

Graduate Training & Career Possibilities in Exercise & Sport Psychology

Sponsored by:

- American Psychological Association Division of Exercise and Sport Psychology (APA Division 47)
- Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP)
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Table Of Contents

- Considerations in Selecting Exercise and Sport Psychology Careers
- CAREER TRACK I: Teaching/Research in Sport Sciences and Work with Athletes on Performance Enhancement
- CAREER TRACK II: Teaching/Research in Psychology and also Interested in Working with Athletes
- CAREER TRACK III: Provide Clinical/Counseling Services to Various Populations, Including Athletes
- CAREER TRACK IV: Health Promotion and Working with Athletes but not Necessarily Directly in Sport Psychology
- Additional Suggestions
- Suggested References

As interest has grown in exercise and sport psychology, requests from students and prospective students for information about graduate training and career possibilities have increased. This booklet addresses some of the commonly asked questions about careers and academic preparation in the field of exercise and sport psychology. The answers reflect the current state of the field, not necessarily the ideal state.

Considerations in Selecting Exercise and Sport Psychology Career

- *What roles do exercise and sport psychologists perform?*

Exercise and sport psychologists typically perform three primary roles: 1) teaching, 2) research, and 3) practice. Career opportunities in exercise and sport psychology may emphasize various aspects or combinations of these roles. Careful selection of a career track will guide you in determining the type of graduate training needed to qualify for career opportunities available in the field of exercise and sport psychology, hereafter referred to as sport psychology.

- *What sort of education do I need to become involved in sport psychology?*

Sport psychology has traditionally been an interdisciplinary field and, therefore, academic training can come from departments of physical education, psychology, or counseling. Many departments of physical education have changed their emphases and now call themselves Exercise and Sport Sciences, Kinesiology, Movement Sciences, Human Performance, or some similar variation (hereafter referred to as sport sciences). The career track that you select will determine the type of academic preparation needed, and will ultimately influence the career opportunities for which you optimally qualify.

Whatever degree you choose to obtain (masters or doctorate), and whether the degree comes from a department of sport sciences or psychology, you should take supplemental course work from the allied discipline not represented by your home department. For instance, both the U. S. Olympic Committee (USOC) Sport Psychology Registry and the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) "Certification Criteria" recommend that psychology majors take sport psychology classes and supplemental course work in sport sciences (e.g., biomechanics, exercise physiology, motor development/learning/ control, and sport sociology). Likewise, sport sciences graduate students specializing in sport psychology should take undergraduate and graduate courses in departments of psychology or counseling psychology (e.g., abnormal psychology, principles of counseling, psychopathology, personality, and social psychology). Further information about the specific coursework requirements for becoming an AAASP certified consultant is available from AAASP.

A well-integrated graduate program would combine traditional psychology, sport sciences, and sport psychology, however, few such formal programs exist. Often students must seek courses as well as research and applied mentoring from professionals in different disciplines/departments.

- *How much training will I need?*

Most of the professional employment opportunities in sport psychology require doctoral degrees from accredited colleges and universities. In addition, students in counseling or clinical psychology doctoral programs usually complete post-graduate internships (normally not in sport psychology) as part of their education. Even if students with a masters degree complete sport psychology internships, these graduates compete at a distinct disadvantage for the limited number of full-time positions available in sport psychology.

Because of the limited number of full-time positions, many individuals work in the sport psychology field on a part-time basis. Whether you want a part- or full-time position in the field is a salient consideration in selecting a graduate program. Depending upon the area you wish to pursue within the field (i.e., teaching, research, and/or practice), there are four possible career tracks that are discussed below. Three of the career tracks (academic sport sciences, academic psychology, clinical/counseling sport psychology) require doctoral degrees while one rather diverse track (e.g., academic athletic counseling, health promotion, or coaching) requires at least a masters degree.

Track I: Teaching/Research in Sport Sciences and Work with Athletes on Performance Enhancement

Educational Requirements for Track I:

- Doctoral Degree in Sport Sciences with a Specialization in Sport Psychology and a Significant Proportion of Course Work in Psychology or Counseling.

Primary Employment for Track I:

- Academic Position in College/University
- Researcher in Research Institute or Medical Research Laboratory
- Coaching Educator for College/University or Sport Organization

Opportunities with the above may include part-time consulting with amateur and professional athletes and teams and, on rare occasions, full-time consulting. If you decide that you want a job that primarily involves teaching and research in sport psychology as well as the possibility of providing performance enhancement techniques to athletes (e.g., relaxation, imagery, goal setting), a doctoral degree from a graduate program in sport sciences is the safest possibility because, with very few exceptions, the academic positions (mostly tenure track) in sport psychology exist in sport sciences departments. (College or university positions are often tenure track. A person who receives tenure is assured some job security. Job termination cannot occur without "just cause" [e.g., demonstrated incompetence, substantial neglect of assigned duties, or substantial physical or mental incapacity]).

Individuals trained in sport psychology through sport sciences departments also can provide performance enhancement skills to athletes, but training in recognizing psychopathology is crucial. When athletes experience emotional difficulties such as depression, substance abuse, or eating disorders, individuals consulting with teams/athletes should have the competence to recognize these disorders and refer athletes to licensed clinical/ counseling psychologists.

Because sport sciences departments monopolize the academic job market in sport psychology, applicants for these positions usually need formal academic course work in sport science core areas such as exercise physiology, biomechanics, motor development, motor learning/control, and sport sociology, in addition to specialized training in sport psychology.

Obtaining a job usually depends more on the applicants' research and teaching records in sport psychology than their ability to provide athletes with performance enhancement and consultation. Having a license to provide counseling or clinical services to athletes is not a prerequisite and may even be a liability if it prevents the applicant from developing competence in the research and teaching aspects of the field. Thus, if you want to stress teaching and research in a relatively secure academic environment, a doctoral degree in sport sciences is the most logical route to obtain academic or research positions that deal exclusively with exercise and sport. On rare occasions (see the last paragraph of Track III), individuals with the preceding training may work full-time primarily consulting with athletes. We cannot emphasize strongly enough, however, how rarely these opportunities occur. When these full-time sport psychology consulting positions do occur, they normally go to individuals with extensive post-doctoral experience working with athletes.

Track II: Teaching/Research in Psychology and also Interested in Working with Athletes

Educational Requirements for Track II:

- Doctoral Degree in Psychological Field with a Significant Proportion of Course Work in Exercise and Sport Science.

Primary Employment for Track II:

- Academic Psychology Position in College/University
- Researcher in Research Institute or Medical Research Laboratory

Opportunities with the above may include part-time consulting with amateur and professional athletes and teams and, on rare occasions, full-time consulting.

This is an appropriate track if your interest lies more in a career in which you teach and conduct psychological research on a variety of topics (including sport psychology) and consult with athletes. Some positions exist each year in research institutes, medical research laboratories, and college or university departments of psychology, counseling psychology, or educational psychology. Applicants usually are hired for their teaching and research competence in traditional subject matter areas of psychology (e.g., counseling psychology, group procedures, learning and motivation, psychotherapy, social psychology) rather than experience in sport psychology. Sometimes, these faculty may offer a sport psychology course, consult with athletes/athletic teams, or conduct research in this area.

To prepare for an academic or research position in psychology, you should attempt to enter a doctoral program in psychology, counseling, or educational psychology. Since these departments typically do not offer training in sport psychology, look for a psychology program that at least permits students to take graduate classes in sport psychology and courses in other relevant areas from a sport sciences department.

Track III: Provide Clinical/Counseling Services to Various Populations, Including Athletes

Educational Requirements for Track III:

- Doctoral Degree in an American Psychological Association (APA) Accredited Clinical/Counseling Psychology Program with a Significant Proportion of Course Work in Sport Psychology and Related Sport Sciences.

Primary Employment for Track III:

- Private Psychology Practice
- Clinical/Counseling Psychologist in University Counseling Center
- University Health Education Psychologist
- Sports Medicine Clinic Psychological Consultant
- University Substance Abuse Specialist
- Career Specialist

Many of the above may include part-time consulting with amateur and professional athletes and teams and, on rare occasions, full-time consulting.

If you would like a career in which you work with athletes as well as non-athletes (e.g., business people, college students, hospital patients, or the general population) there are several reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree in an APA accredited clinical or counseling psychology program.

First, various career opportunities working with clinical problems **require** a doctoral degree in clinical or counseling psychology from an APA accredited program that includes a 1-year APA approved internship. There are laws that govern the practice of psychology such that, in most states, these positions typically require applicants to have a state license or certificate to practice (see AAASP certified consultant criteria for guidance regarding recommended training for working with athletes). People receiving traditional graduate training from sport sciences departments that are not APA accredited will rarely qualify for these positions. Thus, if you want to provide psychological services for people in general (of whom a percentage may be athletes), this track has the distinct advantage of providing the greatest variety of career opportunities as well as the best chance for you to obtain employment upon completion of a doctoral degree and internship.

Second, very few sport psychologists earn most of their income working full-time with competitive athletes. Those professionals who consult with athletes on a part-time basis usually have other employment, such as academic positions, or more traditional clinical or counseling practices in which they earn most of their income. Over the past 3-5 years, only one or two full-time positions occurred each year for people to work with collegiate, Olympic, or professional athletes, or athletes attending private sport academies.

Typically, these positions are filled by people with extensive post-doctoral experience working with athletes. Not only are these positions few in number with no dramatic increase in sight, but they generally offer less job security than other positions. At present, staking your hopes on full-time work with elite athletes appears a risky venture.

Track IV: Health Promotion and Working with Athletes but not Necessarily Directly in Sport Psychology

Educational Requirements for Track IV:

- Masters Degree in Clinical/Counseling Psychology Program with a Significant Proportion of Course Work in Exercise and Sport Science or Masters Degree in Sport Sciences Department with a Significant Proportion of Course Work in Psychology (some colleges, universities, and health centers look for doctoral degrees)

Primary Employment for Track IV:

- College or University Academic Athletic Advisor
- Health or Promotion Worker
- Coach

If you would like to provide general support services to and work closely with athletes and/or exercisers, you may decide to pursue a career in academic athletic counseling or coaching. Sport psychology programs that have considerable emphasis in the area of exercise/health psychology may provide opportunities for their graduates to seek careers in health promotion and rehabilitation.

In terms of academic athletic counseling, the vast majority of positions are at Division I colleges and universities. Academic athletic counselors often organize academic tutoring services, monitor academic progress, assist in academic scheduling, and provide other support services for college student-athletes. In larger universities, academic athletic counselors may be assigned to work with a specific team on academic, personal, or sport performance issues, and/or may provide specialized services, such as career development, new student orientation, substance abuse prevention, learning disabilities assessment, or life skills development. In selecting graduate programs that might best prepare you for an academic athletic counseling position, it is imperative to find programs that can offer you fieldwork placements working directly with college student athletes. Specific course work in counseling, college student development, career development, and sport psychology are particularly relevant. Job opportunities in academic athletic counseling have continued to grow at a slow but steady pace over the last decade.

Health care settings may offer opportunities for people interested in working in health promotion and rehabilitation settings such as employee wellness programs, HMOs, rehabilitation programs, and sports medicine clinics. Although a recent study found that only 2.8% of sports medicine

clinics currently have counselors working with injured athletes on psychological factors associated with injury and rehabilitation, it seems likely that employment opportunities in this and other health promotion areas will increase. To maximize your chances in these areas, it is imperative to find a program that permits internships in health promotion. You also may want to seek certification by the American College of Sports Medicine when appropriate to do so.

For individuals interested in coaching, a degree in sport psychology may make you an outstanding candidate for positions at the college or university level. Your degree work should be complemented by coaching experience and knowledge of NCAA guidelines. Certification by the American Coaching Effectiveness Program (ACEP) may increase your marketability if you are considering youth sport jobs.

Additional Suggestions

- *How can I obtain information about graduate programs in sport psychology?*

The Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) publishes the Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sport Psychology. The Directory describes each graduate program and lists a contact person. The North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity (NASPSPA) publishes a list of graduate programs in sport psychology in its newsletter. The American Psychological Association (APA) also publishes some information about sport psychology graduate programs in its Graduate Study in Psychology, but has a focus on programs in psychology departments.

Once you have an idea of what colleges or universities interest you, you can ask them to send you a description of their programs, degrees, and faculty. The types of degrees and specific requirements for a particular degree differ from school to school. Degrees may be available in counseling psychology, clinical psychology, or sport psychology. Departments of education, counseling, psychology, and sports sciences may offer M.A., M.S., M.Ed., Ph.D., Ed.D., or Psy.D. degrees. The Psy.D. is a relatively new degree which is comparable to the Ph.D., and is designed for people who are primarily interested in applied psychology practice with less emphasis on research.

- *What else should I ask?*

Make sure the program offers the career track and degree you desire. Investigate the reputation of the faculty and program in terms of the opportunities and emphasis in sport psychology, the average time taken by students to complete the program, the funding for graduate students, and the success of graduates in obtaining the kind of sport psychology positions you desire.

Next, check to see if appropriate interdisciplinary course work exists and is an accepted part of the program of study. Opportunities for sport psychology research and graduate sport psychology internship/practica experiences also vary across programs. Give careful consideration to the research and/or clinical/practice focus of the program to ensure that the faculty conducts research on topics of interest to you and is qualified to supervise internship/practica experiences.

For the most thorough information, you should talk to both faculty and students at the programs you have selected. Consideration of the preceding factors can lead to better quality training, which ultimately should make you more competitive for part- or full-time sport psychology positions.

Suggested References

For further information on graduate training and career possibilities, and the field of sport psychology in general, the following references may be helpful:

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