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## In the Huddle: "What is Your 'Elevator Pitch'?"

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Like entrepreneurs and other professionals, sport psychology practitioners may need to explain their work to potential clients before they get the chance to demonstrate it in a workshop or consultancy session. Practitioners can encounter or even create opportunities to explain their work to athletes, coaches, or other stakeholders, such as parents or team administrators (Simpson, 2016). Whether an opportunity takes place in the hallways of an arena or on the sidelines after a team's practice, practitioners can be ready for the moment by preparing an "elevator pitch." Designed to be delivered in the duration of an elevator ride, this pitch is a short speech that defines one's services and their value (Denning & Dew, 2012). The purpose of elevator pitches in sport psychology can be to educate stakeholders about one's services, not just "sell" those services (Simpson, 2016).

Crafting and delivering an elevator pitch can be challenging. Practitioners may have to overcome potential clients' preconceived notions about sport psychology. For example, athletes might believe that teammates will see them as mentally weak for needing sport psychology support, and a coach may be concerned that the practitioner would infringe on the coach's role or relationship with athletes (Fortin-Guichard et al., 2018). Practitioners' own knowledge could also interfere with explaining sport psychology. Practitioners may be so familiar with their work that they forget that stakeholders may not easily understand the same ideas, language, or concepts used frequently in sport psychology. Although professionals in any industry might face this "curse of knowledge" (Heath et al., 2010), it could be especially relevant when describing psychological services that involve

concepts, such as “resilience” or “team cohesion”, that might seem abstract to a lay audience.

While Simpson (2016) has provided guidelines for developing an elevator pitch for sport psychology, directly observing (or reading) the practices of experienced practitioners could also help practitioners, students, and coaches. Sport psychology literature has commonly featured experts sharing their best practices for working with athletes (e.g., Fifer et al., 2008), but there are fewer examples of experts sharing what they say in the conversations that could lead to that work with athletes. Therefore, this edition of “In the Huddle” presents experienced practitioners’ responses to the question: “What is your “elevator pitch” for your sport psychology services?” Some of the contributors are full-time practitioners, and others are academics who have accumulated significant experience in applied practice. For practitioners and students, these elevator pitches may demonstrate how to “hook” a stakeholder’s interest, describe the value of sport psychology, or emphasize one’s own strengths or expertise. For coaches, these pitches may help not only clarify sport psychology itself but also illustrate the breadth and variety of approaches that exist among practitioners.

We would like to thank Dr. Sean McCann, Dr. Faye Didymus, Professor Dave Collins, Professor Brandonn Harris, Dr. Chris Wagstaff, Dr. Peter Haberl, and Dr. Ashley Coker Cranney for their valued contributions:

*Hi, I’m Sean McCann, a sport psychologist here at the USOPC. One of the things I learned early on was that the biggest events—where you really want an amazing result—can often produce new thoughts, new emotions, and new behaviors. So just when you want predictability, control, and certainty, great athletes often struggle to manage feelings of uncertainty. If we work together, we will figure out how to increase certainty and help it happen when it matters most. There isn’t one way to do this—some athletes like to connect at competitions only, and others like to meet every week or once a month. That’s up to you. What matters is that we keep our focus on the things that really make a difference.*

–Sean McCann, PhD

Senior Sport Psychologist

US Olympic & Paralympic Committee

*Sport psychology is as much about maintenance and optimization as it is about addressing areas of performance concern. We can, for example, focus on the maintenance of already excellent psychological performance or optimization of performance where fine-tuning is needed. We can also work through concerns relating to performance anxiety, dips in motivation, or stress management, for example. As is the case with physical training, optimization of psychological parameters requires time and dedication. By developing effective working alliances, we can work with athletes, coaches, and*

*other support staff to maximize psychological performance and, ultimately, help clients to stay well whilst fulfilling fruitful careers.*

–Faye Didymus, PhD

Reader in Sport and Performance Psychology  
BASES Accredited Sport and Exercise Scientist  
Leeds Beckett University

*As a pracademic, company director, and active supporter, I am very clear with clients on what they should expect from a performance psychologist. My ‘Magnificent Seven’ provision spans the following: (a) Mental skills training—everyone offers it...many do it badly; (b) Motor control—the mechanism through which emotions and negative thoughts often disrupt performance. Don’t address this and you are missing several tricks; (c) Skill acquisition and refinement—the essentials for changing physical behaviors; (d) Coaching science—the essentials for supporting the main people you will work with and through; (e) Organizational Psych—understanding how to structure planning, feedback, and leadership to optimize progress; (f) Mental health and wellbeing—has emerged as an important aspect of our work but can easily be over-medicalized; and (g) Self-presentational skills—how you sell yourself, plus how coaches and performers present themselves for optimum impact*

–Dave Collins, PhD, C.Psychol

Professorial Fellow in Human Performance Science  
HCPC-registered practitioner psychologist  
University of Edinburgh

*“What percent of failure or success in sport and performance settings can be attributed to one’s “mental game”? This is a question often asked that underscores the importance and influence of sport psychology service provision. Regardless of the arbitrary percentage we may respond with, the reality is that no singular answer exists. However, investing in one’s mental game yields incredible dividends and can narrow the gap between where an individual currently is regarding their performance, and moving them closer toward whatever their true potential may be. By addressing the mental components associated with performance, one can ultimately differentiate good from great performances as well as successful from substandard performances. Perhaps most importantly, this investment can also enhance the quality of their experience for the individual allowing them to consistently be the best version of themselves.*

–Brandonn Harris, PhD, CMPC

Professor of Kinesiology  
Georgia Southern University

*Oh, you’ve never worked with a performance psychologist? No, I only sometimes work on confidence and motivation with the athletes... yes, of course, I can tell you more, but I can’t “sell” what I don’t “own”. I suspect*

*that if I need to “sell” psychology, you want a performance edge from psychology but probably don’t see psychology working in the same way as me, and we shouldn’t work together. Most prospective “buyers” of psychology believe it happens where the psychologist is, but I think everyone owns psychology. It excites me to support sport organizations to create a psychologically informed system, a community, a legacy after we leave, where people can co-regulate and collectively thrive. This way of seeing psychology is called a systems-led approach or organizational sport psychology, and it’s mostly proactive and sometimes reactive; it’s messy, complex, exhilarating, traumatic, and it fails a lot. What I don’t believe in are quick fixes. Neither the quick nor the fixing bit. It takes time to develop a psychologically-informed system and the challenges people face are usually understandable in context. It means focusing less on “fixing” “broken” people, and more on making the systems they operate in more psychologically safe. There are 168h a week; A psychologist spending one hour a week with individual clients will not be the primary facilitator of change, when those individuals spend their other 167h with others, sometimes in toxic relationships, teams, or systems that undermine their capacity to thrive. For that reason, while I do work with individual clients, I’d much prefer to work across your organization, whereby the system is the client, not an individual. If you think that could work for you, we could talk about developing a culture of care and a shared understanding and collective responsibility and freedom within constraints and narratives and I might use metaphors or draw inspiration from music or tv or films or history or poetry or... No, you are right, now I’m selling something I don’t own. [On exiting the elevator, I hold the door for three people to enter: A snakeskin oil seller, guru, and charlatan peddling psychological skills workshops, silver bullets for confidence, magic pills for motivation, and other quackery].*

–Chris Wagstaff, PhD

Reader in Applied Psychology

HCPC-registered practitioner psychologist

University of Portsmouth

*Attention is the currency of performance. To spend that currency effectively, I help athletes understand how the mind works, so they can work with it. The mind works as a thought and emotion-producing factory over which athletes have a lot less control than they think. Furthermore, that thought and emotion-producing factory comes with a built-in thief, a thief that tries to steal that precious currency of performance—attention! Training attention and awareness are the key focus of the sport psychology work as they enable athletes to take charge of their values-guided actions irrespective of whatever the factory that is the human mind offers up.*

–Peter Haberl, Ed.D.

Senior Psychological Services Provider

United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee

*I help athletes shift their relationships with success, failure, fear, and change. Success, a worthy pursuit, is not character-defining in any enduring sense. Similarly, failure, albeit unpleasant, is a necessary teacher rather than some abstract monster we can adequately avoid. Fear is a necessary human experience, vital to our survival, and one that often fuels creativity and adaptation. Change is all around us; its nature requires we embrace, learn, grow, and change ourselves. We do the best we can with what we have at the time we find ourselves in any situation, so I help athletes extend their psychological flexibilities to optimize their mindsets in ways that can facilitate better outcomes. We all experience success, failure, fear, and change; why pretend like we can control this inevitability? Instead, we gather perspective and flex to find the usefulness in all our experiences so we may maximize what we get from them in the pursuit of what matters to us.*

–Ashley Coker Cranney, PhD, CMPC

Sport and Performance Consultant

Owner, MindRight Performance Consulting, LLC

Adjunct Instructor, West Virginia University

## Reflections

Each of these elevator pitches presents a unique style and approach to describing sport psychology services. Some are direct and to the point. Others, such as Professor Harris' pitch, prompt the audience to think about a question. Practitioners also might have a different version of their elevator pitch for each stakeholder (e.g., athlete, coach, or parent). At the same time, there are some common themes among the pitches:

**“Pain points”:** Some contributors engage their audience by mentioning specific “pain points”, or the needs and concerns that a practitioner could address for the audience (Wang et al., 2016). Dr. Coker Cranney discussed fear and change, and Dr. Haberl focused his pitch on the importance of attention and how the mind can “steal” it from an athlete. In Dr. McCann's pitch, athletes' feelings of uncertainty are the pain point. While sport psychology can cover a range of topics, several contributors focused on one of these issues that an athlete or coach could relate to experiencing and want to address.

**Way of working:** Another theme is how the practitioner works with individuals or organizations. Dr. Didymus mentioned the athlete's responsibility (“time and dedication”) and explained that her work can involve coaches and support staff in addition to athletes. Dr. McCann described how the frequency with which he works with a given athlete can range from “at competitions only” to “every week or once a month”.

**Challenging assumptions:** Finally, some contributors challenged pre-conceived notions that potential clients might have about the practitioner's services. In her opening sentence, Dr. Didymus addressed the notion that sport psychology is for athletes who have a problem to fix: "Sport psychology is as much about maintenance and optimization as it is about addressing areas of performance concern." Dr. Wagstaff emphasized the value of him working with a whole organization's system rather than only individual athletes, and he dismisses any expectation that he will offer "quick fixes" for performance.

## Conclusion

Rather than copy these examples of elevator pitches, practitioners and students can reflect on these pitches to guide the development of their own pitches. The contributors may have featured language, points of emphasis, or interpersonal styles that readers had not considered previously. For coaches and administrators, this edition of "In the Huddle" may have enhanced their understanding of sport psychology and illustrated what to listen for or ask about when a practitioner explains their services.

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