



**NEW JERSEY**  
PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## **The Emerging Field of Sport Psychology**

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Sport Psychology is one of the lesser-known, yet rapidly growing, specialties in psychology. A Sport Psychologist is a licensed psychologist with advanced training in sport and performance psychology. This advanced training can be obtained in the form of a certification program and/or meeting sport psychology proficiencies as determined by the American Psychological Association. Sport psychologists are uniquely qualified to understand and address the mental health needs of an individual along with the sport and performance issues.

Sport psychologists typically work directly with athletes, teams, coaches, and/or sport organizations at a variety of levels. This may include youth, high school, intercollegiate, elite, Olympic, professional, and recreational levels. The types of services sport psychologists are trained to provide include assessment, psychological skills training, performance enhancement techniques (i.e., goal setting, emotional regulation, confidence, visualization, and high performance mindset), injury recovery, career transitions, team building, character development, team building, parent training, and/or coach education. The interventions and techniques are also appropriate for other performance domains (i.e., actors, dancers, musicians, chess players, business personnel, military and special operation forces).

One of the most common reasons for accessing sport psychology services is when an individual is experiencing anxiety that is negatively impacting their overall performance. The next most common reason is when athletes desire to develop a high-performance mindset to maximize their performance capabilities. Sport psychology interventions also promote valuable life skills that go beyond sport or performance domains. Learning how to manage anxiety in sport may also enable better anxiety management in personal situations. Another consideration is that a sport psychologist can also engage treatment resistant individuals. Some individuals may be reluctant to work on their own personal issues but would be more open to work on issues that affect their sport. For example, a female athlete had an anger management problem on the field and was willing to work on that because it would have an effect on sport performance. Once a solid treatment alliance was made focusing around the sport, larger anger management issues could then be addressed affecting other personal and family relationships. Therefore, engaging an athlete initially through sport can enable the individual to focus on broader issues that they were originally resistant to address.

As a case example, a high school baseball player, who was getting prepared to play at the collegiate level, entered treatment to address his batting average that had significantly decreased to .100. The assessment indicated that while at bat, he focused on negative

predictions about his performance that he believed would have a negative outcome for the team as well as potentially decreasing his playing time. This type of mindset and focus leads to performance anxiety and guarantees underperformance. Over several sessions, this athlete was helped to understand his current mindset, and encouraged to reset his thinking when at bat by learning to focus on one pitch at a time, thinking positively about his ability to perform based on regular practice and to develop a pre-batting mental routine that would enhance his ability. The pre-batting mental routine included entering the batter's box with a deep relaxing breath then focusing on a cue word that enhanced his batting mechanics. This pre-batting mental routine was rehearsed during treatment through visualization to enhance the player's ability to carry this to a real game situation. As a result of this intervention, the player showed great improvement by significantly increasing his overall batting average to .450. This intervention supports the power of mindset in performance.

In summary, sport psychology is a rapidly growing field that provides services to help athletes, teams, and coaches facilitate performance enhancement. A sport psychologist must be a licensed psychologist with advanced training in sport and performance psychology. Sport psychologists are uniquely qualified to address the psychological needs as well as the performance needs of the individuals within the sport and performance domains.

Michael D. Zito, PhD, is a New Jersey licensed psychologist with 33 years of experience practicing clinical and sport/performance psychology. He is a certified consultant through the Association of Applied Sport Psychology and an adjunct professor at Montclair State University, since 2004. Dr. Zito appeared on Channel 9/Fox News and his work was featured in the January 2012 issue of SELF magazine. He authored a chapter in the 2010 edition of the Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology titled Family Systems Interventions in Sport. He conducted over 30 sport psychology presentations/workshops at international, regional, and local venues. He is experienced with adult, collegiate, high school, and youth players, teams, and coaches in a variety of sports, and also Broadway actors and competitive chess players.

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What Is Exercise Psychology and Sport Psychology?

<http://www.apadivisions.org/division-47/about/resources/how.aspx>

Association for Applied Sport Psychology

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