally, there are few female role models or mentors for women sport psychologists in training to look to for guidance (Roper, 2002). Leahy (2001) notes the popularity and attitude of mental toughness in sports and observes that this mentality focuses on the responsibility of the individual while disregarding dysfunctional systems or traditions.

The problems female consultants face are often invisible to male counterparts who are not impacted in the same way by dysfunctional systems. This author personally experienced such an instance when talking with another (male) consultant about what a professional in training should do to learn more about how to operate within the world of sports. This well-intentioned individual suggested a beginning consultant should make it a point to travel with teams they are working with; to buy plane tickets and drive whenever possible to show that you are a part of the team. However, his recommendation to simply stay in a room with someone from the team would be difficult - if not completely inappropriate – to carry out considering that the author was a woman working with an all male team and an all male support staff.

While focusing on individual or systemic problems could be harmful to an athlete participating in sports, it also underscores the problems that could occur if a female sport psychologist assumes that she is denied career opportunities because of her skills or abilities when other factors are also at play. Within the system of sports, women sport psychologists often have a difficult time looking as credible or trustworthy as their male counterparts and might also have to give up some aspects of their femininity to blend in

with male sports groups (Roper, 2002; Yambor & Connelly, 1991). Even if a woman is seen as a credible addition to the team, sometimes simply paying for an additional hotel room could be enough to convince a coach that they would rather employ someone with whom it is easier to travel.

It is difficult to say at this point how athletes who have worked with a consultant view the factor of gender in their evaluation of the consultation relationship, specifically when male athletes work with a female consultant as no previous evaluation work has examined these variables. Yambor and Connelly (1991) hypothesize that initially male athletes might view a woman as manipulative or gossipy, or that they might see a woman consultant as being more nurturing and accepting if they were to be upset or cry in her presence than a coach might. However, they also point out that most athletes place an emphasis on receiving good services that address the concerns they experience and therefore, might not be as concerned with the gender of the consultant.

As more women are trained in the field of sport psychology and show interest in working in applied settings, it becomes even more critical to begin to examine how gender of the consultant impacts the perceptions of consultation. Whaley (2001) has called for the addition of feminist perspectives in the research that will be conducted in the applied field. Leahy (2001) has also highlighted the need to re-examine current understandings and knowledge through the perspectives of women as women's voices in the world of sport have largely been ignored. This type of theoretical approach highlights the need to closely examine the context in which people exist in order to truly understand the causes of behavior (Whaley, 2001). Finally, Whaley (2001) notes that by ensuring participant representativeness, examining the relevance of research questions and the

value of statistical differences, and attempting to create positive social change feminist oriented research stands to contribute to the knowledge of this field in a way that previous research has not.



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## **CO-RESEARCHER CONSENT FORM**

### **Purpose of Study**

As discussed in the pre-interview meeting, this study is part of the educational requirements of the sport psychology consultant who has worked with your team for over three years. The project is being conducted to build a better understanding of athletes' experiences working with a sport psychology consultant and what it was like to have a female consultant. You have been asked to participate because you have been on a team with a female consultant for at least one year/season.

### **Study Procedures**

As a "co-researcher" for this project, your participation will consist of sharing your experiences with a female interviewer during at least one interview lasting 60-90 minutes and possibly a second follow up interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. These discussions will be audio recorded, transcribed by an experienced professional, and reviewed by a team of 3-4 graduate students during data analysis proceedings.

Additionally, observational notes will be written about time before, during or after practices, times when you are doing sport psychology activities (i.e. sport psychology seminars), or at competitive settings where your sport psychologist is present.

### **Alternatives to Study Participation**

You may choose not to participate in the interview process or not be selected to give an interview. In this case, you may still be the subject of observational notes discussed above. You have the right to not be included in project-related observations or notes if you so choose or withdraw from all participation at any time without penalty. Team members who do not provide a signed consent form to the researcher will not be included in any aspect of the study.

### **Risks**

During the interviews, it is possible that you may be asked to reveal information that could feel potentially embarrassing or uncomfortable. Additionally, information that you reveal during the interview will be read by your sport psychology consultant. At any point during the interview, you may choose not to answer a question and you will not be forced to reveal any information you do not feel comfortable talking about. At any time you can voluntarily withdraw from the entire project without penalty.

It is not expected that you will undergo any psychological distress from your participation and at no time is your access to sport psychology services dependent on your participation in the study or answers given during the interview.

**Benefits**

Beyond getting a chance to reflect on your experiences of working with a sport psychology consultant, you may not experience any direct benefits from participating in this project. There is no compensation for your participation.

**Confidentiality**

Your name will not be recorded during the interview. Any other identifying information will be deleted or sufficiently altered from transcribed interviews to assure that no one individual can be recognized from any data that is reported. However, the sport and university will be identified as part of the researcher’s educational background.

All computer files with audio recordings or written information will be pass-word protected files on the consultant’s personal computer. All hard copies of interviews and observational notes will be stored in a locked file cabinet.

The research team will have access to interviews and notes, with identifying information already removed, as the data analysis progresses. Team members will be responsible for returning all copies of interviews to the lead researcher and team meetings will be held in private meeting rooms to avoid non-research staff individuals gaining access to your answers.

**Questions**

If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact the lead researcher and your consultant by email at rlmhcf@mizzou.edu or by phone at (573) XXX-XXXX. You may also contact the lead advisor for this project, Dr. Richard H. Cox by email at xxxxx@missouri.edu.

The Institutional Review Board of the University of Missouri-Columbia exists to protect the welfare of people participating in research projects. The IRB at UMC has approved the recruitment of subjects for this study.

**Consent to Participate**

You hereby agree to participate in the dissertation project titled “Athletes’ Experiences of Sport Psychology Consultation: Exploring a Multi-Season, Cross Gender Intervention.” You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

## Appendix B

### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW**

Opening statements:

I wanted to start by thanking you again for agreeing to participate in the study. It is important to remind you that you are under no obligation to complete the interview today; you can stop if you wish or choose not to answer a specific question if you feel uncomfortable. I would like to emphasize that honest answers will be the most helpful, so it's important to share positive and negative comments if you are comfortable doing so.

To remind you, this study is trying to determine what it is like for athletes to work with a sport psychologist. During your time on the team, I have offered opportunities for the team to learn more about many different topics in sport psychology that you may or may not have participated in such as group discussions/seminars, relaxation and yoga training, and working one on one with me.

1. Let's start out with a very open question that you can answer any way you want.

Can you tell me about your experience of having someone like myself, a "sport psychologist," work with your team?

- a. How would you describe my work to someone outside the team?
- b. What are the impediments of working with me, if any?
- c. What, if any, are the beneficial aspects of working with me?
- d. What thoughts or feelings have been generated while working with me?
- e. How do you think my being a woman affected my work with the team and you?
- f. At this point in time, what is most important to you about me or my work?



2. Some athletes have difficulty deciding to work with someone labeled as a sport psychologist and for others it's an easy decision. How did you decide to participate in the activities I organized?
  - a. \* Reference any personal changes that have occurred over time \*
  - b. What were some of your initial thoughts about me and my role with the team?
  - c. How, if at all, did your teammates impact your decision?
  - d. How did the coaches, if at all?
  - e. Were there other people who influenced your decision and if so, who are they and what made them influential (other coaches, thoughts about other athletes)?
  - f. What were your initial thoughts of positives of engaging in the sport psych activities?
  - g. What were your initial thoughts of the potential negatives (negative halo)?
  
3. Now, let me ask you to think about any changes you see in yourself as a result of having worked with a sport psychologist. How, if at all, have you changed as a result of working with me or being exposed to the sport psych activities?
  - a. What changes, if any, happened for you as an athlete?
  - b. What changes, if any, occurred outside of being an athlete?
  - c. What interactions, incidents, or memories stand out to you?

4. It may be difficult for you to speculate about the next question, but your opinion and ideas would be appreciated. What qualities do you believe are important for a sport psychologist to possess?
  - a. In general, how do you think men in general would react to working with a female sport psychologist?
  - b. How might an athlete's opinion of sport psychology be influenced by the sport they are in?
  - c. What can a sport psychologist do to deliver information in a way that athletes are most likely to benefit?
  
5. In the research world, it's considered a "dual role" for me to conduct interviews with people that I've been working with for so long.
  - a. What would it have been like to meet and do this interview with a research assistant, a person other than me?
  - b. What was it like for you to talk with me about the topics we covered today?
  
6. Finally, have you shared everything that seems significant about the experience and is there anything else that would be important to share?

## Appendix C

### EXAMPLES OF SEMINAR HANDOUTS

#### **How can you tell if it's Love?**

Answer: I'm not sure, but it'll last forever (break into air guitar)

So why do you wrestle? Why are you on this team? What is your purpose? Hopefully several reasons come to mind when answering these questions... and maybe one of them is:

**“I love to compete!”**

Playing in to our discussion on motivation from last week, if we're looking at competition in a smart way, it becomes a valuable “renewable resource.” Now take a few minutes to think to yourself and address these questions.

1. What are some of the top reasons that you love to compete?
2. What have been some of your moments of personal greatness that involved great competition?
3. Do you think that your attitude towards competition impacts what kind of competitor you are – and if so, how do you use this to your advantage?
4. What are some of the competitive cliché's that you've heard over the years? Any that you like or find useful?
5. Sadly enough, one day you will not be a competitive wrestler, so what will you value about this experience for years to come?

# Haka if You Wanna

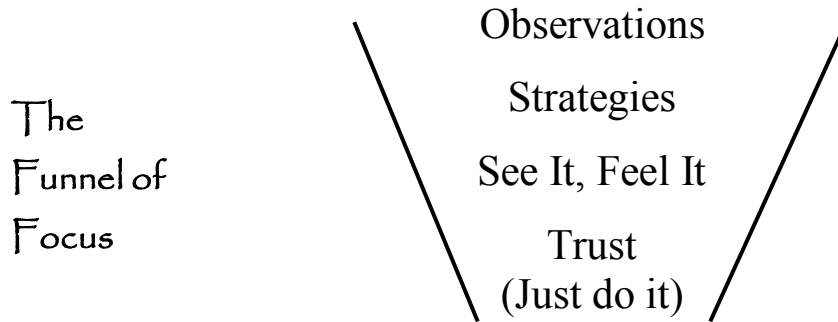
- So why did I show this to you?
  - What do I like about this team? What is their strategy? What can a team accomplish together that would be harder to do as an individual alone?
- So what are we going to do as a team to help the goals of the individual?
  - There have been times in the past where I have watched “fear” or “caution” hold someone back from accomplishing their goals.
  - Fear of what? Of losing? Because when you’re fearful, you generally do lose. Funny how that works.
- The Haka doesn’t say that there is no fear, it says “F\*ck fear.” It doesn’t matter.
- Susan (Talladega Nights) had this to say about fear:

You need speed. You need to **go out there**, and you need to rev your engine. You need to fire it up. You need to **grab a hold** of that line between speed and chaos, and you need to wrestle it to the ground like a demon cobra. And then, when the fear rises up in your belly, you use it. And you know **that fear is powerful**, because it has been there for billions of years! And it is good! And you use it! And you ride it; **you ride it like a skeleton horse** through the gates of hell, and then you win, Ricky! You WIN! And **you don't win for anybody else**.

**You win for you!”**

- Don’t tell me you missed watching “300?!”
- “Taught never to retreat, never to surrender. Taught that death in the battlefield is the greatest glory he could achieve in his life.”  
“Spartans! Prepare for glory!”
- And countless other competitors have said it, too. “You’d have to kill me” to keep me from winning.

## Mental Prep, Continued



1. Observations: minimizing the surprises and distractions by noticing what is going on in: your environment; your opponent; your mental/physical state.
2. Strategies: what are you going to do to deal with what you've noticed during your observations? Thinking now, not later.
  - a. Competitive game plan in place. One or two key words to remind you.
  - b. Reflective of your style, skills, etc...
3. See it, feel it:
  - a. Mental drills – see yourself successfully carrying out your strategy and also see successful management of difficult situations (coping imagery).
  - b. Know the feeling of great wrestling – pace, technique, individual moves.
  - c. See greatness, feel greatness! Affirmation
4. Trust:
  - a. When it comes time to perform, quit thinking so much! Let it FLOW.
  - b. Believe that your body knows what to do and that you will mentally respond in the right way to the situation.
  - c. This is CONFIDENCE!!!

## Appendix D

### **RESEARCH LOG**

April 2006-December 2007:

#### Project Planning and Conceptualization

I began to explore the research questions that were interesting to me and pertinent to the advancement of the field midway through my experience with the wrestling team. This exploration was highly impacted by my decision to enroll in a qualitative research class, which allowed me to envision a new method of conducting a dissertation and avoid the “boring” quantitative work that I had found to be extremely uninteresting in the past. I continued to work with the wrestling team during one of my most exciting years with program and found myself wondering how we eventually got to the point of being able to do yoga together (compared to feeling like I was some sort of “plague” during my first year with the team). Initially, I considered conducting a study that would focus on the athletes’ experiences learning Mindfulness skills; in conducting the data collection of the study that did occur, I kept my interest in this subject “bracketed” according to Grounded Theory guidance to avoid contaminating the data.

However, in further refining my research interests, I was surprised to discover that there was very little recent research focused on examining sport psychology in applied settings; the majority of this work was dated and had a limited area of focus (measuring effectiveness rates). I was even more surprised to discover that there was not ONE single piece of research looking at the impact of gender in sport psychology work. I decided to make this a major emphasis in my research as I felt that the impact of my gender had a

significant impact on my experience with this team (and wanted to know if gender also had a significant impact on the athletes' experiences).

I also enrolled in my department's Scientific Writing course which helped to propel me through the process of writing a proposal. My classmates and professor leading the class helped me to further refine my research interests and understand how a particular methodology could fit with these questions. I debated with my committee some of these same issues as they expressed concern that this project was not addressing an important "hole" in the current literature. Another problem within my study was deciding who would be the most appropriate person to collect the data from the participants. While it felt clear to me that having an "outsider" meet with the athletes would be highly problematic (due to my knowledge of the team's approach to outsiders) my committee expressed concern occupying overlapping roles within the study would create a significant degree of bias in the project. My committee also encouraged me to further define how this project would be "rigorous" and "scientific."

I revisited my methodology and decided to use Grounded Theory exclusively and moved away from also incorporating a Phenomenological approach. I felt it was particularly important to utilize the procedures from Grounded Theory that would provide structure for the study and a method for acknowledging and appropriately dealing with issues around researcher bias. In October of 2007, my committee approved my dissertation proposal and in December of 2007, I received IRB approval. During December I also contacted two individuals to assist me in the data analysis process by working on my research team; once these two graduate students had committed to

working on the project, I provided them with information about my study (the proposal and readings on Grounded Theory).

January 2008-July 2008:

#### Recruitment and Data Collection

After receiving approval from my committee and IRB, I began recruiting from my potential participant sample. I began interviewing participants in January at the same time that I began meeting with my research team. As soon as I had finished transcribing the first interview, the research team and I began line by line coding; the initial coding was very time consuming but forced the pace of the work to slow down and be more meticulous. We continued with line by line coding through the first two interviews and slowly developed a list of common themes and concepts that kept recurring.

At the start of the data collection from individual participants, it became clear that my role with the overall team was changing. No longer able to work effectively with the coaching staff, I unofficially ended my work with the team (no longer doing seminars and only occasionally attending practices) but continued seeing athletes individually. This meant that I only collected one piece of observational data. It also meant that it was more difficult to reach participants, particularly those who were less likely to interact with me on their own accord. I contacted individuals on my list of alternates to ensure that I would have at least ten participants altogether who represented the team appropriately.

Interestingly, the structured interview had changed in subtle ways to either include language that was more appropriate to the participant group or to reorganize the order of the questions in a more logical manner.



By the end of this semester in May, I had finished interviewing ten participants. Also at this time, one of my research participants had to be replaced due to changes in their post-graduation plans. I successfully located another graduate student who was interested in gaining qualitative research experience and we continued coding the next five interviews meeting twice a week during the summer semester. The cohesion of this group was particularly beneficial to the project as we were quick to challenge the ideas put forth by any member (myself included). I started bringing a small toy hammer to use as a gavel during the meetings; our lengthy debates over how certain codes should be used were both time consuming and added a great deal to the overall thoughtfulness of the coding process.

August 2008-March 2009

Data Analysis and Write Up

After moving to start my internship year, I continued the data analysis process on my own. I coded the last two interviews though a strict adherence to the theme definitions that the research team had helped me create. Once this was completed, I carefully reviewed data under each theme to assess for fit; in some cases the definition of a theme (and hence, what should be coded under it) had shifted from the start of the project and in other cases I went back to some of the first interviews to code for themes that were not created immediately. After I was satisfied that most of the data was accurately coded, I reviewed the memos that were written about certain themes and theme families and began writing in more traditional formats about the data.

I quickly became aware of the wide scope of information that this project covered. Even with the decision to not go back and re-interview the participants to further explore a few thin data sets, my first results chapter was over 150 pages long. I shortened these writings to almost half the length by editing or removing participant quotes and deciding (with the guidance of my advisor) to not include a lengthier discussion of how the theme families came together to create an overall theory around the data. I hope to make this the focus of a published work in the future.

In recording a log of my research progress, I also kept note of my biases and personal reactions to the data. Although I have tried to be mindful of how my beliefs and emotions about this project could impact my analysis of the data, it is impossible to say that this project is without bias. Below, I list a number of these personal reflections

- I believe that my relationship with the athletes was more important than what I was able to teach them (for most athletes on the team).
- I think that gender, and in particular, attraction played a huge part in the relationship I built with the team; I think gender impacts male consultants, too – but in a different way.
- I believe that the athletes’ willingness to do yoga or other sorts of unconventional activities with me is a sign of “how far we’ve come.”
- I see myself as a “Switzerland” within the team and think that athletes also see me as a neutral resource – particularly in my relationship with the coaches.
- I am surprised at my lack of knowledge of around gender research.
- I struggle to write about that which is most personal to me: attraction and sexual objectification due to my gender and appearance; the discrimination,

misunderstanding and mislabeling that happened during my work with the team and was revealed in the interviewing process. At times I am quite simply pissed!

- I am surprised by the amount of cultural knowledge I hold in being within a sport environment and work to incorporate this information in the project appropriately.
- I am constantly wondering if I am on the “right track” and then feel impressed that this project captured so much real data about gender in sport psychology consultation.

## VITA

Renee Mapes was born in Adrian, Michigan and grew up as the only daughter of a single father. She decided at the age of 17, as a Junior in high school that she wanted to become a psychologist. This goal was further refined in the first year of her undergraduate education when she decided to specialize in sport psychology. Almost 12 years after the initial decision was made, Renee had obtained the necessary degree and educational experiences to pursue these goals. She will complete her internship and post-doctorate fellowship at the University of California-Davis and plans to marry one the same day as her degree is conferred.