

UTILIZING SYSTEMS THEORY TO FRAME INTERVENTIONS WITH ATHLETES ACROSS THE DEVELOPMENTAL SPECTRUM

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The provision of applied services to athletes has become a well-accepted practice in elite (i.e., professional and Olympic) sport (American Psychological Association, 2018). In the past three decades, the utilization of sport psychology interventions has trickled down to athletes at the intercollegiate level, a movement that has been bolstered by the NCAA's recent position statement on the inclusion of on-campus sport psychology resources for student-athletes in the United States (Brown et al., 2014). More recently, such interventions have become accepted practice at the high school and youth levels as well. Across these levels of sport participation, the common end-goals of sport psychology interventions are the enhanced performance and increased well-being of athletes (Zakrajsek & Blanton, 2017). One potential issue is that applied work has often viewed athletes strictly through the lens of their sport participation and thus neglected the ways athletes influence and are influenced by other individuals in the sport context (c.f., Brown, 2001).

In adopting a more holistic lens, a recent call has been made to account for the broad range of social relationships that take place in sport, while addressing the ways these relationships shape and are shaped by an athlete's sport experiences (Gordin, 2012). This type of whole-person approach opens the door for clinicians to attend to the processes that take place across an extensive web of dynamic and reciprocal relationships that define athletes' sport experiences. In line with this perspective, it is our opinion that all athletes (even those who participate in individual sports) participate within a broad system of interdependent persons (i.e., parents, siblings, peers, and coaches) and that participation across all levels of sport shapes and is shaped by meaningful individuals in the sport context (Evans et al., 2012).

The purpose of the present chapter is to highlight systems theory (Broderick, 1993; Broderick & Smith, 1979; von Bertalanffy, 1972) as a dynamic framework that can be used by clinical and/or counseling sport psychologists in the design and delivery of interventions in organized sport. In the subsequent sections, we will introduce the systems perspective, outline its major tenets, and describe how it can be applied by sport psychologists in an applied context. We will then provide an overview of the salient family and team literature, highlighting the roles of athletes, parents, siblings, teammates, and coaches in sport. Finally, we will integrate these concepts by providing a range of applied considerations for those working as sport psychologists. These reflections will offer strategies for working with youth, high school, intercollegiate, and elite athletes.

Utilizing a Systems Perspective in Sport

Families and teams represent two primary sub-systems in which athlete development takes place (Dorsch et al., 2020). Both sub-systems are made up of individuals (e.g., parents, siblings, coaches, and peers) whose behaviors shape and are shaped by the contexts in which they interact. In short, according to Dorsch and colleagues, the youth sport system is an extensive web of dynamic and reciprocal relationships. Outside of sport, systems theorists (von Bertalanffy, 1972) have urged scholars and practitioners to account for the dynamic and reciprocal processes that influence individual and group behavior. Systems theory has the potential to guide clinical and counseling interventions while enabling the examination of a broad range of social relationships and the ways these relationships shape and are shaped by the contexts in which individuals interact. The framework has evolved to include a vast array of relational constructs that can be applied in families (e.g., Broderick, 1993) and other social settings such as organizations, schools, and teams (Bowen, 2010; Brown, 2001). Three primary tenets of the systems perspective will be used in this chapter to highlight its utility in the provision of applied sport psychology services are: (1) wholeness, (2) feedback loops, and (3) rules and roles.

Wholeness

The first, and perhaps most well-articulated, tenet of the systems perspective is *wholeness*. Wholeness stresses that individuals who engage in regular social interactions should be viewed collectively rather than as an independent set of individuals (Broderick, 1993). In youth, high school, intercollegiate, and elite sport, athletes' reciprocal interactions with parents and siblings (i.e., their "family") and teammates and coaches (i.e., their "team") should be taken as constituting a dynamic, intricate, and sometimes coordinated system (Dorsch et al., 2020). Instead of viewing athletes' performance and well-being as independent of family and team factors, socialization should be viewed in the context of reciprocal influences that occur at home and on the sports field.

An example of wholeness can be seen in the 1980 United States men's Olympic hockey team. As documented in the movie *Miracle* (Cardi et al., 2004), head coach Herb Brooks brings together a collection of college athletes and reminds them that the name on the front of their jerseys (USA) is a "hell of a lot more important than the name on the back" (their surnames). Although the American hockey players possessed individual strengths, by operating individually, the team members had been largely unsuccessful in the matches leading up to the Games. As individuals, Brooks recognized that his team would not be elite, but as a cohesive group who played with and for each other, they had the potential for something special. In one of the great sport upsets of the modern Olympiad, Brooks' team became the unlikely champions at Lake Placid. In light of this example, the tenet of *wholeness* invites sport psychologists to consider the collective nature of families, teams, and other groups with regard to how the whole is more important than the sum of its constituent parts.

Feedback Loops

The second primary tenet of the systems perspective is that the individuals who constitute a system (i.e., a "family" or "team") engage in *feedback loops*, whereby self- and system-level changes occur based on repeated and daily output or interactions with other members of the system, which is subsequently received as input (White et al., 2019). Positive feedback

amplifies change, whereas negative feedback stifles the drive to change (Broderick, 1993). For example, families and young players might influence one another via social learning mechanisms such as reinforcement and punishment. In doing so, individuals and groups desire to achieve and maintain a state of balance or equilibrium. This state of being has been described as the range of limits in which the individual and group function most adaptively (Smith & Hamon, 2017). The athlete who thrives (or not) may do so in both their individual pursuits as well as family support (or lack thereof). When children are experiencing individual and team successes and failures, they receive feedback from their families. These processes of feedback can either enhance or diminish processes of change. If positive in nature, young athletes are more likely to seek/receive additional opportunities to play as they advance (i.e., playing time and all-star, extended seasons). Changes in participation will demand change within the family and team systems (equilibrium). Depending on the family and player's openness to change, or flexibility, an athlete may experience feelings of stress or support.

Perhaps, the primary driver of feedback loops within families and teams is communication (Brown, 2001; Grimm et al., 2017). Communication is replete with patterns that include syntactics (i.e., how clearly messages are transmitted between individuals), semantics (i.e., differences in word meanings), and pragmatics (i.e., the formal and informal ways in which individuals communicate) (Broderick, 1993). These features influence and are influenced by relationships between individuals, laying the groundwork for opportunities to connect, change, or consider issues within the system. Athletes can also benefit from opportunities to discuss implications and objectives with parents, siblings, teammates, and coaches in what is said or not through a process of metacommunication (Galvin et al., 2012). Athletes receive myriad messages before, during, and after they participate in competition (Dorsch et al., 2015; Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Tamminen et al., 2017). These messages are delivered both verbally and non-verbally by members of the family (e.g., parents and siblings) and team (i.e., teammates and coaches). The content and delivery of these messages can support or hinder growth (change) of the individual and/or system. For example, young athletes who perceive pressure from their parents in sport also report less enjoyment and are less likely to continue in subsequent seasons (Dunn et al., 2016). Practitioners, therefore, should aim to facilitate clarity in communication between parents/coaches and the athletes who participate, as "being on the same page" may help sustain connection and individual growth for individuals, families, and teams.

Rules and Roles

A third assumption of the systems perspective is that the individuals who constitute a system will adhere to a set of *rules* and *roles* that are negotiated over time (see Smith & Hamon, 2017). Rules and roles influence how individuals and groups operate within the broader contexts of organizations, communities, and societies (Smith & Hamon, 2017). Of relevance to applied sport psychologists, understanding how rules and roles are enacted by families and teams can benefit both the practitioner and the athlete. Said differently, recognizing the system(s) in which an athlete is operating has the potential to shed more light on that athlete's individual and interconnected relationships. And understanding these relationships better affords a clearer picture of the athlete's performance- and well-being-related issues.

To accomplish system-level goals, families and teams possess implicit and explicit sets of rules. Rules define limits and interactions among individuals while also providing parameters for how individuals and groups adjust to successes and failures (Hammond, 2010). A family or team rule may be different from that of another family or team, and in sport, this may provide

opportunities to appreciate diversity or to create division. For example, some families might expect a high school athlete to be home by 9:00 PM on the eve of a game; others may not impose a curfew on the athlete. Similarly, on some teams, athletes know that they would be in trouble for using an expletive following a frustrating run-in with a referee; on other teams, athletes know that there will be no pushback because the coach is using the same language on the sidelines. Competitive individuals, families, or teams may adopt a “win at all costs” rule, whereas others may incorporate more egalitarian rules to grow as individuals and groups.

Within groups, individuals engage in a variety of implicit (expectations) and explicit (requested) roles. Within families, roles can vary based on factors such as age, gender, and birth order. On teams, roles may vary based on factors such as position, ability, and commitment. Smith and Hamon (2017) explained that older children often play the role of a hero, middle children may be delinquents or feel invisible, and youngest children may adopt the role of family clown. Of concern, roles are not static but change based on the context in which interactions are occurring and the goal(s) for the group in that setting. For example, in sport families, roles such as “soccer mom” and “hockey dad” can be influenced by athletes’ ability, past contributions to the team, and athletic identity. Roles are also shaped by the power hierarchy within a family or team. This hierarchy, or system of echelons (Miller, 1978), is usually headed by adults (i.e., parents and coaches); however, in many instances, peers (i.e., siblings and teammates) maintain an influence on the performance or well-being of an athlete as well.

Understanding the Family

An athlete’s family is the first and most proximal context for athletic development. Indeed, it is the family that is most responsible for shaping athletes’ behaviors, attitudes, experiences, and outcomes, especially in the earliest years of sport participation (Côté, 1999; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). And, although the value athletes place on relationships with peers and coaches increases during adolescence, the impact of the family has been shown to have lasting impacts (Dixon et al., 2008; Dorsch, Lowe, Dotterer, & Lyons, 2016). In light of the family’s central role in athlete development, researchers from a range of disciplines have investigated the role families play in the development of athletes in recreational and competitive sport (e.g., Brustad, 2010). This research has yielded a deeper understanding of three significant social actors in the sport context: (1) parents, (2) siblings, and (3) significant others.

Parents

Although a recent review of the sport parenting literature highlights over 200 empirical studies exploring parent–child interactions in youth sport (see Dorsch, Vierimaa et al., 2019), few clinical and/or counseling psychologists have adopted a professional praxis that accounts for the impact of parents on athlete’s sport performance and well-being. Indeed, researchers *and* practitioners should consider the many ways parents may influence youth, high school, intercollegiate, and elite athletes’ social, emotional, and cognitive development. Although the impact of parents has, in many cases, been ignored by applied sport psychologists, interventions conducted by researchers have sought to shape parent involvement by way of targeted cognitive and behavioral outreach. This work has addressed the role of parents in youth (e.g., Dorsch, King et al., 2017), adolescent (e.g., Thrower et al., 2017), and intercollegiate (Dorsch, Lowe, Dotterer, & Lyons, 2016; Lowe et al., 2018) sport settings and has the potential to inform applied practice with athletes at these developmental stages. Given the multiple socializing influences that parents hold within and outside sport, they are in many

cases poorly equipped to interact with their children in sport (see Harwood & Knight, 2015). Given this, sport psychologists should query youth, high school, intercollegiate, and elite athletes on the possible positive and negative impacts of parent–child relationships as they pertain to athlete performance and well-being.

Siblings

Despite the primary role of parents, especially at the earlier stages of sport participation (Côte, 1999), it is important to acknowledge, however, that they are not the sole contributor to an athlete's family life. Sport psychologists should also consider the developmental significance of *siblings*. Attending to the influences of siblings holds promise for gaining a more holistic understanding of the family and its influences on athletes' sport performance and well-being. The sibling relationship is unique in that it is typically the most enduring family relationship (Cox, 2010; Whiteman et al., 2011). Sibling interactions in sport are often marked by cooperative and competitive processes and by modeling and differentiation as children develop into adolescents and, ultimately, adults (Blazo et al., 2014; Osai & Whiteman, 2017). Sibling relationships extend beyond behavioral factors sport: The social, emotional, and cognitive closeness of siblings can also be key determinants of the roles siblings play in shaping each other's sport-related outcomes (Yeh & Lempers, 2004). Research from outside of sport suggests that sibling relationships serve as a de facto training ground for the peer (i.e., teammate) relationships that will dominate early-to-middle adolescence (Dunn, 2007; McHale et al., 2012). Given the evidence that sibling interactions provide a consequential context for development, sport psychologists would be wise to consider the impact of these relationships on athletes' outcomes and experiences across the sport development spectrum.

Significant Others

Despite the primary roles played by members of an athlete's family of origin (i.e., parents and siblings), scholars acknowledge the developmental significance of *significant others* (e.g., husbands, wives, fiancés, partners, boyfriends, and girlfriends), especially at the later stages of an athlete's career (McPherson, 1984). Attending to the influences of significant others could broaden our understanding of the family and its influences on athlete performance and well-being, particularly at the intercollegiate and elite levels.

Researchers interested in the role of significant others in sport recently have begun to explore the overlapping domains of sport and family, and how these different domains of development concurrently influence the path to excellence (Debois et al., 2015). Wylleman and Reints (2010) detailed specific challenges that occur at the later stages of athletic development and highlighted the potential impact of significant other on athletes' psychological, psychosocial, academic, vocational, and financial well-being. As researchers continue to explore the role of significant others on athletes' outcomes in sport, it would behoove sport psychologists to include husbands, wives, fiancés, partners, boyfriends, and girlfriends in their calculus when conducting individual or family-level interventions.

Understanding the Team

When considering applied work in the context of sports teams, it is critical to understand the complex interactions among a team's many social agents. Even in situations when one might be consulting with a single athlete, it is beneficial to better understand their unique position

in the broader context of the team environment. From this perspective, a sports team can be viewed as a unit made up of several interdependent components working toward a common goal (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998). The following section will outline key considerations for three main social agents: (1) athletes, (2) teammates, and (3) coaches.

The Athlete

Central to effective interventions with athletes is the understanding that all athletes are different. Even within specific teams, athletes have different identities, motives, and goals for their athletic endeavors. In light of this, athletes can have vastly different representations of what constitutes a rewarding or enjoyable sport experience (e.g., McCarthy et al., 2008). An athlete's identity can be understood as the degree to which they devote time and energy to their role in a particular sport (Brewer et al., 1993). Individuals can benefit from a strong athletic identity by virtue of its associated benefits in increased commitment and performance (e.g., Horton & Mack, 2000). Athletic identity is also viewed as a dynamic construct, wherein major setbacks such as deselection from a team (Grove et al., 2004) or a major injury (Brewer et al., 2010) can lead to a loss of identity, which in turn can have detrimental effects on an athlete's well-being. Youth, high school, intercollegiate, and elite athletes should be made aware of the protective benefits of athletic identity, while also understanding that when one's sense of self is exclusively based on being an athlete, life transitions and setbacks can become problematic (Brewer et al., 2010). Of consequence to sport psychologists, performance-related success and athlete well-being depend strongly on athletes' ability to cope with transitions in sport (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Wylleman & Reints, 2010), and adopting a whole-person consulting praxis appears well-suited for examining long-lasting elite sport careers (Gordin, 2012).

Just as athletes can identify with their particular role in a sport to varying extents, they can also be motivated by myriad different social and contextual factors. Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) is a widely adopted meta-theory that has been used to better understand the motivation of youth, high school, intercollegiate, and elite athletes. SDT is made up of six inter-related mini-theories (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which have been reviewed elsewhere (e.g., Standage et al., 2019). For this chapter, we will address two of these mini-theories (Organismic Integration Theory and Basic Needs Theory) and highlight their relevance to *understanding the athlete*. First, Organismic Integration Theory posits that motivation exists along a continuum of varying levels of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000). On one end is amotivation or a complete lack of motivation. Next are four forms of extrinsic motivation that progressively increase in their level of self-determination: external regulation (e.g., competing to meet a coach's demands), introjected regulation (e.g., playing to avoid feelings of guilt or shame), identified regulation (e.g., taking part in sport because it is personally valued), and integrated regulation (e.g., working hard because it is part of one's identity). Finally, at the other end of the continuum is intrinsic motivation, which is when athletes are motivated to participate in a sport because they find it self-rewarding, enjoyable, or stimulating. A large body of literature unequivocally supports the contention that autonomous or self-determined forms of motivation are associated with sport performance (e.g., Gillet et al., 2010), persistence (e.g., Pelletier et al., 2001), and well-being (e.g., Gagne, 2003).

When consulting with athletes, an important question is, therefore, how can we encourage them to adopt self-determined (i.e., intrinsic) forms of motivation? Basic Needs Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) provides some insight as it describes three basic psychological needs

(competence, autonomy, and relatedness), which are key to well-being psychological health. Sport psychologists need to understand the specific types of motivation that regulate an athlete's behavior while also considering how to support the athlete's sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. One way to do so may be through interventions targeting the support of these three basic needs by members of the athlete's family or team, which from a systems perspective can be viewed as feedback loops (Dorsch et al., 2020), which act upon an individual athlete's motivation. In other words, by optimizing social interactions between an athlete and members of the family or team, interventions are well-positioned to facilitate intrinsic motivation and, in turn, performance and well-being.

Teammates

In concert with athletes' self-perceptions, sport psychologists should seek to understand the relationships and dynamics among the many athletes who make up a sports team. As noted previously, youth, high school, intercollegiate, and elite athletes can vary in terms of their motives and self-perceptions, and this variability can be partially attributed to their roles and social relationships within their sport group or team context (Eys et al., 2008).

Each athlete, regardless of their sport or status, has given role, which provides specific expectancy information regarding their behavior in sport (Biddle & Thomas, 1966). For example, certain athletes may be relied upon as a team's star player, while others may be a defensive specialist or team social convener. Regardless of the nature of an athlete's role, it is necessary to reflect upon their perceptions of what is expected by others on the team (i.e., coaches and teammates). Role ambiguity, or a lack of clarity regarding one's responsibilities, has previously been negatively associated with task cohesion (Eys & Carron, 2001) and role satisfaction and performance (Beauchamp et al., 2005; Bray & Brawley, 2002). In other words, when an athlete is unclear about their role and responsibilities, they are likely to be less satisfied with that role, perform in a way that fails to meet expectations associated with that role, and also perceive the team as less united in pursuit of their collective goals (Eys & Carron, 2001). An underpinning factor in this process may be the level of communication among teammates.

Cunningham and Eys (2007) found an inverse relationship between intra-team communication and role ambiguity, suggesting that enhanced teamwork and communication among team members may bolster role perceptions, team cohesion, and performance. Indeed, contemporary research in youth and adult sport contexts indicates that communication among team members may be the most salient predictor of both task and social cohesion (McLaren & Spink, 2018, 2019). Altogether, it is evident that the facilitation and maintenance of adaptive communication and relationships among athletes are imperative for group functioning and performance. As such, even when consulting with athletes in isolation, how athletes' unique needs and perceptions align with the broader team subsystem should be considered.

Coaches

Even though consultants most often work directly with athletes in the pursuit of enhanced performance and well-being, the importance of coaches in the support of athletes should not be overlooked. Of all support staff, coaches spend the most time interacting with athletes, and so it should come as no surprise that they play influential roles in both athlete motivation and group functioning. In terms of motivation, a growing body of evidence has emerged

advocating for autonomy-supportive coaching (i.e., behaviors such as eliciting athlete input, process-focused praise, and minimal use of pressure and controlling behavior). Specifically, autonomy-supportive coaching behaviors have been linked to enhanced perceptions of autonomy, competence, relatedness, commitment, and intrinsic motivation (e.g., Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2015; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; O'Neil & Hodge, 2019).

While coaches can play a substantial role in shaping the motivational orientation of youth, high school, intercollegiate, and elite athletes, their behavior can also impact social relationships among teammates. For example, Jõesaar, Hein, and Hagger (2012) found that autonomy-supportive coaching predicted a task-involving peer climate in a sample of youth sports teams. Similarly, a recent meta-analysis highlights that supportive, democratic, and positively oriented coaching behaviors were significant predictors of both task and social cohesion (Kim & Cruz, 2016). In light of these findings, coaches should be encouraged to be purposeful in how they interact with their athletes to facilitate the development of intrinsically motivated, cohesive groups of athletes.

Beyond the key motivational role of the coach, sport psychology consultants should also consider the role of the coach relative to the delivery of sport psychology services to an athlete or team. While sport psychology has historically been stigmatized in certain sport contexts, the coach remains a gatekeeper in the establishment of sport psychology services and buy-in on the part of athletes (Partington & Orlick, 1987; Voight & Callaghan, 2001). In a study of intercollegiate sport in the United States, Zakrajsek and colleagues (2013) identified that being on the “same page” with coaches in terms of team culture, philosophy, and goals, along with developing trusting coach-consultant relationship were two key ingredients to the successful integration of sport psychology services into an intercollegiate athletic program. In line with viewing the sports team as a “system,” consultants should strive to work in tandem with coaches to create an enriching environment with the goal of optimizing athletes’ performance and well-being.

Utilizing a Systems Lens in Applied Settings

Applied sport psychologists work within a variety of professional settings: with individual athletes, coaches, or coaching staffs; with youth, high school, intercollegiate, or elite teams; or with entire sport organizations (e.g., college or university athletic departments and National Governing Bodies). In addition to sport-specific training, sport psychologists are trained in clinical and/or counseling psychology and, thus, are proficient and licensed to conduct psychological interviews with individuals and groups. Typically, the initial interview with an athlete, team, or organization is an opportune time to assess factors related to the athlete’s family or the team’s inter- and intra-relationship dynamics. At all levels of sport, athletes are impacted by familial and team factors, and these factors subsequently have the power to influence not just the athlete but the athlete’s team and organization as well (Dorsch et al., 2020). It is, therefore, essential that family and team relationships be integrated into any therapeutic intervention, as the impact of these systems is significant to the performance and well-being of the athlete.

One professional challenge for sport psychologists is working with athletes across many different developmental stages. Indeed, many practitioners consult across the spectrum of athlete development from youth to elite levels. Along this continuum, there are unique family dynamics that must be considered within the context of engaging the athlete and building therapeutic rapport. In this section, we address salient factors related to the family and team that may help guide sport psychologists during initial interviews with athletes. We do so

through a developmental lens, acknowledging that best practices will be defined differently across the four stages of sport participation: (1) youth, (2) high school, (3) intercollegiate, and (4) elite.

Youth Athletes

When working with youth athletes, the referral process typically begins with a parent or parents who are observing anxiety, negative athletic performance, or unmet goals. In conducting an initial interview with the athlete, practitioners should consider including the parents too. In this format, the clinician can observe interactions between the parents and athlete, the parents with each other, and each parent with the athlete. During the initial interview, it is also vital to explore each parents' sport history. For example, did they play a sport, how long did they play, and what were their experiences of being an athlete? Answers to these questions provide the practitioner with a "background" of the family dynamic.

Additionally, practitioners should explore athletes' relationships with siblings, including siblings' histories of sport performance and well-being. Often, a youth athlete may be demonstrating anxiety symptoms due to feelings of inadequacy compared to an older sibling that is a skilled or popular athlete. Unknowingly, an older, skilled athlete becomes the "expectation" within a family, which then places potentially unrealistic expectations on a younger sibling to perform at a similar or higher standard of excellence. This process of sibling comparison is often not overt or intentional but a result of modeling: the older sibling receives validation and support for their successes, which then become an "expectation" for the younger sibling (Blazo et al., 2014).

It is worthwhile in an initial interview to spend time exploring family "expectations" regarding involvement and performance and to better understand how "being an athlete" shapes the athlete's identity within the family. To achieve this understanding, it is vital that sport psychologists possess skills in interviewing so they can conduct a clear and concise initial assessment with a youth athlete and his or her family. Possessing these skills allows for the establishment of clearer therapeutic goals (e.g., anxiety management, effective goal setting, and coping with adversity) that all family members can agree upon. Through the lens of systems theory, it is useful to understand the family's rules and roles. For example, if the initial interview indicates that the youth sport athlete is having confidence and performance-anxiety issues, and the parents are supportive and appropriate, then a practitioner might have the athlete begin some journaling exercises and encourage the parents to "help remind, but withhold from making the athlete do the exercise." The practitioner could then discuss the importance of self-directed behavior and prompting in allowing the young athlete to take ownership of the counseling process. By setting clear expectations, the parents understand their role and their motivational impact on the athlete.

If an issue is more diagnostic in nature (e.g., an anxiety disorder), parents may be integral to understanding how anxiety impacts the mood and/or functioning of the child. In such a case, the role of parents needs to be clearly articulated, so they understand how their behaviors may positively or negatively impact their child's response to external stimuli in sport. For example, parents can help a youth baseball player identify an at-bat as "an opportunity to have fun and demonstrate skill competence"; this is a much more supportive behavior than communicating a message such as "you have to get a hit or your team will lose!" For all sport psychologists who work in an applied setting with youth athletes, it is imperative to engage the parents (and perhaps even siblings) during the initial session to achieve a better understanding of the family dynamic in sport and help guide future therapeutic interactions with the client.

High School Athletes

Working with high school athletes can be simultaneously rewarding and challenging. Because these athletes are typically minors and because families are typically a salient source of support during this developmental stage (Côte, 1999), it is wise to apply the same initial interview process used with younger athletes and include the parent or parents in the interview. Often, the athlete is the primary referral source during high school, and they have noticed increased anxiety, self-doubt, negative social comparisons, or perfectionism that is negatively impacting their performance or well-being. This is a key developmental transition, as adolescent athletes become more self-aware and are thus able to articulate their mental challenges more accurately. During an initial interview with high school athletes, it is essential to allow the athlete to articulate and engage in the interview process very openly and willingly. One sign of parental pressure is when an athlete is reserved and quiet; this is often a difficult dynamic to overcome in a therapeutic setting. Indeed, when an athlete perceives that “mom or dad is taking me to the psychologist to ‘fix’ me because I’m not a good athlete,” skilled practitioners must be able to navigate a different clinical or counseling trajectory.

A typical factor driving many athletes at this life stage is the goal of becoming an NCAA Division I student-athlete. Because this goal underlies participation in many sports programs (e.g., AAU basketball, travel soccer, softball, and swimming), athletes may feel significant pressures due to peer comparison. These pressures are often exacerbated by parents who may be linking their sense of parental efficacy to their child’s athletic outcomes (Cumming & Ewing, 2002). The pressures associated with high school sport participation (e.g., scholarships, social media validation, and single-sport specialization) can present clinically as anxiety, mood, self-esteem, body image, substance abuse, or self-harm behaviors with some adolescent athletes. As a general rule, if the sport psychologist is not accounting for an athlete’s detailed family history (e.g., parents’ sports history, parental expectations for sport involvement, and siblings’ sport history), they will miss the opportunity to articulate the goals of counseling and fail to explore the complex and systemic dynamics that can negatively (or positively!) impact the athlete’s performance and well-being.

Intercollegiate Athletes

The role of family can either enable high school athletes to make a smooth transition into college athletics or become an ongoing stressor that hinders the athlete’s successful adjustment. Indeed, recent research on NCAA athletes and their parents suggests that parent involvement in the student-athlete experience (via contact, support, academic involvement, and athletic involvement) bolsters student-athlete well-being but also detracts from developmental growth (Dorsch, Lowe, Dotterer, & Lyons, 2016; Lowe et al., 2018). Parent involvement accounted for 42% of the variance in these student-athlete outcomes, highlighting the importance of parents even at the later stages of sport participation.

If incoming intercollegiate student-athletes developed in youth and/or high school systems where they were always a starter, transitioned to a new club team whenever there was coaching conflict, or were allowed to miss practices because of their athletic skillset, the challenges associated with adjustment to the college setting can be much greater. The fact that many intercollegiate student-athletes experience “failure” for the first time (i.e., not starting, being redshirted, and finding out they are not yet as skilled as older teammates) can be stressful, anxiety-producing, and lead to feelings of self-doubt (Gayles & Baker, 2015).

In initial interviews with intercollegiate student-athletes, it therefore becomes central to explore their sport history through a lens of family and team history.

Most student-athletes have involved families throughout their intercollegiate career, whether that includes the athlete's family of origin or significant others such as husbands, wives, fiancés, partners, boyfriends, or girlfriends. These interactions serve as a constant source of support and encouragement as well as stress and conflict (Dorsch, Lowe, Dotterer, & Lyons, 2016; Parietti et al., 2017). A sport psychologist providing counseling for student-athletes must be continually aware of family dynamics. Indeed, an athlete's relationships at home have the potential to impact the client's performance and well-being as well as their daily functioning with teammates, coaches, academic support staff, sports medicine staff, sports performance staff (e.g., strength and conditioning coaches), and other university personnel. Familial stressors may impact student-athletes' academic functioning, health, and potentially on-field performance; therefore, fostering positive interactions with these individuals should be of primary concern for sport psychologists working in intercollegiate athletics.

Elite Athletes

The clinical features and familial dynamics of elite (i.e., professional and Olympic) athletes are unique and systemic. For example, the issue of confidentiality is quite salient to elite athletes. It can therefore be a challenge for sport psychologists to develop a therapeutic relationship with someone who may have trust issues that arise from their world being open to public consumption via social media and the visible nature of their work (e.g., televised games and sports media). As a potential foundation of this mistrust, the intricate nature of athletes' familial systems should be viewed as an essential component to explore and requires competency in the therapeutic context of psychosocial assessment and intervention.

Without a thorough understanding of an athlete's family system, a practitioner cannot optimize the psychological care of the athlete. At this stage of athletic development, the family can be either the primary source of support and motivation or it can be the greatest stressor and distraction in the athletes' career (Cosh & Tully, 2015; Dorsch, Lowe, Dotterer, Lyons, & Barker, 2016). In the world of professional sports, athletes often experience constant pressure from family members who are requesting financial support, tickets to games, and help with businesses, among other things (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Quite often, an elite athlete becomes the primary financial supporter of their family system, which can complicate and confuse familial rules and roles. The negative implications of a 23-year-old providing the sole source of financial support for parents, siblings, and perhaps other extended family members can create stress, confusion, resentment, and conflict for the athlete – feelings that have the potential to negatively impact athletic performance, thus threatening the athlete's career. Moreover, when the athlete's career is negatively evaluated, increased familial stressors may cause a toxic dynamic as the athlete attempts to balance athletic performance demands while their family demands/expectations are increasingly stressful and distracting.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present chapter was to highlight systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972) as a dynamic framework that can be used by sport psychologists in the design and delivery of interventions with athletes in organized sport. In pursuing this aim, we view an athlete as being situated within a broader system of influence, including parents, siblings, teammates,

and coaches. As the role of sport psychologists continues to evolve in the landscape of youth, high school, intercollegiate, and elite sport, the utilization of systems theory as a lens for practitioner–client interactions constitutes a dynamic and holistic approach to the pursuit of enhanced performance and well-being. Indeed, understanding the systemic influences that shape these outcomes is essential to supporting athletes’ coping mechanisms, social skills, and relationship dynamics that can ultimately lead to enhanced outcomes for athletes as well as families and teams in sport.

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