Successful and Less Successful Interventions with Youth and Senior Athletes: Insights from Expert Sport Psychology Practitioners

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Abstract

This study is focused on reflections of expert sport psychology practitioners about their interventions with competitive youth and senior elite athletes. Two objectives include: (1) to identify key structural components used by practitioners to describe sport psychology interventions and integrate them into an empirical framework, and (2) to analyze the practitioners’ experiences in regard of their successful and less successful interventions in competitive youth and elite senior sport contexts using the empirical framework. We conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve internationally recognized sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) and analyzed the data thematically. The empirical framework derived from the SPPs’ accounts contains eight structural components integrated into two categories: (1) the content and focus (with three components, e.g., adaptation of content), and (2) the organization and delivery of interventions (with five components, e.g., initiation and assessment of athletes’ needs). Using the empirical framework we found differences between successful and less successful interventions and between youth and senior contexts in terms of needs assessment, adaptation and breadth of content, athlete-practitioner relationship, and intervention settings. The empirical framework might inform SPPs in their efforts to design, implement, and evaluate their services in these two contexts.

Keywords: Applied sport psychology interventions, expert practitioners, empirical framework, youth sport context, senior sport context.
Successful and Less Successful Interventions with Youth and Senior Athletes: Insights from Expert Sport Psychology Practitioners

Context-driven practice is a recognized trend in contemporary sport psychology (Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012). A recent Special Issue of Journal of Sport Psychology in Action (Schinke & Stambulova, 2017) focuses on the practitioners’ experiences of working in different contexts and provides recommendations for context-driven interventions. While sport psychology services are likely of equal relevance for youth competitive and senior elite athletes, these two target groups represent different contexts and may benefit from different types and organization of sport psychology services. Based on interviews with expert sport psychology practitioners (SPPs), the present study investigates successful and less successful intervention experiences in two main contexts: competitive youth and elite senior sport.

Successful sport psychology interventions are sensitized in the sense that they are adapted to fit the specific context in which they take place (Cotterill, Schinke, & Thelwell, 2016). For the present paper, we argue that competitive youth sport and senior elite (professional) sport can be seen as two different contexts that require different applied approaches. Literature on sport psychology interventions with senior athletes (e.g., Andersen, 2005; Gould & Maynard, 2009; Vealey, 2007) is far richer than corresponding literature on working with youth athletes. However, it remains beyond doubt that life as a young elite athlete aiming for sporting excellence is not without specific challenges and that psychology plays a key role in overcoming obstacles and staying on target (Abbott & Collins, 2004). Below we identify four major differences between the competitive youth and elite senior contexts.

First, competitive youth and elite senior sport are different in terms of their overall focus. Senior elite level athletes are expected to perform at the present time in their careers, and their competitive level is higher than for youth athletes. Therefore the focus of the SPP is often to help these athletes reach their performance maximum. Youth athletes’ most important results are in the future. Therefore, the focus is (or should be) on their current but mainly long-term development (Abbott & Collins, 2004) to help them build the necessary resources to succeed in the junior-to-senior transition (Stambulova, 2009). These resources are not limited to sport performance and
include competences and skills to deal with different career issues in and outside sport (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

Second, competences and skills needed by younger athletes to develop are different from the skills needed by senior elite athletes to perform. MacNamara, Button, and Collins (2010) introduced ‘psychological characteristics of developing excellence’ (PCDEs), such as commitment, realistic performance evaluations, planning and organization skills, and self-awareness, which are of particular importance for youth competitive athletes. By extension, other authors have argued that SPPs should help youth athletes handle the existential challenges involved in becoming an elite athlete (Mortensen, Henriksen, & Stelter, 2013; Nesti, 2004) and prevent early identity foreclosure (Petitpas & France, 2010). Career researchers have recommended that SPPs assist youth athletes in career planning, balancing lifestyle, energy management and effective recovery (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009).

Third, youth and senior contexts differ in relation to the role of the athletes’ significant others. Youth athletes are less mature and in a stronger need of different types of assistance from parents and coaches than senior athletes, who are expected to be more autonomous (Sandström, Linnér, & Stambulova, 2016; Stambulova, Pehrson, & Olsson, 2017). Coaches’ roles develop as the athletes’ careers progress (Côté, 1999; Sandström et al., 2016; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Researchers thus argue that SPPs in youth sport must educate coaches and parents on the special needs of athletes in different development phases (Harwood, 2008; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010).

Fourth, youth and senior contexts differ in terms of combining sport with education or work. Youth athletes of compulsory school age are dual career (sport and education) athletes, while senior athletes might follow different pathways, such as a professional athletic career, or a dual career (sport and education or work). University education is more flexible and allows more focus on the sport (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014).

Although the above argumentation points to a need for context specific approach, research comparing intervention work with competitive youth and elite senior athletes is a rare treat. The youth sport consulting model (YSCM) was developed as an educational framework for guiding
SPPs in the implementation and delivery of sport psychology services for young athletes (Visek, Harris, & Blom, 2009). The model proposes six phases in the service delivery: (a) identifying an appropriate age group of athletes, (b) gaining entry, (c) the selection and presentation of sport psychology skills, (d) evaluation, (e) off-season considerations and (f) issues related to the termination of services. While the authors provide important guidelines to direct each phase, they also maintain a focus on teaching universally-relevant mental skills. The YSCM is a process model, and we argue that the six phases are universally relevant and not only suitable in youth sport.

Factors contributing to successful interventions are mainly defined in relation to working with senior elite athletes. First, it has been suggested that successful sport psychology interventions require a coherent professional philosophy that integrates the entire efforts of the practitioner’s work (Poczwardowski and Sherman, 2011). Second, successful sport psychology is contingent on a good client-practitioner relationship and working alliance with the athletes (Gardner & Moore, 2007; Williams & Andersen, 2012), as well as with coaches (Speed, Andersen, & Simons, 2005). Basic components of establishing a client-practitioner relationship are genuineness, non-judgmental caring, empathy and particular attention to the human experience (Fifer, Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza, 2008). Third, it has been argued that SPPs should not only focus on goals and strategies for improved athletic performance, but also for improved quality of life for the individual behind the athlete (Friesen & Orlick, 2010). This includes helping athletes to formulate life values, accept difficult emotions (Gardner & Moore, 2007), and handle the existential challenges involved in an athletic career (Nesti, 2004). Finally, a successful intervention takes into account the context or setting in which it takes place (Fifer et al., 2008; Schinke et al., 2012; Schinke & Stambulova, 2017).

In an interview study with four experienced SPPs, Henriksen, Larsen, Storm and Ryom (2014) discussed sport psychology interventions with youth and senior athletes and found that youth athletes (a) have special needs and should be equipped with a holistic skills package that enables them to handle a multitude of existential challenges, (b) are embedded in an environment that should be involved in interventions and (c) need assistance in maintaining a long-term focus. However, Henriksen and colleagues did not interview the SPPs about their work with senior
athletes and thus could not provide direct comparisons. This study has been planned to bridge this gap by contrasting expert SPPs’ experiences in successful and less successful interventions conducted with competitive youth and elite senior clients. To facilitate the comparisons we were also aimed to explore structural components practitioners used to describe their interventions. Therefore, the objectives of the study were: (1) to identify key structural components used by practitioners to describe sport psychology interventions and integrate them into an empirical framework, and (2) to analyze the practitioners’ experiences in regard of their successful and less successful interventions in competitive youth and elite senior sport contexts using the empirical framework.

Method

Participants

First, we created an initial list of potential participants based on the authors’ international professional network. To ensure diversity, we included internationally recognized SPPs from different countries, both males and females, and representing different levels of seniority, sports and types of employment. 12 (out of 14) responded positively to an invitation to take part in the study. The final sample consisted of four female and eight male sport psychology practitioners aged 35 to 55 years (M: 43,5). They were highly educated in sport psychology with PhD (9) and Master degrees (3) and had 9 to 28 years of applied experience (Mean: 14,6 years) working with both youth competitive athletes (aged 13 to 18) and senior elite athletes (above 18). Six participants were from Europe and six from the United States of America. The practitioners had different types of employment (own company, university or employed by a national Olympic committee). They all worked at least half time as practitioners and considered applied practice to be a main part of their work.

We informed them of the purpose of the study and that data would not later be used for other purposes, asked them to sign consent forms, and arranged the interviews. While we agreed that names would be kept confidential, the participants also acknowledged that some details, such as which sport, were important in the presentation of specific cases, and they accepted that few people
with detailed insight were likely to recognize individual participants.

**Data Collection**

We used semi-structured interviews to collect data from the expert SPPs (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Interviewing experts can be seen as a time-efficient strategy, as “the experts are seen as ‘crystallization points’ for practical insider knowledge and are interviewed as surrogates for a wider circle of players” (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009 p. 2).

The interview guide focused on sharing applied experiences and specific cases, rather than theoretical considerations. More specifically, the guide had four main parts. We asked the SPPs to describe a specific example of (a) successful and (b) less successful interventions in youth competitive sport, and (c) successful and (d) less successful interventions in senior elite sport. We finished by asking for their best advice for novice SPPs. We used open-ended questions to elicit in-depth responses. We aimed to ask the SPPs to describe what they actually did in practice, and, when they talked about their values, beliefs, and theoretical considerations, we asked for examples. The interviews started out with an introduction and information about the study. This was followed by a broad and open-ended question: “Would you tell me about a specific intervention with youth athletes, which you consider to be successful?” More open-ended, follow-up questions prompted elaboration, such as “Why do you think this intervention worked well?” Finally, and only if the interviewees had not already commented on these issues, the interviewer asked specific questions about the content, structure and organization of the interventions. A similar approach was applied in all four major parts. The terms ‘successful’ and ‘less successful’ were not defined by the researchers, but left up to the SPPs’ interpretations. Each participant was interviewed once using Skype. The interviews lasted between 47 and 84 minutes (M: 69 min).

**Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

All interviews were transcribed and afterwards verified by the participants. We used thematic analysis, since it can provide “analysis of the people’s experiences in relation to an issue, or the factors and processes that underlie and influence particular phenomena” (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). The thematic analysis followed the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).
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for qualitative analysis in psychology. In the first phase of analysis, we transcribed, read and re-read the entire data corpus in order to familiarize us with the data. All authors noted their initial ideas. The first, third and fourth authors have solid backgrounds as SPPs with extensive knowledge of working in both youth and senior sport contexts, and used this experience to provide perspectives to the analysis. In the second phase we generated initial codes across the entire data set, collating data that was relevant to each code. Third, we searched for themes by re-focusing the analysis on a broader level of themes rather than codes. We wrote rich descriptions of each theme, which was a useful step in the process of building depth and detail into the analysis (Braun et al., 2016). Fourth, we reviewed, refined and defined a total of eight themes representing structural components of the interventions (e.g., adaptation of content and athlete-practitioner relationship), agreed on two overarching categories (content & focus and organization & delivery) and distributed the themes in between. The two categories and corresponding themes served as an empirical framework (Figure 1), which we used to deductively compare the stories of successful and less successful, and youth and senior interventions. Fifth, we used the framework to analyze the different types of interventions (successful and less successful interventions in youth and senior sport) and developed two tables to summarize the analysis (tables 1 and 2). In the sixth and final phase we reported the results, which included the selection of extracts and constantly going back and forth between written text and data. The first three authors took part in all steps of the thematic analysis through a mix of individual work and frequent group discussions, and the fourth author primarily contributed to phases four to six. Along the way, we discussed the analytical work to explore alternative interpretations until agreement was reached, which established peer validity (Smith & Sparkes, 2016) and enhanced the accuracy of the themes and their descriptors.

Findings

When we asked expert practitioners to describe how they work, a number of structural components came up in their communication. To display the results, we have developed an
empirical framework that captures and presents these themes (Figure 1). The framework has two overall categories and a number of components (or themes). The first category is the content and focus of interventions, with components concerning what psychological skills are targeted in the interventions, the degree to which the content is adapted to the specific target group and whether the interventions go beyond mental skills. The second category is the organization and delivery of interventions with components concerning the assessment of the athletes’ needs, the settings in which to deliver the service, the regularity and nature of the athlete-practitioner relationship, the involvement of the athletes’ significant others and the evaluation of the intervention. We use the framework as a set of criteria to compare successful and less successful interventions in youth and senior elite sport. Tables 1 and 2 are complementary to the framework and contain the context-specific descriptors (or sub-themes) of each theme. The results section below follows the logic of the framework and presents one overall category and its themes at a time. For each category, we will first present a Table that serves as a summary of the analysis, followed by a more in depth presentation.

**Figure 1** The Empirical Framework Characterizing Experiences of Expert Sport Psychology Practitioners

- **Experiences of Expert Sport Psychology Practitioners**
  - **The Content and Focus of Sport Psychology Intervention**
    - Adaptation of content
    - Targeted mental skills
    - Beyond mental skills
  - **The Organization and Delivery of Sport Psychology Intervention**
    - Initiation and assessment of athletes’ needs
    - Settings and ways of delivery
    - Athlete-practitioner relationship
    - Involvement of athletes’ significant others
    - Assessment of intervention effectiveness
The Content and Focus of Sport Psychology Interventions

The content and focus of the interventions emerged as an important category when the SPPs described their interventions. This category includes three themes: adaptation of content, targeted mental skills and beyond mental skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Youth successful</th>
<th>Youth less successful</th>
<th>Senior successful</th>
<th>Senior less successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation of content</td>
<td>Curriculum adapted to the sport, group and athletes. Clear direction and purpose</td>
<td>Pre-determined curriculum</td>
<td>No curriculum. Content is based on the athlete’s or team’s needs Clear direction and purpose</td>
<td>Pre-determined curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted mental skills</td>
<td>Goal setting, self-talk, visualization, stress management, pre-performance routines, and relaxation.</td>
<td>Focus is limited to sport performance and relevant mental skills</td>
<td>A whole person approach with focus on sport performance, motivation and existential issues</td>
<td>Focus is limited to sport performance and relevant mental skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond mental skills</td>
<td>A whole person approach with focus on family, school, peers, self-management and life skills. Education of coaches and parents</td>
<td>Focus is limited to sport performance and relevant mental skills</td>
<td>A whole person approach with focus on sport performance, motivation and existential issues</td>
<td>Focus is limited to sport performance and relevant mental skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The Content and Focus of Sport Psychology Interventions

**Adaptation of content.** The SPPs described different ways to approach decisions about content and focus of their interventions, and there seems to be an element of personal preference. While some SPPs most often taught a specific set of psychological skills (e.g., goal setting, arousal regulation), others always let the focus areas grow out of the interaction with athletes and coaches. However, the content tended to be better adapted to the specific sport and team in the successful interventions than in the less successful ones.

For youth athletes, the SPPs often had a curriculum, i.e. a list of mental skills that youth athletes would benefit from acquiring. In the successful interventions, this curriculum was adapted...
to the sport, the group and sometimes even to the individual athletes. SPP7 illustrates how he targeted psychological skills (communication and focus) in a youth football academy, but in the context of team tactics and adapted to the specific needs of the athletes:

We focused on having good communication among these midfielders, who had a tendency to attack more and neglect their defensive duties… They needed to make a shift in their role from offensive players building the play, to a more defensive mindset organizing their defensive structure. So we also talked about concentration and focus, about how you can make that quick shift in mindset.

Also in the successful cases for senior athletes, the content was adapted, because: “Elite athletes are older and more experienced, so you can have more of a client-led approach with them” (SPP6). There was less need of a curriculum because the more adult athletes were more aware of their needs and better at communicating them.

In less successful interventions with youth athletes, the content was often too generic and had a pre-packaged curriculum design. This was problematic when the content did not really reflect the most prominent needs of the athletes. SPP1 described how a pre-planned curriculum did not motivate the athletes:

We started with goal setting, then we looked at energy management, we looked at imagery, confidence, building mental toughness. We had eight sessions and we had a topic for each. But after five sessions only one or two athletes would still attend even though their presence was required.

The SPPs gave numerous examples of lack of success due to insufficient adaptation of content, such as: “I just tried to help her build her confidence, instead of tackling why she wasn’t confident”.

The SPPs highlighted a clear direction and purpose as a common characteristic of successful intervention with both youth and senior athletes, and described how a lack of a plan was unfruitful: “I felt like I didn’t have a clear plan. We would meet each week and talk about the things that had been going on and it was a good conversation, but we lacked direction” In many cases, the deliberate adaptation of the content contributed to clarity and direction. A quote from SPP5, who
was asked to give advice to novice SPPs, serves as a summary:

Don’t go in with a pre-packaged plan. Do know the athlete first. Take some time to understand the athletes, the situation they are in, their cognitive level, their ability to communicate, and then adapt what you have for them. I mean, go in with some ideas, but don’t go in doing the same thing for everybody.

**Targeted mental skills.** When talking about what skills or topics they considered to be an integral part of doing sport psychology, the SPPs highlighted a range. The majority of the SPPs emphasized goal setting, self-talk, imagery, pre-performance routines, regulation strategies, while a minority emphasized mindfulness and acceptance techniques. For present purposes, the most important finding was that the choice of skills was more dependent on the practitioner’s background, experiences and preferences than on the age of the athletes, as clearly stated by SPP2: “I would make use of my toolbox interventions irrespective of how old the athlete is”, and SPP6 supports this: “The biggest thing that I have learned in working with kids is that you don’t work on anything different. You work on the same things with a 7-year-old, and a 17-year-old. The difference is all in the delivery”.

**Beyond mental skills.** While all SPPs taught mental skills, a key difference between their successful and less successful interventions in youth and senior sport lay in what they did beyond this. SPP1 describes how a whole person approach was a part of her professional philosophy: “Sometimes they just want to learn mental skills and it is very educational in nature, but my personal philosophy is that athletes are whole people, they are not just athletes”, and SPP4 agrees: “I don’t think it is healthy to separate the athlete from the person”.

With the youth athletes, the SPPs highlighted that in their most successful cases, they managed to view the athletes as whole persons, to look beyond their athletic identity and to target school, family and other life areas, because “life stuff influences performance stuff” (SPP4). At the same time, they often succeed in teaching parents and coaches on how to support the process. A specific example of the whole person approach is a focus on life skills, which they described as skills that are transferable from sport to other settings, as explained by SPP3: “I tried to make it more about sport at first and then I had them appreciate that these were transferable skills into all
things that they do”. Specifically, several SPPs highlighted a focus on developing the autonomy and self-management of the young athletes, as described by SPP12:

I often practice under an acronym of acceptance, understanding and management. I seek to understand whether they accept that there is a particular issue going on here, whether they accept that they have a responsibility to take ownership of that and take charge of trying to make a difference. If I get a sense that there is acceptance then I try to empower the individual who sits in front of me.

The elite athletes were described as more self-reliant, and the practitioners stated that with elite athletes “we have to appreciate the fact that results do matter” (SPP3). While supporting performance, a whole person approach was expressed in the way that the interventions targeted existential issues (life values, loneliness, hard choices and feelings of meaninglessness), motivation (during set-backs) and handling injuries. SPP7 provided an example of how his sessions with an athlete developed with the age and level of the athlete:

The things we worked on progressed from goal-setting and competition routines when he was a junior athlete, to more abstract or complex concepts such as personal values, taking responsibility and avoiding conflict, and to the bigger picture of who he wants to be as a person and to other areas of his life, like education, family and relationship issues.

On the contrary, less successful cases ended up limiting their focus on mental skills training and sport performance, and thus missed out on the bigger picture: “I did not succeed with a soccer player. I accepted that he just wanted to enhance his performance, but this was not really the problem. He had no job, no school, no meaning” (SPP10).

**The Organization and Delivery of Interventions**

The second overall category of the framework is the organization and delivery of sport psychology interventions. It includes five themes: initiative and assessment, settings, athlete-practitioner relationship, involvement of significant others and assessment of effectiveness.
Table 2: The Organization and Delivery of Sport Psychology Interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Youth successful</th>
<th>Youth Less successful</th>
<th>Senior successful</th>
<th>Senior less successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiative and assessment of athletes’ needs</td>
<td>Coach initiative.</td>
<td>Coach or parent</td>
<td>Coach and athlete</td>
<td>Coach initiative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple sources of</td>
<td>initiative. Few</td>
<td>initiative. Multiple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>information</td>
<td>sources of information</td>
<td>sources of information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settings and ways of delivery</td>
<td>Mainly classroom</td>
<td>Multiple settings</td>
<td>Mainly office sessions,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(office, playing field,</td>
<td>skype and email</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>training)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete-practitioner relationship</td>
<td>Irregular contact</td>
<td>Short-lived non-</td>
<td>Short-lived non-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>influential relationship</td>
<td>influential relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement of athletes’ significant others</td>
<td>Good cooperation with coaches</td>
<td>Lack of coach and parent support and cooperation</td>
<td>Good cooperation with coaches</td>
<td>Lack of coach support and cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of intervention effectiveness</td>
<td>Feedback (from athletes, parents and coaches) and observations with a primary focus on athletes’ development</td>
<td>Feedback and observations. Focus on performance and development</td>
<td>Assessment is unclear or lacking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Initiative and assessment of athletes’ needs.** In the successful interventions with youth athletes, the coach played a key role in taking the initiative. In some cases, athletes and parents were also involved, as described by SPP12: “The process started with me meeting the coach, the parents and the rower. The aim of that meeting was to really better understand the situation and the context and to explain my philosophy, my way of working”. In terms of assessment, the SPPs emphasized using information from multiple sources including the coach(es), the athlete(s) and in some cases parents and medical staff. This wide approach made it more likely that the most important issues were targeted, but it demanded patience, which was developed over time:
Earlier in my career I would hear one little thing and I would jump on it right away. Now I just sit back and collect the whole picture, which gives me an understanding of what’s going on at all levels, on a more global level, and where to start and how that might impact the next idea and the next idea, rather than just attacking one idea right away. (SPP3)

In almost all the less successful youth interventions reported by the participants, the initiative did not grow out of a common understanding of the need. SPP1 gave an example from her work with a gymnast, in which the initiative came only from parents, with the coach uninvolved and the athlete not feeling a need: “The contact was made by the mother and I believe that it was more of the mom’s idea to bring her into the sessions than it was the athlete’s agenda and the athlete was simply compliant”. Such examples often involved time restraints and a “fix my kid” attitude.

In terms of the senior elite athletes, taking the initiative was often easier, because a practitioner was already associated with the team and travelled with the team to competitions and camps. The parents rarely played a part in initiating the interventions. A thorough assessment using multiple sources of information was again highlighted as a key to success, and the senior athletes’ high priority in the sport system allowed for a longer and more in-depth assessment phase than with youth athletes. SPP6 gives an example of how she prioritized observing the athletes and engaging in informal conversations with coaches and staff: “So the first thing I did with them was observation, literally the first two days I got there all I did was observe. I watched the team process, I watched each athlete and I watched the coaches” (SPP6).

Less successful interventions with senior athletes would often be initiated by the coach without the athlete(s) being involved in the decision, but “when the motivation comes from the coach it is not always all of the individuals in the team who think it is a great idea, and therefore not all individuals are committed to the process” (SPP6). The assessment phase was described as scarce in information sources, not including observations, and rushed. This was often a consequence of limited time and an important competition coming up soon.

To summarize, all the SPPs in the study shared a preference for the qualitative intake interview in combination with observations: “I rarely use psychometric inventories. I use the interview form, applied behavioral analysis, information from the coach, and sometimes
Settings and ways of delivery. The setting refers to where the interventions take place. Less successful interventions with youth athletes were often restricted to teaching mental skills to a group of athletes in a classroom-type setting. While the athletes would gain a better understanding of the skills taught, the SPPs often felt the athletes did not manage to transfer these skills to the playing field. On the contrary, in the successful cases, the SPPs often highlighted their working with the athletes in multiple settings, such as in training, during competitions, etc. This allowed the acquisition of mental skills to be situated, in the sense that learning then took place in the same context in which it was to be applied. Meeting the athletes inside their training and performance environment provided an opportunity to work with exposure training and positive reinforcement, in order to follow up on the athletes’ mental training more consistently and to stimulate reflection in practice. SPP7 provided an example of how his work with a group of youth football players took place in multiple settings and was situated:

We worked on this over 15 games. We reviewed every game using video. We followed it up on the training pitch, where we did some tactical build-up play and I stood behind the central defenders and had a constant focus on them and on their communication.

For the senior athletes, the same tendency was clear, although the work was more often directed at an individual than at a group of athletes. In the less successful cases, the work was often limited to office, e-mail and Skype sessions, while in the more successful ones, the SPPs were closer to the athletes and worked with them in multiple settings, and most importantly on the ‘playing field’. Specific for the senior athletes was an opportunity for the SPP to travel with the team to camps and competitions, which allowed for closer contact and for working across settings. SPP4 described how she worked in different settings:

My work generally takes place on the field, in the practice facility, in the weight room. I travel a lot with athletes, so sometimes it is in a hotel lobby, in a cafeteria. So I very rarely meet in an office setting. Most of the work I do is actually in the real performance environment of the athletes.

Working with the athletes in multiple settings allowed for the contact between practitioner
and athlete to be more regular. They simply met more often than in cases where contact was restricted to the more formal classroom or office sessions.

**Athlete-practitioner relationship.** Developing a good working alliance and relationship with the athletes takes time, but was emphasized by all the SPPs as one of the most important foundations for a successful sport psychology intervention. Overall, when describing the successful interventions for both youth and senior athletes, it was evident that the relationship between the athletes and the SPP had been an influential one, in which the athletes trusted the SPP and were receptive to his or her messages and ideas. The foundation for this relationship was built on many actions on the part of the SPP, for example taking an interest in the athletes as whole persons and demonstrating a personal investment by showing up at practice or competitions without actually having an appointment. On the contrary, in the less successful cases, the relationship was often described as non-influential and short lived.

While all successful cases were characterized by influential relationships, there were differences between youth and senior athletes. For the youth athletes, where performance was described as secondary to learning and development, the relationship was described as providing a context for effective learning. This included encouraging reflections, creating a context for sharing knowledge among the athletes, creating a focus on life skills and assisting the athletes in bringing their new psychological insights onto the playing field. As described by SPP 11: “I try to see them at their sports, to connect with them on the field of play, to be there when the athletes do what they love and help them connect our talks to their sport”. For the senior athletes, the relationship was described as deep and trusting, and the athletes would ask SPPs for help with performance-related and personal issues both inside and outside sport. We further describe this type of relationship as existential, in the sense that a key focus was to assist the athletes in clarifying their basic approach to sport and life. Finally, the relationship was often long term, with the SPP following the athletes throughout their career. SPP11 described his working relationship with an athlete like a wave:

So you follow the athlete through their career, and sometimes you have loose contact and sometimes more intense. When an athlete reaches the next level of their career and around competitions we may meet more often. But then for a half a year you don’t have any
contact. It is like a wave, sometimes high and sometimes low.

**Involvement of athletes’ significant others.** The SPPs generally stressed that the athletes are embedded in an environment and that the environment has an influence on development and performance, and therefore they were explicit in their description of how they dealt with the environment, particularly the micro-environment (coaches, parents, team-mates). The SPPs highlighted that a close cooperation with the coach (without breaking confidentiality) was often a key ingredient in successful interventions.

In successful interventions with youth athletes, the coach was often directly involved: helping to set a target, attending workshops and helping to design on-field exercises. This ensured that the technical, tactical, physical and mental aspects of training were aligned towards the same objectives. Parents were usually informed about the overall nature of the work. Just as a supportive environment was a resource, a less supportive environment was described as a potential barrier to the success of the intervention. Examples included coaches and parents who did not acknowledge the need or take an interest, as in the example given by SPP1: “The coaches in the gym she comes out of do not believe in sport psychology, so it has been this constant battle”.

For the senior athletes, the parents played a smaller role, but cooperation with the coach was still very important. Involving the coach was facilitated by the fact that the practitioners were often able to travel with the teams, as explained by SPP1:

With the coach, the team and the administration it is very complex. There are a lot of things going on that could affect the client, so I have needed to involve everyone in making the plan and supporting the work. I have travelled with them, so I have seen some of the stuff in action. I am much more integrated in this team than with the teenagers.

The involvement of significant others in some cases also included an aim to optimize the functioning of the sport environment. This included educating coaches and parents to support the athletes better, improving communication in the club and developing team spirit and culture.

**Assessment of intervention effectiveness.** All SPPs emphasized that ongoing evaluation is an important part of any sport psychology intervention, in both youth and senior sport, although the effects of sport psychology interventions are hard to measure. Analyzing the
interviews, we can distinguish between the sources used for the evaluations (how to evaluate) and the actual focus points of the evaluation (what to evaluate). In terms of sources, while a few SPPs occasionally used questionnaires, they were generally cautious to quantify the evaluation of the effects of their work using these. Rather, they preferred a qualitative assessment using multiple sources such as feedback (from athletes, parents and coaches) and observations of practice and competition, as stated by SPP6: “The assessment forms give me nothing I can’t get from observing or talking to the individual, so once a month the coach, the athlete and I will actually sit down and talk about how things are going”. The SPPs also emphasized that evaluation should be ongoing in order to improve the process and not only an end-point effect measurement.

In terms of the focus points of the evaluation, the SPPs looked for several indicators of the success of their intervention, including athlete engagement in sessions and home assignments, coach and parent satisfaction, and a higher degree of self-awareness expressed in how the athletes’ communicate. However, the most important indicator of success was the athletes’ use of acquired skills in training and competitions, and therefore: “… the main thing I look for is behavior” (SPP9), backed up by SPP12: “I use game related footage to demonstrate behaviors, and I show it to the athletes and the coaches”. Evaluations with youth and senior athletes were similar, with the exception that athletes’ sport performance was included at the senior level. Accounts of less successful interventions often lacked an evaluation, or included a rushed evaluation based on unclear criteria.

It was common among the participants to mention various situational constraints when they reflected on their less successful interventions. For example, we asked the practitioners why in such cases they were unsuccessful in supporting the holistic needs of the athlete whereas they clearly valued this approach, or why they jumped to interventions before conducting a thorough assessment of athletes’ needs, or why they limited their interventions to the office setting, etc. They expressed regrets and had difficulty explaining. But in their stories, a number of situational constraints stood out. One such constraint was time pressure, as evident when SPP7 talked about a superficial evaluation: “I would have liked to have a bit more objective measurement, but time constraints and reality constraints just stopped that from happening”. Other constraints included a
lack of interest in sport psychology and in a whole person approach from the athletes or coaches, poor communication with key stakeholders, and sometimes being caught in a quick-fix idea, as described by SPP3: “A father wanted me to work on a specific issue with his daughter. It was expected to be a quick intervention. The dad was like ‘fix my kid’, and I felt rushed. We never developed a relationship”.

**Discussion**

The first objective of the study was to identify structural components which the interviewed SPPs used to describe their sport psychology interventions. As a result, we developed the empirical framework that captures the main components of sport psychology interventions (Figure 1). The framework has two overall categories and a number of themes representing the components. The content and focus of interventions category concerns what psychological skills are targeted in the interventions, the degree to which the content is adapted to the specific target group and whether the interventions go beyond mental skills. The organization and delivery of interventions category concerns the assessment of the athletes’ needs, the settings in which to deliver the service, the nature of the athlete-practitioner relationship, the involvement of the athletes’ significant others and the evaluation of the intervention.

The second objective was to explore the experiences of the practitioners in their successful and less successful intervention in competitive youth and elite senior sport contexts. The framework proved helpful in guiding our data analysis and provided a structure for comparing successful and less successful interventions with youth and senior athletes. This is summarized in Tables 1 and 2 serving as an expansion of the framework. We further believe that the framework and the tables, summarizing the expert SPPs’ experiences, might serve as a useful structure for intervention planning and applied cases presentation.

**Contrasting Successful and Less Successful Interventions**

It is possible to contrast successful and less successful sport psychology interventions across youth and senior athletes, as described by the expert SPPs. First, the successful interventions were sensitized (Cotterill et al., 2016) in the sense that practice was contextualized and culturally situated (Schinke et al., 2012). One key example is in regard to the adaptation of content to the
specific target group. Less successful interventions were often characterized by a curriculum approach, teaching all athletes the same skills and without any clear direction and purpose. On the contrary, in the successful interventions, the content was adapted to the specific target group.

Second, in the less successful interventions, focus was often limited to performance mental skills, whereas the successful cases were characterized by a whole person approach, in which the SPP took an interest in the athlete as a whole person and helped him or her acquire the full range of skills needed to handle life as an athlete. This finding supports Martindale and Mortimer’s (2011) notion that a holistic skills package is needed, because athletes are whole persons situated in complex environments (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010; Stambulova et al., 2009). When successful, the SPPs further helped the athletes handle the existential challenges involved in becoming and being an elite athlete, including negotiating identity across domains, managing energy and motivation over time, and coping with adversity in sport and life (Nesti, 2004).

Third, to be able to provide contextually sensitive and targeted intervention, the SPPs highlighted a thorough assessment of the athletes’ needs. The SPPs described a preference for qualitative intake interviews, observations and feedback from coaches and parents. Such an extensive approach was seen as a worthwhile investment, because it builds rapport and increases the likelihood of targeting the right themes.

Fourth, while sport psychology rarely requires specialized facilities, a clear pattern in the SPPs’ stories was that interventions that only took place in the classroom or in office-type settings were less successful than ones during which the SPP also met the athletes on the playing field. Meeting the athletes in training and competition allows for observations and this is where the SPPs often find themes and examples to address in their work.

Fifth, there was a difference that related to the athlete-practitioner relationship. Athletes should know and understand that their SPP cares about them as people, rather than solely as athletes (Fifer et al., 2008), and therefore the time spent by the SPP in the environment is a crucial investment in terms of establishing trust in the athlete-practitioner and coach-practitioner relationships. After investigating key persons for the developmental pathways of athletes, by interviewing 17 elite athletes, Storm, Henriksen, Larsen and Christensen (2014) used the term
'influential relationships' to describe relationships that had a significant impact on the athletes’ development. They further distinguished between two types of significant relationships, or ways in which a person (most often the coach) could be influential. The transitory relationship was short-lived, but had a supportive influence on the athlete during a transition, usually by promoting a significant shift in the athlete’s career. The existential relationship was long-lived, typically transcended the sport and private context and made the career meaningful in the sense that, through these relationships, athletes developed their mindset and approach to their sport. Looking at the SPPs' stories through this lens, we argue that successful interventions occurred when the athlete-practitioner relationship was an influential one. In most of their success stories, the SPPs depicted existential relationships that were long-lived, trusting and in which the athletes were open and willing to develop their basic approach to sport and other life spheres. We believe that showing an investment in the team provides a basis for developing an influential relationship. Such an investment can take many forms depending on the context, such as travelling, spending time, taking an interest in the athletes and coaches as people, showing up at competitions and at training etc. (Schinke & Stambulova, 2017).

Providing contextually appropriate interventions that target the athletes as whole persons, investing in time-consuming assessment approaches and aiming to meet the athletes in the playing field can all be considered fundamental parts of the SPPs’ professional philosophy (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). Indeed, they all point to immersion in the team, which is suggested to be an underlying factor interwoven into all structural elements of an SPP’s professional philosophy (Schinke & Stambulova, 2017; Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011).

Reflecting on their interventions (especially the less successful ones) the SPPs directly or indirectly emphasized s role of situational factors that can work as resources or constrains. For example, travelling with a team is an important resource in developing influential relationships with clients/teams. However, practitioners do not always have opportunities to travel with a team or spend extended periods of time in a sport environment, particularly when teams do not have enough financial resources. There are also other examples. Coach cooperation provides an important foundation for initial assessment and for taking sport psychology to the playing field. But not all
coaches value sport psychology enough to devote the time needed. Sensitized interventions and whole person approaches are keys to meeting the athletes and to providing truly helpful support. Nesti (2004) argues that novice practitioners often end up only teaching mental skills and providing generic programs that are not truly adapted to the specific culture of the sport and team, because university programs do not provide the necessary skills. In the present study, we found that in some cases, even experienced SPPs ended up teaching generic programs and focusing solely on mental skills and sport performance. Importantly, however, in retrospect the expert SPPs all considered such interventions to be less successful. We suggest that situational factors should be carefully considered in applied sport psychology education and further taken into account and reflected upon by established practitioners (Stambulova & Johnson, 2010; Wylleman, Harwood, Elbe, & De Caluwé, 2009).

**Contrasting Interventions with Youth and Senior Athletes**

Henriksen and colleagues (2014) examined the successful interventions with youth athletes of four experienced SPPs and contrasted these to working with senior athletes. However, like most studies on sport psychology for young athletes, they did not ask the SPPs to talk about their work with senior athletes. The authors therefore argued that it was a task for future research to directly contrast expert SPPs’ experiences in youth and senior contexts. The present study provides a basis for such a comparison and for developing recommendations.

When the SPPs talked of their work, it is clear that the differences between successful and less successful interventions were more evident than the differences between interventions with youth and senior athletes. At the same time, it was also clear that competitive youth sport and senior elite sport can be seen as two different contexts because they require different applied approaches. From an overall perspective, the present study supports a key notion that bears repeating: talented youth athletes are not miniature versions of their elite adult counterparts.

Based on the overall idea that the psychological skills needed to be developed by youth athletes are not the same as the skills needed to be performed by senior athletes, researchers have in recent years set out to investigate the specific skills needed by youth athletes. As examples, MacNamara and colleagues (2010) coined the term PCDE to describe psychological characteristics
of developing excellence, which are particularly needed in the development phase (e.g., commitment, planning and organization skills); Larsen, Alfermann and Christensen (2012) concluded that psychosocial skills (e.g., self awareness and communication) were more relevant in a football academy than traditional mental skills (arousal regulation, visualization); and Holt and Dunn (2004) concluded that pathway thinking, resilience and seeking social support were directly associated with success in a youth soccer setting. However, none of these studies included senior elite athletes and thus direct comparisons warrant caution. In contrast, the present study included SPPs’ experiences working with senior and youth athletes, and, as a result, we have demonstrated that the practitioners targeted the same key mental skills, regardless of the age of the athletes. This seemingly points to a gap between the research-based recommendations (youth athletes need to learn different skills than senior elite athletes) and applied practice (experienced practitioners teach the same skills across age groups). However, the gap is bridged by the fact that in their successful cases, the SPPs took a whole person approach, which was expressed differently in the two contexts. In the youth context, the SPPs targeted a broader range of skills, including life skills (e.g., self-management) to help them manage the difficult transitions in sport and life. In the senior elite context, the SPPs supported the athletes handing motivational and existential issues. We suggest taking the aforementioned research findings seriously and aiming to include PCDEs and psychosocial competencies in youth sport psychology consulting, but that this inclusion should not imply the exclusion of more traditional mental skills.

While all successful interventions made use of multiple settings, the SPPs’ work with youth teams rarely included travelling. On the contrary, the SPPs often travelled with the senior elite teams to training camps and competitions, lived with the team, took part in daily staff meetings and were able to observe and support the athletes while performing under pressure. This allowed the relationship between the athletes and the practitioner to develop into a deep and trusting, long-term existential relationship (Gardner & Moore, 2007; Storm et al., 2014) and for athletes to ask for help concerning many of life’s challenges. Also, and from a cognitive behavioral therapy perspective, we argue that following the athletes in competitions provides the potential to work with “warm cognitions” (Beck, 2005) (thoughts and feelings that are present in the moment), rather than
athletes’ recollections. Bringing observations of specific episodes into individual and team talks further brought quality to the intervention. Finally, by travelling with the team, the SPP shows an investment in the team, which makes it easier to achieve support from the coaches. While we recognize that youth teams often have less resources, we argue that sport psychology for youth athletes and teams could benefit from integrating the SPP more directly in the team, in a similar fashion to what is more often seen in senior sport.

Working Effectively with Youth and Senior Athletes: Insights from Expert Practitioners

In the following we summarize the findings in the form of recommendations. We suggest that the empirical framework presented in this paper can be used as an inspiration in planning sport psychology interventions. The youth sport consulting model (Visek et al., 2009) is a process framework that structures the interventions into a number of phases and provides recommendations for each. Our empirical framework provides a structure for designing interventions. By formulating each theme as a question (e.g., How will you assess the athletes’ needs? How will you involve significant others?), the framework can be converted into a checklist that will aid the planning process.

More specifically, insights from the expert practitioners on delivering sport psychology to youth athletes can be summed up as follows: (1) Invest time to make a thorough assessment of the athletes’ needs using multiple sources of information, including interviews and observations; (2) Adapt the curriculum of the intervention to the needs of the specific group, thereby providing a clear purpose; (3) Teach relevant performance mental skills, but go beyond these to include life skills; (4) Take a whole person approach and help the athletes handle the multitude of challenges in several domains (school, sport, family and social life) involved in developing their talent; (5) Follow the athletes over time and across contexts; (6) Involve the athletes’ significant others, especially coaches, and help them support the intervention; (7) Make ongoing evaluations that use multiple sources of information, particularly observations of the athletes, and focus on development before performance.

Insights from the expert practitioners on delivering sport psychology to senior athletes can
be summed up as follows: (1) Invest time to make a thorough assessment of the athletes’ needs using multiple sources of information, with an emphasis on interviews and observations; (2) Skip the idea of a curriculum and focus instead on the athletes’ or team’s needs; (3) Teach mental skills if needed, but take a whole-person approach and focus on helping the athletes handle the key existential and motivational issues involved in an elite athletic career; (4) Follow the athletes over time and across contexts, and use all communication means necessary to maintain regular contact; (5) Involve the coach and aim for his or her support; (6) Make ongoing evaluations, particularly based on feedback and observations, that keep a balanced focus on development and athletic performance.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has some limitations. First, wanting to elicit the practitioners’ ideas about successful interventions, we did not define “successful” for them. Rather we asked the practitioners to recount stories of interventions they considered to be successful and less successful. We realize they may understand success differently. Second, we defined the youth age group broadly (13-18). We could probably have obtained even more targeted results had we been more specific. However, what constitutes a youth category in different sports differs, and we aimed to elicit ideas about successful cases in what is considered a youth level in the respective sports. Third, the qualitative methodology used in this study did not allow us to establish a rigorous causal relationship with respect to the factors influencing intervention success. We relied mainly on the causal relationships emphasized by the participants. By extension, we realize the a sample of twelve SPPs each interviewed once, does not exhaust what expert practitioners have learned in their careers. Therefore we consider the empirical framework as provisional and expect it to be elaborated and clarified with further research. Finally, we conducted interviews over Skype. While we would have preferred a personal meeting, Skype allowed us to reach an internationally diverse sample.

We included European and North American SPPs, not only to secure a broad representation, but also originally with the intention to conduct an analysis of similarities and differences between applied sport psychology practice in these two cultural contexts. The idea was to help practitioners provide contextually sensitive interventions (Schinke et al., 2012). However,
based on the current data, this proved to be too difficult. The European practitioners represented a number of different countries, just as the North American ones were based in different states. Furthermore, the practitioners worked in different sports and it is hard to know what differences arise from national culture and sport culture. We suggest this as still being a potentially interesting avenue for future research.

**Conclusion**

Talented youth athletes are neither miniature senior elite athletes, nor investments waiting to pay off. They are a distinct athletic population with specific needs of support. In this study, we have developed an empirical framework derived from the SPPs’ intervention narratives. The framework contains eight components, integrated into two categories: (1) the content and focus, and (2) the organization and delivery of interventions. The framework proved useful in contrasting successful and less successful intervention with competitive youth and elite senior clients. We found differences between successful and less successful interventions, and between competitive youth and elite senior contexts in terms of assessment of athletes’ needs, adaptation and breadth of content, athlete-practitioner relationship and intervention settings. This comparison allowed us to present context-specific recommendations about what works and doesn’t work in helping youth and senior athletes. The empirical framework might need further validation, but even in its current form it can be used as a checklist in the planning of sport psychology interventions. We also recommend the empirical framework to be used in education and supervision of SPPs.


SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IN YOUTH AND SENIOR SPORT CONTEXTS

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