ABSTRACT

COLLEGIATE ATHLETES’ PERCEPTIONS OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

by Bradley Axson Williams

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of sport psychology that existed among athletes at a NCAA Division I university, as well as why such perceptions were held and how they came to be formed. Thirteen (7 male, 6 female; 8 Caucasian, 5 African-American) student-athletes representing a variety of individual and team sports were interviewed. Through qualitative analysis of in-depth personal interviews with the athletes, the meanings that the athletes attached to sport psychology were revealed. Five themes emerged: mental aspects of sports, problems and issues, lack of support, good for the team, and no interest in sport psychology. The results suggest that the athletes in the study perceive sport psychology as dealing with the mental aspect of sports, that they generally consider sport psychology services to be of value to them, and that they believe significant others in their lives might view those who seek such services negatively.
COLLEGIATE ATHLETES' PERCEPTIONS OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY:
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Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1 - Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2 - Review of Literature</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition and Historical Overview of Sport Psychology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Status of Sport Psychology as a Discipline and Profession</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Opportunities in Sport Psychology</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Examining People’s Perceptions of Sport Psychology</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Media: Representations of Sport Psychology in American Newspapers</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Athletes’ Perceptions of Sport Psychology</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport Psychologists’ Perceptions of Sport and Mental Health Practitioners</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Elite Athletes and Coaches about Sport Psychology</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Athletes’ Perceptions of Sport Psychology</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 - Method</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Interviews</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Procedures</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of Data</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues of Credibility and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 - Results</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Aspects of Sports</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems and Issues</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems and Issues: Something Wrong</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems and Issues: Teasing by Teammates and Friends</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems and Issues: Neutral Connotations</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Support</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Support: Betrayal and Jealousy</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Support: Too Individual</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Support: Coaches’ Reluctance</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Support: Parents’ Belief that Sports are not that Important</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Interest in Sport Psychology</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Interest in Sport Psychology: Because of Excessive Use of Sport Psychology</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Interest in Sport Psychology: Because They Speak to Others</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good for the Team</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered Experiences of Sport</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #1: Mental Aspects of Sport</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #2: Problems and Issues</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems and issues: something wrong</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems and issues: teasing by teammates and friends</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems and issues: neutral connotations</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #3: Lack of Support</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support: betrayal and jealousy</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support: too individual</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support: coaches’ reluctance</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support: parents’ belief that sports are not that important</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #4: No Interest in Sport Psychology</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #5: Good for the Team</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered Experiences of Sport</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raced Experiences of Sport</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Remarks</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5 - Discussion</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport Psychology Equals ‘Mental’</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport Psychology Deals with ‘Problems’ or ‘Issues’</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered Experiences of Sport</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletes Receive Little Support in Seeking Sport Psychology Services</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Others’ Fill the Role of Sport Psychologist for Some Athletes</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Future Research</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Study</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Open-Ended Interview</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Consent Form</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1: Meanings of Sport Psychology</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Chapter 1
Introduction

As we begin the 21st century, society’s interest in sports and sport participation appears to be at an all time high. Children of all ages and skill levels are participating in athletics, and as they grow older, many continue to stay involved with sports in high school and even college. Furthermore, professional sports teams continue to draw the attention of fans everywhere. At the professional level, in most colleges and universities, and even in some high schools, sports are viewed as a business not only by the administrators, but also by the players (Sage, 1998).

With the expansion of opportunities for athletes in the developing world of sports, many athletes have expanded their search for ways to enhance their performance. This means not only working to maximize physical skills, but also striving to master mental skills so that optimal performances can result. Many athletes would agree that optimal sports performance involves just as much, if not more, of a mental component than a physical one. Furthermore, it is often the case that when two athletes or two teams of athletes with similar physical abilities match up against one another, the deciding factor in who comes out victorious may depend on who is stronger mentally. Hence, the job of sport psychologists may be important to many athletes, as it is these professionals who are specifically trained to work with athletes on developing the mental skills necessary for improved performances. While some athletes view sport as a business, others may participate in sport for the sheer enjoyment, for health reasons, to be a part of something, or to improve their personal development. Athletes who have these motivations for engaging in sport may also be interested in working with sport psychologists, as they may wish to maximize their human potential in sport and in life.

Although there is an increasing demand for sport psychology services, it is still evident that many sport practitioners (i.e. athletes, coaches) view sport psychology skeptically (Weinberg & Williams, 2001). Because sport psychologists are in a “helping profession,” some contend that stigmas may be attached to anyone who seeks their assistance. For example, Ravizza (1988) suggests that a “shrink” image is connected with some athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology and that because of such an image, athletes may hesitate to seek their services. While research with elite level athletes who have previously worked with sport psychologists has revealed that athletes at this level highly value such services (Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991; Kirschenbaum, Parham, & Murphy, 1993; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Partington & Orlick, 1987; Suinn, 1985; Sullivan & Hodge, 1991), little is known about perceptions of sport psychology held by athletes at other levels. Furthermore, due to the paradox that seems to exist, the increased interest in sport psychology and the hesitancy of athletes and coaches to seek these services, it seems important to extend research to better understand how athletes view the practice of sport psychology.
Therefore, this study is designed to explore the views and perceptions that college athletes have of sport psychology. Specifically, the following questions are examined in the study:

1. What does sport psychology mean to student-athletes?
2. How do athletes come to know what they know about sport psychology?
3. Why does sport psychology hold the meanings it does for athletes?

A number of research studies have been conducted investigating the perceptions various groups in society have of sport psychology. These studies have examined how non-athlete undergraduate students (Linder, Pillow, & Reno, 1989; Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte, & DeLange, 1991; Van Raalte, Brewer, Linder, & DeLange, 1990), adult Lions Club members (Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte, & DeLange, 1991), NCAA Division I college athletes (Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel, & Lounsbury, 1997), NCAA Division II college football players (Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1992), British collegiate athletes (Van Raalte, Brewer, Matheson, & Brewer, 1996), elite athletes and coaches (Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991; Kirschenbaum, Parham, & Murphy, 1993; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Partington & Orlick, 1987; Suinn, 1985; Sullivan & Hodge, 1991), the U.S. media (Brewer, Van Raalte, Petitpas, Bachman, & Weinhold, 1998), and sport psychologists themselves (Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1993), view the field of sport psychology.

Some of these studies examined how people viewed sport psychology in relation to other sport and mental health practitioners. The results indicated that athletes and non-athletes seem to generally group sport psychologists with more non-sport-related and mental health professions rather than more sport-related and physical professions (Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte, & DeLange, 1991; Van Raalte, Brewer, Linder, & DeLange, 1990; Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1992; Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1993; Van Raalte, Brewer, Matheson, & Brewer, 1996). Some of the other studies mentioned above examined whether or not athletes who worked with sport psychologists instead of their coaches were derogated. Results indicated that non-athletes often gave a lower rating to athletes who consulted a sport psychologist instead of their coach on a particular issue, but that athletes usually did not derogate other athletes who were known to have worked with a sport psychologist (Linder, Pillow, & Reno, 1989; Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte, & DeLange, 1991; Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1992). When athletes did derogate other athletes who sought the services of a sport psychologist, results indicated that African-American athletes derogated more than Caucasian athletes, and males did so more than female athletes (Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel, & Lounsbury, 1997).

Although a few studies have provided information concerning the perceptions athletes have of sport psychology, none of these investigations have examined why athletes hold the perceptions they do. Instead, these studies sought to determine whether or not male football players would derogate other football players who worked with sport psychologists instead of their coach (Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer,
& Linder, 1992), where athletes grouped sport psychology in relation to other sport and mental health professions (Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1992; Van Raalte, Brewer, Matheson, & Brewer, 1996), and whether or not male and female African-American and Caucasian athletes would derogate athletes who worked with a sport psychologist (Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel, & Lounsbury, 1997). Though these studies provided some valuable information, they failed to explore why derogation did or did not occur, how such views developed, and why athletes saw sport psychologists in relation to other sport and mental health practitioners as they did.

Because this study is about the meanings\(^1\) of sport psychology to intercollegiate athletes and how and why those meanings exist, a qualitative methodology was used. The case has been made that qualitative methodologies offer a means of gaining an in-depth, holistic, and contextualized understanding of a phenomenon. Further, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note, it was a desire to understand the ‘other’ that signified the beginning of what is known as qualitative research. Through the use of an open-ended interview technique that attempted to explore student-athletes’ understandings and perceptions of their sport performance, the researcher expected to gain a richer understanding of what sport psychology means to student-athletes, how athletes come to know what they know about sport psychology, as well as why sport psychology holds the meaning it does for them. Again, following in the path of Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) description of qualitative research, the proposed study was designed to provide an understanding of how student-athletes make sense of and interpret the concept and practice of sport psychology.

Based on Henderson’s (1991) definitions, the current study was based in an interpretive paradigm and used qualitative methods. The researcher entered the research with some theories in mind. However, he did not seek to test them. Instead, induction was used and he searched for hypotheses and theoretical ideas that emerged from the data. The researcher was interested in the perspectives of the athletes whom he interviewed; their subjective experiences were important to his investigation (Henderson, 1991). That is, this study attempted to discover and explain the realities of the athletes. Such is the role of the researcher when operating under the interpretive paradigm (Henderson, 1991).

Consistent with Heyink and Tymstra’s (1993) view of qualitative research, the current study sought to determine not only what perceptions exist regarding sport psychology, but also why such perceptions exist. Moreover, the researcher searched for clarification, interpretation, and explanation. According to Heyink and Tymstra (1993), the interview can fall on a continuum in terms of its structure, from being highly organized to being minimally prestructured. The interview in this study leaned toward the latter. There were some guiding questions, but the discussion was permitted to “take off” after such questions were asked of the athletes.

\(^1\) The term “meanings” is used throughout this document and is intended to mean the “perceptions” of others, as well as the “experiences” that others have had with regard to sport and sport psychology.
As was discussed earlier, the number of sports participants is increasing. Furthermore, along with increasing numbers of athletes, there seems to be an increasing emphasis on sports as a business. Because of this, athletes strive to do everything in their power to perform at their highest potential. For these athletes the services of a sport psychologist, who is trained to work with athletes of all skills and ages on performance enhancement, may be beneficial. Many sport psychologists are also motivated to work with athletes because they enjoy applying scientific principles and theories to sport so that any athlete’s overall sport participation may be enhanced. Therefore, even athletes who may not necessarily view sport as a business may also benefit from the services of a sport psychologist. However, the term “psychologist” has been known to carry negative connotations among athletes in the past (Ravizza, 1988). Therefore, despite the help that may be provided, athletes may be opposed to or uninterested in working with such individuals. In order for sport psychologists to be prepared for their work and for the field to evolve, it would be helpful to know what perceptions athletes may have of them as well as what experiences athletes have had with sport psychology. While some studies have begun to examine athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology, they have only begun to explore the issue. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology, why such perceptions are held, and how they came to be formed.
Chapter 2
Review of Literature

The purpose of this research was to explore NCAA Division I student-athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology. Specifically, the researcher’s primary interests were in understanding what sport psychology means to athletes, why sport psychology holds the meaning it does for them, and how athletes come to know what they know about sport psychology. In this chapter, the relevant literature in this area is examined. This review of literature begins with a definition and historical overview of sport psychology. Second, the roles of today’s sport psychologists are highlighted, as well as the current status of the field. The literature review ends with a discussion of some of the research that has been conducted on perceptions of sport psychology and sport psychologists.

Definition and Historical Overview of Sport Psychology

Sport and exercise psychology examines human behavior in sport and exercise contexts from a psychological perspective. That is, sport psychology attempts to determine why, how, when, and under what circumstances athletes, exercisers, physical education students, coaches, spectators, and officials behave the way they do. Some sport psychology professionals spend their careers teaching and doing research, while others consult or conduct applied interventions with members of the aforementioned groups of people. Regardless of their orientation, sport psychologists typically ask one of two general questions (Weinberg & Gould, 1999):

1. What effect do psychological factors play in determining an individual’s physical performance?
2. What effect does participating in sport and physical activity have on a person’s psychological development, health, and well-being?

While a number of sport psychology theories were derived from the parent discipline of psychology, sport psychology also has strong ties with motor learning, as many of the first experiments related to sport psychology came from this field. Near the end of the 1800’s, George Wells Fitz of Harvard created an experiment measuring reaction time and accuracy and concluded that his findings would have applications to athletics (Davis, Huss, & Becker, 1995). Meanwhile, other researchers examined transfer of training, or the idea that involving one side of the body in a task can transfer to the other side of the body receiving an education as well. In addition to the motor learning, reaction time, and transfer studies being performed in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, some work examined the relationship between sport and personality development. Along these lines, some researchers derived theories explaining why people engage in sport and play. For example, Scripture (1900), Fitz (1897), Patrick (1903, 1914), and Kellor (1908) examined whether sport participation improved one’s personality, whether play prepared
children for life, whether play was related to ancestral survival practices, and whether play built a strong mind, respectively (Davis et al., 1995).

Though the work of a few researchers began to be applicable to sport, it was Norman Triplett who conducted one of the first investigations that truly combined sport and psychology at the end of the 19th century (Davis et al., 1995). Triplett’s interests grew out of his love of cycling, and his experiment combined a social psychology perspective with that of motor learning. He sought to examine the effect that the presence of others had on the performance of competitors. Triplett’s experiment was considered one of the first sport psychology experiments; most would agree that the first noteworthy contribution and the start of what is sport psychology began with the work of this man.

From 1920 to 1940, Coleman Griffith became the center of attention with his combination of research and application in sport psychology. Griffith wrote over 40 articles in a thirteen-year time span and published numerous books, with his most famous being *Psychology of Coaching* (1926) and *Psychology of Athletics* (1928). Griffith also coordinated the Athletics Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois, investigating such phenomena as methods of teaching football, the effects of will power on performance, the effects of fear on muscular coordination of gymnasts, the psychology of pep sessions, and psychological hunches and jinxes (Gould & Pick, 1995). Furthermore, when he was not teaching, Griffith consulted with various collegiate and professional athletes and sports teams. He interviewed famous football player “Red” Grange, worked with legendary football coach Knute Rockne, and served as sport psychologist to the Chicago Cubs baseball team. Griffith was the first person to devote most of his career to sport psychology-related work (Gould & Pick, 1995). Moreover, due to the breadth of contributions he made to the field in research, writings, and other areas, many have referred to Coleman Griffith as the father of sport psychology in North America (Gill, 2001).

Between 1940 and 1965, research in sport psychology was random and scarce as no one continued systematic inquiry in sport psychology in Griffith’s footsteps (Simons & Andersen, 1995). Most of the research as well as the focus at this time were on different aspects of motor learning or on personality and sport. Various texts that began to re-introduce sport psychology ideas were also published, including John Lawther’s *The Psychology of Coaching* (1951) and Bryant Cratty’s *Movement Behavior and Motor Learning* (1964) and *Social Dimensions of Physical Activity* (1967). In addition, Franklin Henry started the first graduate program in the psychology of physical activity at the University of California at Berkeley (Landers, 1995).

From 1965 to 1975, the field became increasingly organized as numerous sport psychology societies and journals were formed. In 1965, the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) was formed, while five years later the organization’s official journal, the *International Journal of Sport Psychology* (IJSP), was published. Two years after ISSP began, the North American Society for the
Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity (NASPSPA) was formed in 1966. Next, in 1969, came the formation of the Canadian Society for Psychomotor Learning and Sport Psychology (CSPLSP).

Over the last 31 years, the field of sport psychology has added more societies and journals, has established numerous undergraduate and graduate programs, and has further extended its research and applications. The *Journal of Sport Psychology (JSP)* was published in 1979 and quickly became recognized as the leading journal for sport psychology research (Gill, 2001). Nine years later, the journal changed its name to the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology (JSEP)*. In 1983, the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) established an official sport psychology committee and registry (Gill, 2001); four years later the USOC would hire Shane Murphy as its first ever full time sport psychologist. In 1985, the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) formed; its official journal, the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology (JASP)*, began publication four years later. Then, in 1986, the American Psychological Association (APA) recognized sport psychology by creating a formal division for exercise and sport psychology, called Division 47 of the APA. One year later, in 1987, a complement to *JASP* called *The Sport Psychologist (TSP)* was published (Gill, 2001).

According to Weinberg and Gould (1999), in the 1990’s, sport psychology gained an increased acceptance as more people recognized its usefulness. Additionally, they point to a number of events and issues that highlighted the 1990’s. First, a greater number of professionals became interested in gaining training in psychological skills and applied work. Moreover, in terms of applied work, more opportunities became available than ever before, but very few were full-time positions. Although a new emphasis was placed on applying theory to practice in the 1990’s, tension between researchers and applied practitioners continued to exist. Still other developments in this decade included a greater emphasis on counseling and clinical training for those interested in becoming sport psychologists, and an increased attention toward qualitative research.

Other issues of major focus in the 1990’s were those of ethics of the field, certification of individuals, and accreditation of programs. In an attempt to regulate members’ professional conduct and ensure the appropriate use of skills and techniques by practitioners, the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) created a code of ethics in 1992. Later in the decade, common ethical dilemmas were discussed in the literature. Meanwhile, the debate over who should be allowed to call themselves sport psychologists was also a frequent topic of conversation in the 1990’s, although the discussion had started in the early 1980’s. In 1989, the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) made one of the first attempts to resolve the issue by establishing certification criteria for consultants. With the creation of the certification guidelines, a set of minimum standards existed for those professionals who wished to become certified consultants through the association. While some professionals in the field were arguing for certification of individuals, others believed a more important first step was to develop
a system of accreditation for sport psychology programs. The debate over which was more important, or whether certification or accreditation should take place first, continued throughout the last decade of the 20th century.

Compared to almost any other discipline in sport and exercise science, sport psychology is particularly young. The history of its development has been outlined to show the growth and expansion of the field and to provide a context for understanding what sport psychology means to those who are researchers, practitioners, and students in the field. Sport psychology is concerned with the mental aspects of sport, and athletes appear to understand and appreciate the mental component of sport more than the general population (Williams, 2001). Having presented the history of the field and the definition of sport psychology, the next section will cover the current status of sport psychology as a discipline and profession.

Current Status of Sport Psychology as a Discipline and Profession

While keeping in mind how sport psychology was defined in the past and how the field developed, it is interesting to examine how the field is currently operating. In the field’s current status, sport psychologists normally serve any one or combination of three roles: as researcher, as teacher, or as consultant.

Research

Sport psychology research today spans a wide array of areas or approaches that examine the interaction between psychological factors and sport participation. One area of research, individual differences, includes such research themes as personality and sport, motivation, and arousal, stress, and anxiety (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). Other research in the field is concerned with social influences on sport behavior and psychological functioning, such as competition, reinforcement and feedback, group and team dynamics, group cohesion, leadership, and communication (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). A third and large area of research in sport psychology, performance enhancement, includes work on imagery, arousal regulation, attention and concentration, and self-confidence (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). Another segment of research in the field focuses on health and well-being and includes topics such as exercise adherence, athletic injuries, burnout, and over training (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). Lastly, some sport psychology research is concerned with attempting to understand how sport participation influences psychological development, and examines themes such as aggression, moral development, and research on youth sport participation (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). Regardless of the focus of the research, many professionals are attempting to bridge the gap between research and practice, often by conducting studies in natural settings or laboratories that resemble sporting environments (Williams, 2001). Performing such research makes it easier to apply the results to real life settings. Further, there appears to be an increased interest in qualitative research as a means of understanding the mental aspects of sport (Williams, 2001).
Teaching

A second role held by many sport psychologists is that of teaching. According to the sixth edition of the *Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sport Psychology*, there are over 75 college graduate programs across the country that offer graduate degrees in sport psychology (Sachs, Burke, & Schrader, 2001). Furthermore, there are over one hundred professionals who teach sport psychology at these institutions. Some may solely teach graduate level courses, while many others may teach both graduates and undergraduates. Curricula within these programs often cover areas such as physiological and motoric aspects of sport, psychological foundations of sport, psychological interventions in sport, social psychology of sport, the development of sport throughout history, sociological aspects of sport, and research methods for sport. In addition, many programs offer or encourage students to take part in internships that offer practical experience in field placements. Those who teach in sport psychology programs sometimes also offer coaching education programs. Continuing education programs are occasionally available as well.

Consulting

A third role of sport psychologists can be that of consultant. Those who consult with individual athletes or sports teams most often focus on helping athletes develop psychological skills that will enable them to perform successfully. Some of the many interventions that consultants use with athletes include techniques for developing awareness, goal setting strategies, relaxation and energizing techniques for regulation of arousal, use of imagery in sport, confidence enhancement, and concentration and attention control training (Williams, 2001). According to Gardner (2001), applied sport psychology consultants may focus on helping athletes develop life skills and coping resources, while others may use psychological testing to aid teams in the professional draft selection process.

The role of the sport psychology consultant, however, can be further divided into one of two specialties: the clinical sport psychologist and the educational sport psychologist (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). Clinical sport psychologists have received in-depth training in psychology and are licensed to work with severe emotional disorders like depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse. Educational sport psychologists are not qualified to work with clinical disorders, but instead have extensive training in the sport and exercise sciences (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). If clinical cases are presented to educational sport psychologists, they are ethically bound to refer such clients to a licensed psychologist for treatment. However, both clinical and educational sport psychologists can, and do, work with athletes and coaches on psychological skill development. Unfortunately, many athletes and coaches in the past have attached a negative stigma to sport psychologists because they believed the professionals only worked with athletes who had problems (Ravizza, 1988). In other words, some athletes have previously failed to understand that sport psychologists most often work with psychologically healthy people who simply wish to improve their performances or overall life experiences.
no actual “problems.” The purpose of the current study is to examine what sport psychology means to athletes today, why sport psychology holds the meaning it does for them, how athletes come to know what they know about sport psychology, and from where their meanings arise.

**Career Opportunities in Sport Psychology**

Just as the tasks of sport psychologists may vary as discussed above, the number of available career opportunities for each area (research, teaching, and consulting or applied work) are also quite different. Since the United States Olympic Committee hired Shane Murphy as its first full-time sport psychologist in the middle 1980’s, sport psychology has gained increased exposure. Sport psychology is mentioned more frequently in the media with regard to sports teams, and as indicated above, numerous colleges and universities offer courses and degrees in sport psychology and related fields. Furthermore, the number of scholars interested in the applied area of sport psychology has grown tremendously over the last decade. But while more work opportunities are being created than ever before in applied sport psychology, very few full-time positions currently exist (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). This trend has been true since the 1980’s, when Waite and Pettit (1993) examined work experiences of graduates from sport psychology doctoral programs. These researchers reported that graduates cited numerous obstacles in their pursuit to do sport psychology consulting, with the most popular being public relations, or marketing challenges and image problems (Waite & Pettit, 1993). Similar to the 1980’s and because of such obstacles, many scholars currently working in the field might teach and perform research and only consult occasionally, should an opportunity present itself. A more recent survey of APA Division 47 and AAASP members conducted by Meyers, Coleman, Whelan, and Mehlenbeck (2001) revealed that few professionals earned sufficient incomes from sport psychology work alone. Furthermore, Meyers et al. (2001) added that based on the results of their surveys, those interested in sport psychology consulting would be wisest to treat consulting only as an accessory to their other work. A clearly relevant question to ask in response to these findings would be, “Why are there not more full-time applied sport psychology positions?” A possible answer to this question may be that most schools, organizations, and athletes do not see a need for such services. Why athletic departments, sports organizations, and athletes do not perceive a need for sport psychologists needs to be better understood. There is some research that has begun to examine the perceptions that people have of sport psychology and this is presented in the next section.

**Research Examining People’s Perceptions of Sport Psychology**

Although sport psychologists may share similar understandings of their profession, other members of society may have quite different perceptions concerning what sport psychology is and what duties sport psychologists perform. Furthermore, within the subculture of college athletics, athletes may hold different meanings of sport psychology and its effectiveness and relevance to their athletic performance.
For instance, some studies examining elite athletes’ opinions of sport psychology have reported that those who had worked with sport psychologists in the past considered sport psychology to be extremely beneficial to their performances and wished to meet with a consultant again (Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991; Kirschenbaum, Parham, & Murphy, 1993; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Partington & Orlick, 1987; Suinn, 1985; Sullivan & Hodge, 1991). Of course, there are also athletes who have worked with sport psychologists in the past and who have not had positive experiences. Athletes who have never worked with sport psychologists vary in their opinions of the effectiveness and relevance of such services as well. Some see sport psychology as having the potential to be very beneficial to their performances. Others, however, may have more negative attitudes toward sport psychology.

One reason that some athletes may have a negative attitude about sport psychology is because negative stigmas have been known to be associated with people who are seeking or who once received services for mental health issues (Ravizza, 1988). These people have frequently been labeled as having a disease or as being “head cases,” mentally retarded, or crazy. Because counseling and clinical psychologists often work on mental health issues with individuals, their clients may be so labeled. Consequently, sport psychologists have sometimes wondered if perhaps the same stigma might be placed on athletes who work with them (Ravizza, 1988). Thus, over the last sixteen years, several studies have been conducted to examine the perceptions that various groups hold of sport psychology. To date, perceptions of sport psychology have been assessed in the following populations: the media, non-athlete college undergraduates, adult Lions Club members, sport psychologists, elite athletes and coaches, and college athletes.

*The Media: Representations of Sport Psychology in American Newspapers*

One group from whom perceptions of sport psychology have been gathered is the United States media. Keeping in mind the powerful influence that the media can have on the decisions athletes make, Brewer, Van Raalte, Petitpas, Bachman, and Weinhold (1998) conducted a study investigating the manner in which sport psychology is portrayed in the media. More specifically, the researchers examined numerous volumes of three major newspapers, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*, from 1985 to 1993, and found 574 articles that mentioned sport psychology in one way or another. After content analysis of these articles, Brewer et al. (1998) determined the following: sport psychology was the prime focus in 2% of the articles; 8% of the articles mentioned a psychological intervention; a sport psychologist was mentioned in 59% of the pieces; consultation was brought up in 40% of the pieces of writing; only 2% of the sample had a negative tone, 12% had a positive tone, and 87% had a neutral tone. Clearly, sport psychology was generally presented in an impartial manner. The researchers concluded that while some people and groups in society may hold negative conceptions of sport psychology, American newspapers do not present such views.
Non-athletes’ Perceptions of Sport Psychology

Non-athletes were one of the first groups from whom researchers collected information regarding perceptions of sport psychology. According to Linder, Pillow, and Reno (1989), quite often in the past athletes who were not drafted by professional sports teams or who were drafted lower than expected were known or perceived to have worked with a sport psychologist. Wishing to examine whether a stigma may be attached to athletes who consult sport psychologists, these researchers conducted two experiments examining perceptions that one part of the public (undergraduate students who were not athletes) had regarding athletes who worked with sport psychologists. In experiment one, a total of 139 participants were provided different scouting reports of a college football quarterback and asked to choose whether or not he should be drafted into the professional ranks. Some of the scouting reports mentioned that the athlete had seen a sport psychologist to work on improving his consistency, while others indicated that the player dealt with the same issue through his coach. Participants rated on a seven-point scale how strongly they would recommend drafting the athlete. Furthermore, in an attempt to discover what attributions helped to form the students’ decisions, the researchers also had them complete ten additional questions with a seven-point scale response format related to how the athletes would interact with the team and with management, how health conscious they would be, and how well they would play season after season. The results of the first experiment by Linder et al. (1989) revealed that compared to the football player who worked with his coach, the football player who consulted a sport psychologist on the same issue was recommended less strongly for the draft. This player was also rated as being less emotionally stable, was considered less likely to get along with management, and had an overall rating that was significantly lower. Based on the results, Linder et al. (1989) suggested that a negative perception (termed “negative halo”) might develop about athletes who seek sport psychology services.

Wishing to assess the generality of this negative halo effect to other sports and to both central and non-central positions, Linder et al. (1989) conducted a second experiment examining the perceptions that 110 undergraduates had of two baseball players and two basketball players who worked with sport psychologists. A similar procedure to the one used in experiment one was used. Furthermore, an almost identical scale was administered to measure the attributions made by the participants. Results showed the following: compared to the players who consulted with their coaches, those who worked with a sport psychologist on the same issue were anticipated to relate less well with other players and to have more trouble getting along with management. Based on the results of the second experiment, Linder et al. (1989) concluded that the negative halo effect was generalizable across sports.

In 1990, Van Raalte, Brewer, Linder, and DeLange examined perceptions of sport psychology a bit differently. The purpose of their research was to further investigate peoples’ perceptions of sport psychology using a methodology termed multidimensional scaling analysis, or MDS (Van Raalte et al., 1990). A total of 200 undergraduate students were administered a questionnaire that asked them to make
similarity ratings between various pairs of practitioners. The practitioners used were
sport psychologist, clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, coach, psychiatrist,
counselor, performance consultant, nutritionist, sports medicine specialist, strength
coach, hypnotist, and technical equipment advisor. Van Raalte and colleagues then
had the participants place the professions in a two-dimensional space, using the
dimensions of mental-physical and sport-non-sport. Results indicated that the
students placed sport psychologists in the non-sport/mental quadrant with the other
mental health practitioners. Within that quadrant, however, sport psychologists were
closest to the sport end of the sport-non-sport dimension and with the exception of
counselors, closest to the physical end of the mental-physical dimension.
Furthermore, coaches were placed in the sport/physical quadrant and much closer to
the sport side and physical side of the two dimensions than sport psychologists.
Based on these findings Van Raalte et al. (1990) concluded that the public’s
perception of sport psychology appears to be influenced more by the word psychology
than the word sport, and that if the same is true of athletes’ perceptions, they may not
wish to seek such services. This would have implications for the sport psychologists
who wish to work with athletes.

In order to extend the findings of their previous work, Linder, Brewer, Van
Raalte, and DeLange (1991), conducted another study less than one year later. Their
purpose this time was to examine the differences between males’ and females’
perceptions of sport psychology. Specifically, Linder et al. (1991) hypothesized that
males could be socialized in such a way that they have stronger role expectations for
themselves compared to females, and that these differences in role expectations could
lead to differences in perceptions of sport psychology and those who seek the
services. In the first part of their examination, 113 undergraduates were administered
the same questionnaire that Van Raalte et al. (1990) used in their earlier work.
Similar to Van Raalte et al. (1990), Linder and colleagues analyzed where the
professionals fell along the two dimensions and in which quadrants they were
grouped. Results showed that males and females shared similar perceptions; coaches
were placed in the sport/mental quadrant, while sport psychologists fell in the non-
sport/mental space. In this study, coaches were once again much closer to the sport
der of the sport-non-sport dimension as compared to sport psychologists; however,
both professions appeared to be equidistant from mental and physical ends of the
mental-physical dimension. Interestingly, among mental health practitioners,
counselors fell closest to the sport end of the sport-non-sport dimension, while sport
psychologists fell closest to the physical end of the physical-mental dimension. This
seems to indicate that when making comparisons between many different mental
health professions, undergraduates do not consider sport psychologists to be the
experts with sports issues or mental issues. Considering what sport psychologists
specialize in, these results are a bit surprising.

In part two of the study by Linder et al. (1991) two experiments were
conducted. In experiment one, 207 undergraduate students were given one of three
scouting reports to be used in evaluating how strongly they would recommend
drafting a football player, basketball player, and baseball player. Each player was
said to have been working with a coach, a psychotherapist, or a sport psychologist. According to the results, male participants awarded significantly higher draft ratings to those athletes who worked with their coaches as compared to those who worked with either a sport psychologist or psychotherapist. To explain these results, Linder et al. (1991) suggested the possibility that compared to women, men may have higher role expectations of themselves and because of this, they may be more apt (than women) to derogate a male who seeks the services of a sport psychologist. According to Linder et al. (1991), males would be more likely to derogate one another than females because males might view the practice of consulting with a psychologist as a type of deviant behavior, whereas females would not consider help seeking behavior to be deviant.

In experiment two of the study conducted by Linder et al. (1991), 87 adult male Lions Club members were put through the same procedure used in experiment one. A sample of older adult males was used to test the hypothesis that a higher role expectation existed among men, assuming that it would be especially prevalent among older males. Results confirmed the expectations of Linder et al. (1991); study participants awarded those athletes who consulted a sport psychologist lower draft ratings compared to the athletes who worked with their coaches.

Based on the results of the studies examining non-athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology, at least two points seem evident. First, non-athletes appear to associate sport psychologists more with professions that are affiliated with mental health and non-sport issues than physical performance and sport issues. And second, on average non-athletes have negative or unfavorable opinions of athletes who work with sport psychologists when they have the choice of seeking the help of either sport psychologists or their coaches. One question that remains unanswered from these studies, however, is whether or not non-athletes would derogate other athletes who seek sport psychology services if the coaches are unavailable. In other words, perhaps the negative perceptions that non-athletes in the previous studies held were directed more toward the athletes, who chose a sport psychologist over their coaches and less directed toward the profession itself. If the coach were not an option, perhaps the opinions these non-athletes had toward athletes who sought sport psychology services would be more favorable. What these studies also fail to reveal is what sport psychology means to non-athletes, why sport psychology holds the meaning it does for them, how non-athletes come to know what they know about sport psychology, and from where their meanings arise. Therefore, the current study sought to explore these components in the collegiate athlete community.

Sport Psychologists’ Perceptions of Sport and Mental Health Practitioners

Continuing with their investigations of perceptions of sport psychology, some of the same researchers from the college undergraduate studies decided in 1993 to investigate sport psychologists’ perceptions of sport and mental health practitioners (Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1993). Van Raalte et al. (1993) hypothesized that sport psychologists would have a much different view of their profession
compared to that of college students. A total of 35 sport psychology professionals completed the same questionnaires used in the study by Van Raalte et al. (1990) that involved making similarity judgments related to triads of practitioners. Also like the previous studies, the participants ranked each profession on the two dimensions: sport-non-sport and mental-physical. The results of the study showed that the perceptions of the sport psychologists were actually quite similar to those of the undergraduates. While such results might normally be encouraging, Van Raalte et al. (1993) noted that even sport psychologists have quite different perceptions of their roles and it would therefore be difficult to believe that members of any other population would have consistent perceptions. Consequently, though sport psychologists’ perceptions of themselves in the study seemed to match those views of undergraduates in previous investigations, Van Raalte et al. (1993) noted that they were unsure whether this represented a shared understanding of the field or a shared confusion.

Perceptions of Elite Athletes and Coaches about Sport Psychology

A number of articles have been published over the years that describe the reactions of elite athletes and coaches to sport psychology services they have received in the past (Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991; Kirschenbaum, Parham, & Murphy, 1993; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Partington & Orlick, 1987; Suinn, 1985; Sullivan & Hodge, 1991). These studies are unique in that all or almost all of the subjects involved had already worked with sport psychologists. Still, the pieces describe perceptions that these groups had concerning sport psychology. In summary, while some of these studies involving elite athletes’ and coaches’ perceptions of sport psychology services discussed qualities of good and bad consultants, the same investigations generally reported that such services were viewed as worthwhile in the eyes of the coaches and athletes. For example, some of the athletes from the 1984 Olympics attributed their success to the training provided by sport psychologists leading up to the games (Suinn, 1985). Other athletes who shared positive views of sport psychologists pointed to the fact that they valued having someone to talk to who was somewhat removed from their sport (Orlick & Partington, 1987). Meanwhile, interviews of coaches from the same Olympic Games revealed a shared agreement “that high quality sport psychology consultants are positive, confident people, capable of working with athletes and coaches without being intrusive, and committed to helping them in practical, highly individualized ways” (Partington & Orlick, 1987, pp.100-101). In another study by Gould, Murphy, Tammen, and May (1991), 45 Olympic coaches and 47 Olympic athletes were surveyed in an attempt to obtain ratings of sport psychology services they had received. Results of the surveys indicated that a large majority of both coaches (73%) and athletes (91%) were so positively impressed that they desired to continue working with the sport psychologist in the future. Olympic coaches in other studies also expressed a desire for additional consultations because of the beneficial effect they had on the athletes (Kirschenbaum, Parham, & Murphy, 1993).
Athletes at the highest skill levels appear to be embracing sport psychology and the services of sport psychologists. But when examining the entire athletic community, elite athletes represent a small part of the entire group. One might wonder whether college athletes, who constitute a much larger proportion of the athletic community, would share the same perceptions as elite athletes. After all, we know that many college athletes admire or have as role models those from the elite levels of sport. Some research has begun to examine college athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology.

**College Athletes’ Perceptions of Sport Psychology**

Of most interest to the present investigation was what past research has found regarding college athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology. The first published study examining college athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology was conducted in 1992 and involved football players from NCAA Division II schools (Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1992). Results of previous studies by Van Raalte and colleagues revealed that athletes who consulted a sport psychologist instead of their coach were derogated by sports fans (Lions Club members) and college students. The researchers then decided that the next logical step would be to test the perceptions of the very groups that would seek the assistance of sport psychologists, the student-athletes themselves (Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1992). In the study’s first investigation, 111 football players from two schools constituted the sample. Players from one of the schools had worked with sport psychology graduate students while players at the other school had no such experiences. All were given a scouting report of a quarterback similar to that used by Linder et al. (1989). Again, the reports either had the quarterback seeking the help of a coach, a psychotherapist, or a sport psychologist and again, the participants were asked to rate how strongly they would recommend that the quarterback be drafted. Interestingly, the results of the first investigation showed that, compared to the quarterbacks who worked with coaches, athletes did not derogate or give lower draft ratings to the quarterbacks who worked with a sport psychologist. Furthermore, there were no significant differences in perceptions between the athletes from the two schools. Van Raalte et al. (1992) concluded that male athletes most often perceive other male athletes who seek the help of sport psychologists differently than do adult males and college students of both sexes.

In part two of the same study, Van Raalte et al. (1992) examined how 53 football players from a school that offered sport psychology services perceived various sport and mental health practitioners. They used procedures similar to those implemented in previous research investigating this phenomenon, only the practitioners used were: sport psychologist, clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, coach, psychiatrist, counselor, performance consultant, nutritionist, sports medicine specialist, strength coach, and hypnotist. Again, when presented groups of three practitioners, the participants judged how similar the practitioners were to one another; they were also asked to rate the professions on the two dimensions: sport-non-sport and mental-physical, and to rank order from one to eleven each
profession’s level of expertise in sport-related, mental, and physical issues (Van Raalte et al., 1992). Results revealed the following: compared to all non-coaching professions, the sport psychologists were seen to have more sport-related expertise, and compared to all of the psychological practitioners, the sport psychologists were viewed as possessing more knowledge of physical issues and less of mental issues. Van Raalte et al. (1992) concluded that the similarity judgments of practitioners that were made by the athletes in the study were quite similar to those reported in earlier related studies by Van Raalte et al. (1990) and Linder et al. (1991). Furthermore, the athletes in the present investigation seemed to suggest that consulting with sport psychologists is an acceptable practice. Again, it was posited that, compared to adult males or the general public, athletes might be less likely to derogate other athletes who work with sport psychologists. Perhaps this is due to the fact that athletes seem to have a greater appreciation for the imperative mental component of sport than non-athletes, that they know of others who have sought sport psychology services in the past, or that they have learned about sport psychology in school and simply know more about the field compared to non-athletes. Finally, Van Raalte et al. (1992) suggested that additional research be conducted in this area, but with both males and females and with athletes from other collegiate levels; their investigation only involved male football players from a NCAA Division II program.

A few years after the study just presented, Van Raalte, Brewer, Matheson, and Brewer (1996) sought to replicate the study in another country. A total of 32 British collegiate athletes were subject to the same questions and ratings procedures as outlined above to see if their perceptions differed from those of their American counterparts. The results of this study showed that British athletes held similar views of sport psychology to both U.S. athletes and North American sport psychologists. Sport psychologists were perceived to be similar to mental health professionals in general, but to be more similar to sport related professionals than other mental health practitioners (Van Raalte et al., 1996). Van Raalte et al. (1996) reiterated the point that sport psychologists have quite different perceptions of their own roles and it would therefore be difficult to believe that members of any other population would have consistent perceptions. They therefore once again concluded that the shared results between the British and American athletes could indicate a common understanding of the field or a common confusion of sport psychology.

In 1997, Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel, and Lounsbury took a different approach in investigating athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology. Interested in gender and racial issues, they hypothesized that Caucasian and African-American athletes would have significantly different perceptions, males and females would not show significantly different perceptions, and no significant race X gender interaction would be present in terms of perceptions of sport psychology consultants. A revised version of the Athletes’ Attitudes Toward Seeking Sport Psychology Consultation Questionnaire (ATSSPCQ) by Wrisberg and Martin (1994) was administered to 48 African-American and 177 Caucasian athletes from various sports at a NCAA Division I university. According to the results, African-American athletes were more likely than Caucasians to stigmatize sport psychologists and males were more likely
to stigmatize sport psychologists than females. Martin et al. (1997) explained the former finding by pointing to a study by Watkins, Terrell, Miller, and Terrell (1989) that found black athletes were mistrustful of members of a helping profession who were white. Martin et al. (1997) also suggested that black athletes might believe physical prowess is more influential than mental strength in determining sport performance. Finally, with regard to the gender distinction found, Martin et al. (1997) suggested that, unlike females, males are socialized into thinking that seeking help or expressing emotions and feelings to sport psychologists would mean they were weak, and displaying any sign of weakness is unacceptable. Thus, males would be more likely to stigmatize sport psychology consultants and the practice of seeking such services than females.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

As the review of literature reveals, numerous studies have examined the perceptions that various groups in society hold regarding sport psychology. Those investigations that measured athletes’ perceptions revealed that some derogated other athletes who chose to get help from sport psychologists instead of their coaches while others did not. Moreover, other studies investigated how people viewed sport psychology in relation to other sport and mental health professions. Based on these results, it appears clear that the athletic community has mixed perceptions concerning the relevance and benefit of sport psychology to performance enhancement. However, the populations that have been examined have been fairly homogeneous; most studies have looked at males only and only one has examined athletes of numerous sports. Furthermore, the one study that examined race and gender found that these two factors distinguished student-athlete perceptions of those who consult a sport psychologist. Finally, all of these studies merely indicated what perceptions existed, but failed to explore the issue in any more detail. For example, in the studies asking participants where they would group sport psychology in relation to other sport and mental health professions, no attempts were made to determine the meanings that these participants attached to all of the professions. But for the field of sport psychology to flourish and expand, it would be helpful to not only know what perceptions exist within the athletic community, but also how and why such perceptions of sport psychology exist. Therefore, the present study sought to investigate the perceptions of sport psychology that existed among athletes at a NCAA Division I university, as well as why such perceptions were held and how they came to be formed.
Chapter 3
Method

Participants

The participants in the study included thirteen athletes from a NCAA Division I university. Four of the seven males appeared to be Caucasian, while the remaining three appeared to be African-American. Two of the six female participants appeared to be African-American, while the remaining four appeared to be Caucasian. Furthermore, the athlete participants represented eight varsity sports, four of which would be considered team sports and four of which would be considered individual sports. The researcher knew of the athletes and had access to them because of his graduate assistant job in the athletic department. Male and female African-American and Caucasian athletes representing numerous team and individual sports were purposely chosen in order to provide as broad a range of perspectives as possible. A purposeful sample of diverse athletes was also chosen because past research has been criticized as being limited in terms of the populations studied (i.e., white males) and because more recent research in sport sociology suggests that gender and race are important in differentiating the experiences of athletes in intercollegiate sport (Sage, 1998).

Procedures

The following section describing the procedures that were followed in this investigation is divided into four parts. First, the procedures surrounding the conducting of pilot interviews are described. Next, the interview procedures for those interviews that were used in the study are highlighted. Following the interview procedures is a subsection explaining how the data in the research is analyzed. Then, the final subsection introduces how credibility and trustworthiness are sought in qualitative research and the current study in particular.

Pilot Interviews

Pilot interviews were first conducted with one African-American male and one Caucasian female. The pilot interview with the female participant was conducted in a campus apartment, while the interview with the male athlete took place in the student athlete development center at the university. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and was audio tape-recorded. These open-ended interviews consisted of the researcher asking a number of guiding questions and then allowing the athletes to respond and “take off” in any direction they wished. The pilot interviews were beneficial in providing the researcher with interviewing experience, and in testing the guiding questions in order to see if they spurred sufficient conversation. After the pilot interviews, the list of guiding questions was revised to produce the final list that would be used during the research (see Appendix A).
Interview Procedures

The researcher was acquainted with many of the athletes at the university where he studied because of his graduate assistant job in the athletic department. Thus, he gathered participants through informal contact in the form of a telephone call or by asking them in-person. Potential participants were simply provided a brief description of the research study and asked if they would be willing to help the researcher with his project. For those who agreed to participate, a meeting time was then scheduled for the interview. Each interview took place in a quiet room inside the student athlete development center of the university, was audio tape-recorded, and lasted approximately thirty minutes. Interviews were conducted until “saturation” was reached (Patton, 1990). This required interviewing thirteen student-athletes.

At the onset of each interview, athletes were given a consent form to read which outlines the purpose of the study and process of the interview and asks for their signature, indicating an understanding of and agreement to participate in the study (see Appendix B). Once they signed the form, the in-person, open-ended interviews were conducted with thirteen athletes, at which time a more in-depth examination into the athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology occurred. The interview was designed to discover what sport psychology means to student-athletes, why sport psychology holds the meaning it does for them, and how athletes come to know what they know about sport psychology.

Analysis of Data

The analysis process for the present study began at the start of each interview and continued well after all interviews were conducted. At the onset of each interview, the researcher listened carefully to the student-athlete’s responses. In addition to audio tape-recording what was actually said by each athlete, the researcher began to hypothesize while documenting thoughts that came to mind regarding meanings and patterns that emerged from the athletes’ responses. Because each interview was being audio-recorded, the researcher had time to make such observations. Then, after each interview was complete, a research assistant transcribed it and returned it to the researcher so that he could proceed with further analysis.

While being sure to make continual references back to the research question, following each transcription, the interviews were carefully evaluated using the process of coding which, according to Lofland and Lofland (1995), is one of “the core physical activities of developing analysis” (p.186). Coding refers to various methods of categorizing and sorting data so that the information may be further analyzed (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). For the present study, the researcher engaged in open coding and axial coding. Strauss (1987) provides a detailed description of these coding phases. In step one of the process (open coding), the researcher combined his personal thoughts with the interview transcript. He read and re-read each transcript, searching for categories of meaning. At this time, he made notes regarding these
emerging meanings that were revealed, notes that were used in a later phase of data analysis. In summary, and following along with Strauss (1987), the researcher created categories and subcategories in the open coding phase and also started to make connections among them.

In the open coding phase of data analysis, researchers will most likely experience a period of wonderment and speculation in which the ideas they acquire help them to begin forming hypotheses (Strauss, 1987). This springboard effect, as Strauss (1987) terms it, should then lead the researchers into the next phase of coding, axial coding. According to Strauss (1987), axial coding features taking the meaning categories that have been formed and looking for patterns and connections among them. Then, the researcher begins to form additional hypothesis surrounding the numerous “varieties of conditions and consequences, interactions, and strategies that are associated with the appearance of the phenomenon referred to by the category” (p.64). Lastly, the relationships among all of the categories should begin to appear.

The two phases of coding outlined above were used to analyze the responses of each student-athlete and then across the interviews. Moreover, while each interview was analyzed in this manner immediately after it was conducted, a process of continual integration of categories took place after each interview. In other words, categories that arose from the first interview were noted and kept in mind by the researcher as he began the second interview. He then analyzed the second interview and took even more ideas with him into his analysis of the third interview. The process continued in the same fashion throughout data collection. It is also important to note that after each interview, when an initial understanding was made concerning each of the athlete’s responses, the interviewer returned to each participant and made sure that his interpretations represented the athletes’ experiences by obtaining feedback from the athletes themselves. In other words, the researcher presented the transcribed interviews to the athletes and asked if they wished to add to or change any of their responses. If adjustments were needed after this consultation, the researcher made changes to his notes at that time.

Somewhat analogous to Strauss’s (1987) idea of categories is Luborsky’s (1994) concept of themes, or “manifest generalized statements by informants about beliefs, attitudes, values, or sentiments” (p.195). According to Luborsky (1994), themes may be collected by searching for statements that the athletes report repeatedly or by paying careful attention to statements that have special meaning attached to them. The researcher in the present study searched for themes using these methods of collection; he also utilized Luborsky’s (1994) idea of a worksheet on which covered topics are noted during the interviews. Strauss’s (1987) coding procedures and Luborsky’s (1994) thematic analysis seem to coincide sufficiently so that the researcher in the present study could use both methods.

To obtain a visual image of how the created themes or categories fit together, the researcher also engaged in what Lofland and Lofland (1995) call diagramming. More specifically, he employed a flow chart, or diagram that depicted a network in
which related ideas were connected via links (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Being able to actually see where concepts fell and how they fit together was extremely valuable during the long and complicated data analysis phase.

When all phases of data analysis are complete one important component of professional research remains to be implemented. Thus, heeding the advice of Lipson (1994) concerning the importance of reciprocity, when the study was completely finished, every athlete who participated received a research summary that provided a brief report of the study’s findings and an explanation of what sport psychology is and the roles that sport psychologists play.

**Issues of Credibility and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research**

In qualitative investigations, researchers strive to maintain what they term **credibility** and **trustworthiness**. Kirk and Miller (1986) explain that by carefully documenting their procedures, qualitative researchers can maintain credibility in their studies (as cited in Silverman, 1993). Spradley (1979) adds that credibility can be maintained in studies involving observation if researchers keep numerous sets of notes at various stages of data collection and analysis (as cited in Silverman, 1993). With regard to analyzing texts, Silverman (1993) advises making sure that categories are created in a systematic manner; he also recommends that the researcher have an additional person or persons analyzing the data. Then, input from all raters is put together and a final set of categories results.

According to Guba (1981), trustworthiness can be established by engaging in some of the following: peer debriefing (meeting with qualified others to discuss your analyses), triangulation, member checks (continually testing the data and interpretations that emerge with the participants from which they emerged), doing purposeful sampling (purposefully select the participants instead of conducting random sample), collect thick and descriptive data, develop thick description, establish an audit trail (take careful notes of the procedures so that others may easily examine the processes used to analyze the data), and practice reflexivity (keep a daily journal of thoughts pertaining to analysis). Hammersley (1990 and 1992a) also offers an explanation as to how qualitative researchers may address trustworthiness (as cited in Silverman, 1993). He suggests that trustworthiness be associated with one’s confidence in his knowledge, but not certainty, meaning that one recognizes that no knowledge is completely certain. Hence, he proposes that qualitative researchers’ accounts, instead of reproducing what is real, merely represent that reality (as cited in Silverman, 1993). Finally, in his discussion of trustworthiness in qualitative research, Silverman (1993) highlights two forms of trustworthiness that are often used: triangulation and respondent validation. According to Silverman (1993), triangulation involves using multiple methods and respondent validation features “taking one’s findings back to the subjects being studied” (p.156).

In order to maintain credibility and trustworthiness in the present study, some suggestions of Silverman (1993) and others were closely followed. First, pilot
interviews were conducted in order to make sure the interview questions elicited the information of interest. Moreover, an extensive amount of time was awarded to practicing for the interviews. In addition, while the researcher entered the investigation with some theories in mind, he did not seek to test those theories. Instead, he formed hypotheses as he continued to collect data, and in the end, attempted to develop a theory. This is an inductive approach and closely resembles suggestions that have been made by Glaser and Strauss (1967) when one wishes to maintain trustworthiness (as cited in Silverman, 1993). The researcher also engaged in respondent validation, another procedure that Silverman (1993) highlights as being important in qualitative research; each athlete was contacted after the interviews so the researcher could report his interpretations back to them in order to make sure they expressed themselves accurately.

In addition to following the suggestions of Silverman (1993), the researcher also kept in mind Guba’s (1981) model of the naturalistic treatment of trustworthiness. Thus, he engaged in many of the practices that support Guba’s (1981) approach as well. For example, he strove to collect thick, descriptive data, met with others to discuss his analyses, and reported his analysis back to the participants. Furthermore, the researcher had a second person take part in the coding of the interviews in order to increase the trustworthiness of his analysis.
Chapter Four
Results

The purpose of this research was to explore NCAA Division I student-athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology. Specifically, the researcher’s primary interests were in understanding the meanings of sport psychology to intercollegiate athletes. In seeking to understand what sport psychology means to intercollegiate athletes, the researcher was concerned not only with what sport psychology means to athletes, but also why sport psychology holds the meaning it does for them, and how athletes come to know what they know about sport psychology. The athletes who were interviewed had many different views on what sport psychology meant. Furthermore, while some provided very specific details of interventions and topics that they believed sport psychologists worked on with athletes and coaches, others were more general. Analysis of the data revealed five major themes. The major themes are mental aspects of sports, problems and issues, lack of support, good for the team, and no interest in sport psychology. Moreover, under problems and issues, the sub-themes of something wrong, teasing by teammates and friends, and neutral connotations emerged, while lack of support was comprised of the sub-themes betrayal and jealousy, too individual, coaches’ reluctance, and parents’ belief that sports are not that important. No interest in sport psychology consisted of two sub-themes: because they speak to others and because of excessive use of sport psychology (see Figure 1).

Mental Aspects of Sports

One theme that emerged from the interviews was that sport psychology meant the “mental aspects of sports.” For example, one athlete’s explanations of what sport psychology meant to him included the following:

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** [...] sport psychology to me is the mental training of athletics. The part of [sport] that’s dealt with the least by coaches is the mental part and it’s where a sport psychologist would kinda be like another coach or trainer or something. And so then sport psychology would just be helping the athlete develop his mind ready for game situations and all situations that can be brought out in the game.

A second student-athlete explained what sport psychology meant to her:

**Athlete #3 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** [...] what I’ve seen of it is just working on the mental aspects of the game and stuff like that. When I think of the word, I think of the mental part of the game. That’s just what I think of.

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2 In an attempt to ensure anonymity, some of the student-athletes’ quotations have been paraphrased. The paraphrasing has been done in such a way as to maintain the intended meanings being conveyed by the student-athletes.
Another athlete discussed how she viewed sport psychology:

**Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport):** [...] probably tapping into willpower, and kinda letting an athlete know how much the mental toughness, how important that is to your performance. So kinda becoming aware of how strong your psychological mindset is and how much influence it has on how you perform. And then they [sport psychologists] probably make suggestions; probably give them [athletes] tips of how to mentally prepare [...] 

Though the meanings that one athlete attached to sport psychology changed after coming to college, sport psychology initially meant the following to her:

**Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** [...] if you weren’t able to clear your mind while you’re playing [sport]. That’s what I thought a sport psychologist was for. I guess at first I thought maybe it was kinda picking at your mind [...]

Similarly, although they changed, a male athlete’s initial thoughts about sport psychology were:

**Athlete #7 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** [...] you go to a sport psychologist when you’re missing brief parts. And your mind is kinda, you’re losing track [...]

Meanwhile, a female student-athlete reported the following:

**Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport):** I guess I think a coach deals with the training aspect and maybe a sport psychologist would work with the mental aspect of training, competing, and so on.

Another team sport athlete replied that sport psychology meant the following to him:

**Athlete #10 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** I would say probably preparing athletes mentally and not only in sports but just I guess any kind of mental problem that they might have.

When asked what sport psychology meant to him, a different athlete reported:

**Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** [...] I think it’d be a way to help players, like they try to help you stay focused on the mental part. Like you’re tired, it’s the [time period in game] with two minutes to go or something or it’s just one of them nights when if you’re a [type of role in sport] and it’s just an off night you just have to stay focused, stay in the game, cause you can still help your team even though your [aspect of the game is] not [successful] that night.
When reporting how he thought his teammates might react if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist, the same athlete said that they might tease him, but that they would still be supportive of his decision. He explained why they might use the word “shrink” when teasing him:

**Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** [...] Just cause like, psychology, you think of mental, and people’s minds and I mean that’s just how people perceive it.

A white male athlete also equated mental issues with sport psychology when he explained whether or not he would work with a sport psychologist:

**Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport):** Yeah, definitely being injured is a real tough thing because you can’t, for a while, I couldn’t even go outside and run. I couldn’t jog. I just had to, the last couple weeks of school, when it was nice out I had to sit inside when everyone else was outside [engaging in aspect of his sport] and stuff like that.

**Interviewer:** So are you saying then, that you think another thing sport psychologists might do is help athletes through injuries too?

**Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport):** Yeah. Yeah. Because an injury just isn’t a physical thing. It’s also a mental thing. It’s [...] you start getting stressed about seeing other people move ahead of you and sit through practice and seeing other people doing well and you know you can do it or do better than what they’re doing and stuff like that.

He also mentioned that his coaches might use the services of a sport psychologist if certain athletes suffered from a “mental breakdown”:

**Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport):** [...] it would depend. It would really depend on the situation. I could see if a star player all of a sudden started having a mental breakdown, yeah, then they [coaches] might incorporate it [sport psychology], but until one of the selected special few had problems, I don’t see it happening.

**Interviewer:** Okay. You mentioned mental breakdown. What do you mean by that?

**Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport):** [...] as a student athlete mainly you’re able to keep separate your athletic life and your student life. But once something goes wrong, one or the other pressures start building on you and you keep trying to file them in and then all of a sudden something minor happens and it becomes a huge fiasco because you’ve been, I don’t know, putting aside all the other problems you’ve been having and all of a
sudden they all come in bundled as one. You just really lose it for a couple minutes or a little bit.

In addition, another male athlete reported the following:

**Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** Yeah, I thought maybe it’s just like studying why players [or] athletes do certain things or what their emotional states are after certain events take place in sport and stuff like that. Just I mean broad like study of the different emotions and mental things that are going on with athletes and you know, people in sport and stuff.

**Problems and Issues**

Almost all of those interviewed also used terms such as “problems” or “issues” when talking about what sport psychology meant to them, or what they thought it meant to others. In addition, the athletes spoke of stigmas and negative connotations that they felt were often associated with psychology and psychology related fields. Some of the athletes clarified their usage of certain words and indicated that they were not using them in a negative manner, but other athletes attached a more negative connotation to psychology and sport psychology.

**Problems & Issues: Something Wrong**

For example, when asked how she thought her parents would feel if she were working with a sport psychologist, one athlete began talking about negative connotations that people often associate with psychology:

**Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport):** I don’t think they’d feel [...] they’d probably question me at first cause sometimes there are bad connotations when you’re talking about a psychologist, a psychiatrist.

**Interviewer:** [...] what do you mean by bad connotations?

**Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport):** Well, whenever you think of a psychologist, you think of somebody just sitting back in a seat, and you’re laying down on the couch, and you’re having really, really bad problems. And, that you’re depressed, and you think of really, really major things like depression, and not having self-worth type-thing, low self-esteem, that’s the type of stuff I used to think of when thinking of psychiatrist, psychologist. You know, psychiatrist [a] person who’s for everything. They give you medicine for it. If you don’t feel well, or, if you are depressed they always trying to give you medicine for it instead of trying to talk it out, that type of stuff. And so at first my parents would probably be like, well “Why you going to see a psychologist?” But after explaining to...
them and why, and my reasons, I don’t think that they’d have a problem with it at all. My parents are really open-minded, too.

Later, when asked how she thought fans would feel if they read that she was working one-on-one with a sport psychologist, the same athlete reported more notions of bad connotations associated with psychology:

**Athlete #1** (African-American female; junior; individual sport): Well, that might not be such a good thing. Because, there’s this idea like I said of the psychologist. And, you have to have a really, really bad, major thing going on in your life that you have to have, something’s wrong with you. Really, really. Like something’s really wrong with you if you have to go see a psychologist. So, I mean it’s always easier to talk to one person and make them understand, but it’s not as easier to talk to a big, big group of people and make them understand. Everybody has such different ideals and just things that they live after, and that the fans would probably think that I have some sort of issue. And that I was mentally not able, or something like that.

**Interviewer:** Do you think even if it was mentioned in an article that talked about the success you’ve been having? Do you think they’d still feel that way? Regardless of whether they found out you’re doing well and working with a sport psychologist or you’re doing poorly and working with a sport psychologist? Do you think it would matter?

**Athlete #1** (African-American female; junior; individual sport): Well, that would entail that I was doing bad at first. And that would entail that I, was doing horribly at first and then I had to talk to a psychologist. And now I am doing better that’s all that they’d probably think. Something might have been really wrong with her at first […]

**Interviewer:** You think they’d ignore whatever your performance was at the time and focus more on the term?

**Athlete #1** (African-American female; junior; individual sport): I mean, I don’t think they’d ignore the fact that I did well, and my performance was well, but they would equally focus on the fact that I had to see a sport psychologist in the first place.

When asked how he thought his non-athlete friends would feel if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist, another athlete’s response included his view of certain negative connotations that he thought might be associated with seeing a sport psychologist:

**Athlete #2** (White male; freshman; individual sport): […] it would depend upon which friends really it is, which kind of group. If I could explain to them what a sport psychologist does, and they knew how I am with [sport] trying to
gain every advantage, they would think well, he is just trying to better himself. But if it’s other people that I really don’t talk to and they just may hear the term or something that they wonder what’s going on or what’s wrong or something, I don’t know […]

**Interviewer:** Ok why do you say what’s wrong? What do you mean?

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** Because I think a lot of them would think a sport psychologist is somebody that’s just like the rest of, a lot of the other people. That the term sport psychologist has sport in front of it but they really wouldn’t think of anything being different than a regular psychologist except somebody who just specializes with working with athletes or something, I guess.

**Interviewer:** And what do you think then they associate it with?

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** Like a mental problem, or you know, having troubles dealing with life or coping with something versus just trying to gain an edge mentally.

**Interviewer:** And you think that it seems […] a theme that keeps coming out is that basically you feel that a lot […] anyone who doesn’t know about sport psychology or much about it might possibly feel that way?

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** Yeah. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Or have that definition, where you just attach it to a regular [psychologist…]

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** A regular […] yeah. Cause like when we brought it up in my psychology class in high school and I told the teacher or whatever, and then he brought it up in class. And everyone’s like, what do they do? Just work with athletes that have mental problems and stuff like that? It was kinda a bad connotation sorta the way […] But, so that’s why I kinda feel that way

Another female athlete mentioned that the first meanings she attached to sport psychology included some negative connotations as well:

**Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport):** […] and when I heard him say sport psychologist I was confused because I always related psychology as something wrong your head and you’re just messed-up and not in a bad way necessarily, but going through depression or anxiety or something difficult. And so, I never really put the two together, but […] I don’t know.
Later, she stated that if she were working with a sport psychologist, she would probably not tell her teammates. In her explanation, she mentioned the term “problems:”

Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): […] if they knew […] if I was, I don’t think I would make it public. I think I would kinda keep it to myself more […]

Interviewer: Why is that?

Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): […] because I think if I was working with one, that I would really be openly like, oh, I’m having, I needed, I’m having problems or whatever within my sport or whatever. I’m the type of person that would just as soon keep to myself and talk to someone in private and just not tell anyone about it cause I just don’t think it’s any of their business necessarily.

The researcher later asked the athlete to define what she meant by “problems” and she again used the word, in addition to “serious issues:”

Interviewer: […] a few seconds ago you said something about problems […] if you had problems you probably wouldn’t want others to know that you were working on them with someone. What do you mean? How would you define problems? What do you mean by that?

Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): […] say I was having serious issues with one of my teammates or the coach, or just how I was being forced to play, like if I was being forced to change my way, my style of playing. I’m not sure that I would be really wanting everyone to know that I was really upset. Not necessarily upset in an emotional sense, but, was just really, really affecting my style of play that if they forced me to change my style I just wouldn’t want people to know that. And especially if I had a really big problem with a teammate on the team the sport psychologist would be, after I tried to confront the teammate and after I tried talking to coach and it’s still not working, they would be the option. They would be […] I guess, the last option almost to try to help me figure out how to deal with it better and to just put it aside when I’m playing and not let that be the center of my of my focus. Like, oh my God, she hates me, what am I going to do, how can I fix it, how can she start to like me? Instead, just focus on how to get over that and just play.

Interviewer: Well, would you say, do you think that athletes have to have problems to work with a sport psychologist or that athletes only work with a sport psychologist if they have problem?
Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): No, I think it’s [...] no, I don’t think that problems have to be the main cause, but I think that if I was having problems, if personally I went to see a sport psychologist it would be because I was having problems. But overall in general, I don’t think that you would have to have problems. It could be just another positive reinforcement and you think you’re playing well and that you just, a positive reinforcement of how to stay on that track. How to stay on the right path and not go astray from it, and how to just set more goals. How to achieve those goals further and that probably happens all the time, but [...] 

A second female athlete mentioned stigmas that she thought were still sometimes associated with psychology-related professions. When asked about how she thought fans would react if they knew she was working with a sport psychologist, she reported:

Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport): [...] probably people who are not in athletics or just not athletes cause, gosh. Sometimes I wonder. What? Like, their mindsets are so different from ours when it comes to certain things. But, they might initially think I have some issues of some kind [...] 

Interviewer: What kind of issues? What do you mean by [...]?

Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport): [...] when you think of [...] I think even though it’s not as bad as it used to be, there’s still some stigma attached to going to see a therapist. 

Interviewer: Like what?

Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport): Like they’re crazy or they just have issues that they can’t deal with, and they really aren’t doing well so they have to go see their psychologist or something.

Interviewer: So do you think that some of those same stigmas with general psychology could also be applied to sport psychology...?

Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport): Yeah [trails off], cause then someone could think she’s so obsessed with performing that she’s paying someone to talk to her about her [...] about sports. I can see some people being skeptical.

When asked how she thought her coach would react if her coach knew she was working with a sport psychologist, a female athlete reported that the coach might think of “problems” or “something wrong.”
Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport): My coach would think it was fine, I mean, he wouldn’t […] I think maybe he’d be a little concerned as to why I was seeing one just because maybe he thought there was a problem that he could help fix. I don’t really know what he would think. He’s, I don’t know. I think he would definitely respect my decision to go see a sport psychologist but I would think maybe he would think there’s a problem with me and that’s why I’m seeing one, when, I know there doesn’t have to be a problem to go see a sport psychologist but I think he would think maybe there was something wrong, and maybe that’s what he would think […]

When the same athlete was asked how her parents would feel if they knew she was working with a sport psychologist, she said:

Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport): […] I think my parents would think that there’s something wrong. Because that’s something that they know I’ve never had to deal with before. I’ve never had to go see a sport psychologist before or any kind of psychologist because they know what kind of person I am and I think they think that I’m a real strong-willed. I’m a very independent person and, if they thought that I had to go see someone else for help, they would know that was kinda out of character for me and I think they would be concerned that there was a problem when maybe it wasn’t a problem.

Then, when asked how she thought her teammates would interpret the situation, she stated:

Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport): […] just like my coach, I think they would think there’s something wrong, maybe, or I know, if I knew a teammate was coming to one, I would feel like there’s something I need to do to help them cause I would just automatically assume that something’s not going right with them on the team or they’re not feeling like they’re fitting in or something like that. So, I think that I would reach out to them more, and not ask them why are they seeing them, but I would just, maybe, be kinda concerned.

When asked how her non-athlete friends would react, the athlete reported:

Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport): […] kinda the same way that I think a teammate of mine would react, maybe a little bit concerned. It just depends on what all these people perception of sport psychology is but I think that the friends I have that don’t play sports would maybe think there was a problem or other issues in my life that were affecting how I played [sport]. And maybe they would be worried about me, or […]

Finally, when she was asked how she would feel if her teammates were working with sport psychologists, she mentioned the idea of “something wrong” and “problems” in her response:
Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport): [...] I wouldn’t think too much of it. I would be happy that that person was able to admit that they need help. Because I think that that’s a hard thing to do is just setting up an appointment and admitting that there’s something wrong. A lot of times I’m bad at this, but like trying to cover up problems, I like everything to be [...] I hate conflict and I just like to cover it up, so I think I would be happy for that person that they were able to admit that they needed help or that they were trying their best. That would be comforting to know that my teammate is doing everything they can to make that team better.

One athlete mentioned the notion of “phobias” when speaking about what sport psychology meant to her:

Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport): [...] I guess I think of it as, I don’t even [...] I guess in the sense the same as a psychologist is. Just, I guess sitting down, talking about sports cause it’s obviously dealing with sports, and then how you can do things to better your performance. Or I guess I even look at it as, like for instance, if I have a phobia about being nervous or something like that, that’s something that I can work on with a sport psychologist. That’s what I would use it as [...]""}

The student-athlete also commented on the stigma that she thought some had of anyone who had the term “psychologist” in his/her title and of anyone who worked with such people:

Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport): I’m not real sure how that would go. Just by the fact that sometimes I think it gets titled like “shrink” and I think in that respect, there are bad connotations that go with that.

Interviewer: [...] what kinds of connotation?

Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport): Like you’re nuts type of thing, you’ve lost your mind type of thing. So maybe the fact that if you needed a sport psychologist you can’t handle [...] that you’re kinda losing your mind type of thing. Which, sometimes athletes do, I’m not gonna lie. So, it’s sometimes, I just think fans don’t realize what we go through. Coaches, parents, teammates, obviously they do. But I don’t think everyone realizes what we go through.

When asked how she thought non-athlete friends would react if they knew she was working with a sport psychologist, the same athlete reported:

Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport): The majority of my close friends know what goes on, know what I go through. So I think they would understand. But those people on the outside, once again, I don’t think
so, but if it was close friends, I don’t think there would be a problem with them.

**Interviewer:** So the friends who aren’t quite as close. You think that they’d have the same reaction as some of the fans would?

**Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport):** Yeah. Probably something I wouldn’t tell. I probably would keep it to myself, not tell them that I was seeing a sport psychologist.

A male athlete spoke of “something wrong” when he discussed what sport psychology meant to him:

**Athlete #10 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** Cause they [sport psychologists] probably have, maybe some idea of what athletes go through and what might be wrong. I think if that’s it, then I think they might know what the athlete can do to if they need help in a certain situation how to get out of it […]

He also spoke of “problems” when explaining how he thought many people view psychology related fields:

**Athlete #10 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** No, most of the time when you hear of psychologist you think the person must have a problem, but I’m sure they [sport psychologists] could help regardless of that.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So what you’re saying is that’s what a lot of people think when they first hear anything with psychology in it? That there’s some kind of problem?

**Athlete #10 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** Yes.

When asked how he thought his coaches would feel if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist, another male athlete reported:

**Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport):** I feel that some of the coaches here would think that maybe something was wrong.

**Interviewer:** Why do you say that?

**Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport):** […] because they just have almost a negative view on going for outside help.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Any ideas why?
Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): I really don’t have any idea why. They think that if someone would go to a sport psychologist that they’d view something as being wrong with them because they [the athlete] couldn’t handle it themselves or come to a coach with it or something like that.

Interviewer: Meaning the coaches would view that that means they’re doing a bad job? Is that what you mean?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): No. They just think there was [laughing] something wrong with the kid. I don’t think the coaches here ever think they’re doing a bad job. I just, I wouldn’t see it […] They would probably blow it off or think that something was wrong with the kid.

The same athlete commented on how he thought fans of his sport might react if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist:

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): …hard core fans would probably see it as […] a way of bettering yourself mentally, being more mentally prepared for playing. But them some people would see it, “Oh, that guy is psycho” or something, but […] most normal, most people would say […] “he’s trying to help himself out the best way he can.”

Interviewer: […] any ideas why some people, though, might say, he’s a psycho like you said?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): Cause people don’t know what a sport psychologist does.

When he discussed whether or not he ever thought about working with a sport psychologist as a way to improve his performance, he mentioned that his sister should because she was a “head case”:

Interviewer: Have you ever thought about talking to or working with a sport psychologist as a way to improve your athletic performance, and why or why not?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): I haven’t for me, because in high school, we had visualization before a game. We’d all lay down in a room and he’d talk us through how the game was going to go. So, I would be able to do that on my own. But I have a sister that swims and she’s a head case. It’s funny, because she starts thinking about, my dad tells her to think before the race, she gets up on the block and starts to think about it. And so she struggles with it and sometimes she has breakdowns but it would help sometimes, especially this year, being red shirted. I red shirted, I was injured and stuff like that so, yeah, I think it would help.
The same athlete mentioned the term “mental breakdown” when speaking about whether he thought his coaches would ever have a sport psychologist work with the team:

**Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport):** [...] it would depend. It would really depend on the situation. I could see if a star player all of a sudden started having a mental breakdown, yeah, then they might incorporate it, but until one of the selected special few had problems, I don’t see it happening.

**Interviewer:** Okay, you mentioned mental breakdown. What do you mean by that?

**Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport):** [...] as a student athlete, mainly you’re able to keep separate your athletic life and your student life. But once something goes wrong, one or the other pressures start building on you and you keep trying to file them in and then all of a sudden something minor happens and it becomes a huge fiasco because you’ve been, I don’t know, putting aside all the other problems you’ve been having and all of a sudden they all come in bundled as one. You just really lose it for a couple minutes or a little bit.

A male athlete mentioned “therapy,” “mental disease,” “problems,” and “mental issues” when explaining what sport psychology meant to him:

**Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport):** [...] what I think sport psychology is now, is I think it basically is someone who, I almost think of it as a regular psychologist. This is my, initial, I don’t know. When I think about it, I see someone sitting down and just like you would with normal mental issues. That you sit down and you talk about what’s going on. I mean, for me [sport] is a very mental sport. So it’s just like you have a mental disease almost. You feel like you need to talk about your problems or whatever and then that’ll give you ways to get through it mentally. So I think it’s just like that. I see it being just like a regular therapy session almost and I see it almost as a sport psychologist loves to be someone who does group-type things.

When asked how he thought his teammates would feel about him in the same situation he mentioned “something wrong” and “problems” in his reply:

**Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport):** [...] it would be hard to tell. That would be an awkward situation for the team, I think because they wouldn’t talk about it. We’ve had some people who have had depression and they’ve been on medication and stuff like that and the word’s kinda gotten around, you don’t say anything. But you try not to act different around them, but you sort of do. You just start to, you just don’t talk to them as much, you
talk to them too much, and it starts to be different. I think the team might, a lot of the guys would be a little ignorant on the subject of sport psychology. They wouldn’t understand why you’re going to see one. I think a lot of them would think something’s wrong with you and you have a problem, but I think a lot of people would understand. Like “Hey, that’s great, you’re working hard, it’s going to help you out” and be supportive. But I’d still kinda be [...] the majority of us would be a little, like what’s wrong with this kid? Does he have issues, is he gonna crack under the pressure at [conference championships], is he gonna not do well in the [event], is he gonna blow it off or something? You know, stuff like that.

The athlete added that fans might view the situation in a similar way:

**Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport):** [...] I think most fans would be like the [athletes of sport]. Cause that’s pretty much all we have is [sport] fans and not too many people have, or watch our sport much. But I think they all, I think a lot would understand who have been there and realize there’s a lot of pressure and a lot of things they’ve got to worry about. And I think there would be a lot of people who didn’t understand what’s wrong with this person. Are they gonna crack when they [are about to start the competition] when something can go wrong? So I think there’s a whole split.

When speaking of how he would view other college athletes in his sport if he knew they were working with a sport psychologist, another male athlete stated:

**Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport):** [...] I might actually think he’s a little weak at first. Honestly that would be the first [...]**

**Interviewer:** Weak?

**Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport):** I think he’s [...] I don’t think people would [...] if I worked with a sport psychologist, I don’t know necessarily if I’d want my competitors knowing that cause it might be something I might not think of it as a weakness. But if they perceive that I have that weakness, that’s gonna be one-upping them. They’re gonna think, “Oh, he’s not gonna do as well.” Their confidence will be boosted by this. But, I think it would be actually good for them, I’m sure it’ll help them out, but I just, it has a little stigma of them being weaker, so I think that’d help me out as a [athlete in sport]. So I can see that as my competition is weaker, and I’d [...]**

**Interviewer:** So, it’s not necessarily that you think it can’t help, you’re saying how it could be perceived by others [...]?

**Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport):** Yes, that’s correct.
Problems & Issues: Teasing By Teammates and Friends

The notion that sport psychology carries a negative connotation was also revealed by another sub-theme that emerged: teasing by teammates and friends. For example, although one athlete reported that she did not think her non-athlete friends would have problems with her if she were working with a sport psychologist, she did think that they would still tease her regarding the matter:

**Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport):** They’d probably tease me about it later. “Oh, look at you, why you seeing a sport psychologist?” But they’d tease me, yes, but it wouldn’t be looking down on me. Cause I tease my friends, too. I say you must have some issues if you’re seeing a sport psychologist, but it wouldn’t be that serious at all.

A male reported that, although they would be totally supportive, his teammates might still tease him if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist:

**Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** I mean just the way I know my teammates are, we make fun of you about anything and everything, so it wouldn’t really matter.

**Interviewer:** Okay. What do you think they’d say if they would make fun of you? Any ideas?

**Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** [smiles] Oh man, just like, “Are you going to meet with your shrink before practice?” or something like that.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so in a way, do you think, now do you think they’d be serious, do you think they’d just be joking?

**Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** They’d be joking, like I said, we joke about any and everything. I mean if we can find something to talk about to get somebody then we’ll do it.

When asked how he thought his teammates would react if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist, another male athlete stated:

**Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport):** [...] at first they’d probably tease me a little but after that there’d probably be no problems because they realize that everyone has their own problems or issues or anything like that so if someone needs help they might tease you about it a little bit but other than that, it would be accepted.
Interviewer: [...] when you say problems or issues, in a way, are you saying, do you think you basically would only work with a sport psychologist if you had some kind of problem, or not?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): No, no, I mean, that’s just what they would say [...] 

Problems & Issues: Neutral Connotations

While associating the words “problems” and “issues” with sport psychology, not all athletes attached, nor did athletes always attach a negative connotation to the terms; rather, their use of the words referred more to challenges or obstacles that must be overcome in sport. For example, when asked what he meant by the term “problem,” this athlete’s explanation did not contain negative connotations:

Interviewer: [...] I think you used the word problem. Do you need to have a problem then, you think, to work with a sport psychologist or what do you mean by that? Like mental issues and problems [...]?

Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport): [...] I think some athletes are just really mentally tough. They’re very mentally tough and they will not need any help at all. They will just pile up the [term referring to part of training] per day, and they will do everything on their own completely and they’ll be fine. But I think a lot of people will just have little mental blocks where, I can’t do anymore, I don’t know why I’m getting frustrated right now. I’m a better [athlete] than this. So I think you almost, you don’t have to have a problem, but I think most people, I think it would be most beneficial if you do. I think it also, definitely people who don’t need to see one who go see one, it could help. I’m sure everyone could benefit, all athletes could benefit from it.

Interviewer: So any ideas how it could help someone who doesn’t necessarily have a problem?

Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport): [...] I think we all have problems, actually. I think we all just mentally could be stronger than we are. You can always lift another ten pounds. You can always get that extra muscle on there. So you can always get that extra mental edge. So, everyone could always work on something they’re maybe not strong in, some aspect of their sport.

When later asked how he thought his parents would feel if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist, the athlete mentioned the word “problem” but again without a negative connotation:
Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport): [...] my parents personally would be very supportive of that. They’re very supportive of just about anything I do. So they would see that, if I had a problem at all, they’d be more than supportive of me working with that and other [athletes from sport], it just varies between all different parents. Cause [sport] parents, there’s just a wide variance. They’re very different people.

One female athlete mentioned “problems” and ideas of “something wrong” on numerous occasions during the interview, but with no apparent negative connotation attached to the term. For example, when asked what sport psychology meant to her, she stated:

Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport): [...] a sport psychologist’s role is to help out an athlete with any type of problems that they have, and I guess it’d sort of be an outlet in a person to give it advice. They help out with [...]  

When later asked if she thought her coach would ever have a sport psychologist work with the team, she reported:

Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport): But as far as us, yes. I think she would. She would, tell us, or have us come to a sport psychologist or suggest that, “Well, you all have problems, go to a sport psychologist.” Just so she can put it out there, that it is out there [...]  

She added that she couldn’t see her coach pushing the idea of working with a sport psychologist by explaining:

Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport): [...] to a certain extent, I think that she doesn’t really think that’s necessary.

Interviewer: What’s [not] necessary?

Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport): Talking, and talking out your problems, talking out your [...] but she will put it out there. I mean, she might. I don’t think that she thinks it’s truly, truly, really necessary [...]  

When asked if she would ever consider working with a sport psychologist, the same athlete responded:

Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport): Well, it’s kinda a yes, I guess [laughing] type thing. Yeah, I think if I had a problem and I needed to see [...] talk to somebody about it. Well, I’m more so a person that, I want to talk to the people who can fix my problem type-thing. And I think that I would talk to you, a sport psychologist, but at the same time, that
wouldn’t be the only person I’d talk to. I’d talk to officials or things like that. If I have a problem, I also talk to someone. Cause I think that’s important. If I have a problem with somebody, I think it’s important that you talk to them personally.

Because this athlete brought up the idea of “problems” rather frequently, the researcher inquired what she meant by the term:

**Interviewer:** [...] a couple times you brought up the phrase or the word problem. And you talked about working with sport psychologists. What do you mean? Can you tell me what you mean by that, by problem?

**Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport):** Well, I kept it so broad on purpose. Because I think that anything can affect your athletics. I know, cause it has.

**Interviewer:** So is that how you define problem, then?

**Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport):** Anything that happens [...] Ok. Ok.

**Interviewer:** Ok. Ok.

**Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport):** And so, that can include a lot of things.

When predicting how she thought her teammates would feel if she were working with a sport psychologist, she once again brought up the term “problems:”

**Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport):** I mean, they wouldn’t have a problem with me. They’d probably look at me at first, like “Why does she have to go and do something like that?” I don’t think that they would shun me for it or anything like that. In fact, I know them well enough to know that they wouldn’t shun me for it. But they’d kinda ask me, “What’s going on? Are you okay? Why do you have to talk to the [...]?” And, I think that would be about it. I don’t think it’d be anything major going on with the [sport] team where they’ll pull it aside [or] have to talk about it behind my back, cause I don’t think it’d be that serious. But I think there are a lot of people who have problems that you just don’t know about, and so I don’t think that’s something that would be a big issue.

Toward the end of the interview, the researcher asked her if she thought a sport psychologist could help her with the mental aspects of her performance, and she again mentioned “problems,” replying:
Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport): I don’t think there’s really a problem mentally with me, at all. As far as like I’m really positive. And I’m really, really, I feel like a leader this year. I feel like I can do anything this year. And so, I can’t see anybody making me feel even better than I already feel.

When asked how he thought fans of the sport would react if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist, a male replied:

Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport): I don’t really know. I think people who don’t know what sport psychology or sport psychologist is would be thinking that it was just like any other type of psychologist as far as a different type of working with you for other types of reasons. So I don’t really know how they would view it.

Another female student-athlete also spoke of “problems” when explaining why she would probably not work one-on-one with a sport psychologist:

Athlete #3 (White female; sophomore; team sport): I think it does help some people, but me personally, I think I usually know what the problem is. Or like with myself I know what the problem is. I just have to accept it or fix it or […]

When asked about her impressions of sport psychology the first time she was introduced to the term, another female student-athlete spoke of “issues” and “problems:”

Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport): […] sport psychology, I would think that it was more for if you had problems and […]

Interviewer: What do you mean by problems?

Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport): […] I don’t, I think maybe if you didn’t know how to focus on the [playing surface], or leave everything behind while you’re playing. Like if you had issues personally, academically, family, whatever, if you had to […] if you weren’t able to clear your mind while you’re playing [sport]. That’s what I thought like a sport psychologist was for. But now I’ve learned that it can be for goal setting and stuff like that.

Later, she was asked what she thought sport psychologists did with athletes, and again mentioned “problems:”

Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport): […] I think they really have to observe first, because you can talk the basics about your goal-setting and, peak performance and all that stuff, but you really have to observe,
especially our team. You have to go out and watch our team, kinda have to have a background of information before you can specifically get into the minds of the players or the coaches for that team or whatever team it might be because that’s the only way it’s really gonna, benefit you most. It’s […] if a sport psychologist sees maybe what the problems are, what he thinks you can work, like what we could work on it really helps to hear from [sport psychology consultant] because I guess he doesn’t have a solid background in [sport], I don’t really know. It’s one thing in [another sport], but we could, my teammates and coaches and everything can talk about why we’re not doing this right, what we need to do, but it really helps to get from an outside person what he sees not knowing anything, maybe what he sees is our problem. That’s always helpful to hear from him.

When the researcher asked the same athlete if she would ever consider working one-on-one with a sport psychologist, she used the term “problems” in her reply:

**Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** Ok. If I had tried other things that had worked for me in the past and nothing was helping me improve my performance or motivation or something like that, then I would definitely choose that option. Because I see it working for our team as a whole, so I definitely have faith in it. But I just haven’t had to come down to that cause usually I’ve been able to fix my problems on my own.

The researcher then tried to get clarification regarding what the athlete meant by “problem:”

**Interviewer:** So, it sounds like you’re saying that in your view you need to have like a problem or you need to be lacking something to, if you work with a sport psychologist? Is that accurate?

**Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** That’s my view on it, yeah. I mean, individually. For a team-wise, I don’t think there needs to be a problem. I think there needs to be a sport psychologist for a team would be more like guidance and for us it’s like a mediator between our coach and the team. But I think on an individual basis, the way I view it is, if you have a problem or an issue that’s when you would go to a sport psychologist.

**Lack of Support**

During the course of the interviews, as student-athletes made numerous comments concerning what sport psychology meant to them, many indicated a “lack of support” for seeking sport psychology services or working with a sport psychologist. Four sub-themes comprised this category of meaning: betrayal and jealousy, too individual, coaches’ reluctance, and parents’ belief that sports are not that important. As revealed in the quotations presented, these sub-themes interacted
with each other (e.g., jealousy resulted in ridiculing or devaluing those using sport psychology services).

Lack of Support: Betrayal and Jealousy

Some athletes thought that certain people in their lives would feel betrayed or jealous if they knew the athletes were working with a sport psychologist. For example, one team sport athlete mentioned how he thought his coach would react if his coach knew he was working with a sport psychologist:

**Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** [...] I would think that it probably would be like, “What do you need to talk about that you couldn’t have asked us?” Coach would probably feel a little betrayed in a way maybe that I’m kind of sneaky or something like that. I don’t know, that’s what I think [...]  

**Interviewer:** And why do you think they’d feel that way, because you’re not going to them instead?

**Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** Yeah, it’s just like a parent pretty much, like if you have a problem or something and you can’t come ask them they’d be like, “What’s your pr-, what’s wrong, what’s so big that you can’t come ask me?” and I just feel that’s how they would be in that situation.

A female team sport athlete spoke of how she thought her father would feel if he knew she was working with a sport psychologist:

**Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport):** Well, I think my dad would be a little jealous that I would be really talking in depth to someone else about my performance in athletics in general and just trying [...] because he was always the person that I talked to, and he was always the one that I would go to, and I think he may just feel a little weird or whatever if I was going to someone else and not immediately going to him. And that I felt that he wasn’t helping me enough, I guess.

A third athlete reported that he thought that some of his teammates might think he was trying to be better than them if he worked with a sport psychologist:

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** [...] some of them, I think, would think that you were trying to be better. I don’t know. I don’t think a lot of them would view the mental game that you have to really [...] they would think I was wasting time. They would think it was pretty much a joke. I think pretty much most of the coaches and players think extreme of the drills and your technique out there. Not so much of anything that mental stuff can give you and I think they’d probably do the same things, laugh at the fact that you’re trying to work on your mental game, which would then maybe take
time away from a little bit of the other stuff, too. So, they’d probably just think it was a waste of time.

Lack of Support: Too Individual

A number of student-athletes interviewed indicated that if sport psychology services were to be used, the services would be better for the team as a whole versus for individual athletes. Sometimes, the athletes themselves believed this, while other times, they indicated that they thought their teammates or coaches would have such opinions. For example, a female student-athlete mentioned why she might initially question a teammate if the teammate was working one-on-one with a sport psychologist:

Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): [...] partly curiosity but partly I would wonder what is going on [in] their mind, like why do they feel like they need to have to see someone to enhance their performance perhaps or and not meet with them as a team or something like that? Just curiosity factor, I guess.

Later, when told to assume she was working one-on-one with a sport psychologist and asked how she thought her coach would react, the same athlete said:

Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): I think he’d be supportive, but at the same time, I think he’d wonder, why do you feel, he would definitely ask why you would feel that you need to work with one one-on-one as opposed to as a unit, but if I had a legitimate reason or whatever, any reason, really, I think he would be supportive of it, supportive of it right off. I never think he would hold it against anyone for trying something to excel.

Interviewer: [...] why do you think though, you said he might wonder why you needed the one-on-one? Why do you think he would question that? Any ideas, or [...]?

Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): [...] he tries to reinforce the team being a unit, a single unit that thinks alike and we know each other so well that we are one, where he refers to things like, you will all breathe the same, you walk the same, you know every step they’re going to take. And I mean, he may think “Why are you going [to] that [...]?”

In addition, one male athlete reported his thoughts on a sport psychologist working with the entire team versus one-on-one with individual athletes:

Athlete #7 (White male; freshman; individual sport): Yeah. I think I would. I mean, I’d be very open for a whole team working with one. I think it’d be very beneficial. But one guy on his own going out to do it, I don’t
know, I think it kinda isolates him and puts him in a different place than the rest of the group. Maybe, I don't know [...]

**Interviewer:** So it puts them in a different place? So do you see that in a negative light and why? Think about why maybe you would see it negatively.

**Athlete #7 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** [...] I think, I mean I'd be happier. I wouldn't be opposed to a person going out and doing it because I think it'd be clearly better. But, to do it as an individual in a team setting I think kinda sends the wrong message that, ok, I'm gonna go out and do this and you guys can just keep on doing what we've always been doing. It almost creates, I think it's more, not so much with a psychologist just more with doing something on your own kinda creates an individualist attitude. Okay, I'm gonna go meet with this [...] 

### Lack of Support: Coaches’ Reluctance

Some of the athletes interviewed appeared to share the notion that their coaches were, or would be, somewhat reluctant to use sport psychologists with their teams. For example, one athlete explained his interest in working with a sport psychologist and how his coaches were somewhat reluctant to the idea:

**Interviewer:** Have you ever thought about talking or working with a sport psychologist as a way to improve your athletic performance? Why or why not?

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** I have, especially this year when I came in. That was one of the things I asked Coach [name] when I came here was, “Was there a sport psychologist that would be available?” I wanted to work with ‘em because I was just having a bad year last year with injuries, and I didn't know how well I'd be able to bounce back from injuries cause I was thinking about not even [participating in his sport] and coach said, “Any help that you need we'll be able to get it for you.” And I was thinking towards the beginning of the year I was wanting to and I was asking the coaches about it and pretty much they just said, “That would be a lot more time, so maybe next year if you still need it or whatever, just this year just try to get physically back into shape because of being a freshman.” And I had physical therapy, and I had therapy with [name of therapist], I had so much time the coaches, they just wanted to get my [body part] better initially, so [...] 

Later, when asked if he thought his coaches knew what sport psychology was and what sport psychologists did, he replied:

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** [...] I don't really know if they [his coaches] really know or value what they [sport
psychologists] could do. It’s hard to say cause they weren’t really pushing for me to go to one or have the team really look into it, so I don’t know if they would really value it or not. I don’t know.

Furthermore, when the athlete was asked how he thought his coaches would feel if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist, he reported:

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** [...] I think initially, I don’t know somewhat from the coaches I think they may get a little, they may just kinda laugh, maybe laugh or wonder exactly why [...]  

**Interviewer:** Why do you think they’d laugh?

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** [...] because when, well, now [name of coach] kinda laughs about it a little bit. The fact that I was asking about it, and about the sport psychologist. Just, I just don’t think they understand how much of a mental game it is or else they don’t think that [...] or they think that I can overcome stuff without help or whatever, like help with the mental blocks and stuff like that. I just don’t think they understand the importance of it and think maybe you’re wasting time or whatever.

**Interviewer:** Okay any other reasons why you think they might laugh, or not?

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** Not really. I think it’s just they’d think I’m wasting time, and either that, or else I’m thinking I’m better than something, or I don’t know.

**Interviewer:** Do you think they’d have a problem with you [...]?

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** I don’t think they’d have a problem. I think they would just think I was, more or less, just wasting time. But, see I don’t think they understand the mental aspect as much, I don’t know.

Meanwhile, a female athlete was asked if she ever considered working with a sport psychologist as a way to improve her athletic performance, and replied:

**Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport):** Hmm, that would be interesting cause I never thought about it cause I don’t know if it’s ever been given to me as an option.

When asked how she thought her coaches would react if they knew she was working with a sport psychologist, a white female athlete responded:
**Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** My coach would think it was fine. He wouldn’t [...] I think maybe he’d be a little concerned as to why I was seeing one just because maybe he thought there was a problem that he could help fix.

Another female athlete thought that her coach would be reluctant to have the team work with a sport psychologist but might be okay with having athletes work individually with one:

**Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport):** Just in the aspect of, sometimes you can train, train, train, and still not get over that hump, that mental barrier. And I think that if she saw a need, she would utilize it. But I honestly wonder, I honestly think it would maybe be more of an individual thing. Like she wouldn’t send a team.

**Interviewer:** She wouldn’t?

**Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport):** I don’t know if she would. I don’t know. I don’t know. It probably depends. Because maybe not everyone would benefit from it. I don’t know, although, but, so I honestly wonder if she would do it individually, but I guess I’m unsure, I don’t really know what it would be like in a team setting. I wonder if people would feel uncomfortable with everyone around.

**Interviewer:** Why do you think they might feel uncomfortable with everybody around?

**Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport):** I don’t know, sometimes talking, it sometimes is hard being in a team cause you [compete] together but yet you compete against each other, especially in [sport] it’s kinda that, you have to find that medium of, well I’m benefiting the team but I have to [compete better] than that, or do you? It’s a hard balance. So sometimes, I think, being on the team, I don’t want to talk about stuff cause I know I directly compete with other people which [...]


Interviewer: Why is that?

Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport): [...] personally, I don’t think he likes someone to mess with his head. I don’t think he likes to talk about his issues and I think he really likes how he runs things and he’s just not, it goes back to he doesn’t want to change.

Another male student-athlete reported why he thought his coaches might not have a sport psychologist work with the team:

Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): [...] doubtful. I don’t think so.

Interviewer: And why not?

Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): I just think it would get in the way.

Interviewer: How?

Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): Just because there are certain things coaches want to do with their team and with players and they have their time set aside. But then also, you’d have to set aside time then for a sport psychologist to come in. And with a sport psychologist they also work on a schedule so then you got to fit the team into their schedule and that might conflict with what a coach might want to do or something like that.

Interviewer: Okay. So are you basically saying you think the main reason why is probably a time issue? Just not enough time and it’d be hard to work schedules?

Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): Right. Yeah. Right.

Another male athlete reported that how he thought his coaches viewed anyone who sought outside help:

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): I feel that some of the coaches here would think that maybe something was wrong.

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): [...] because they just have almost a negative view on going for outside help.
Interviewer: Okay. Any ideas why?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): I really don’t have any idea why they think that if someone would go to a sport psychologist that they’d view something as being wrong with them because they [the athletes] couldn’t handle it themselves or come to a coach with it or something like that.

He also mentioned that his coaches like to be in control of everything:

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): [...] the coaching staff here likes to have a lot of control over everything [...]

When asked if he thought his coaches knew about sport psychology, the same athlete replied:

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): Some coaches have, some coaches haven’t. In high school, we were really into it. But here [college], I don’t know, it’s tough to say. I haven’t been here very long, but from what I can tell, no.

Interviewer: And why do you say no? Any reason why?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): [...] it’s not incorporated into the system. I mean, they don’t use it as a form of motivating; they don’t use it as a form of helping someone deal with something. It’s basically follow or come along with us or get cut away from the pack so I don’t see that being used at all.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you think they have an idea of what it is?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): They may have an idea of what it is, but maybe they don’t believe in it.

Interviewer: Okay, why do you say that?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): Cause they just have the mentality that it’s done this way and this way for everybody so we’re, do it all this way no matter what you think. It’s our program, do it our way or hit the highway.

Lack of Support: Parents’ Belief that Sports are not that Important

Another sub-theme that emerged in analyzing the interviews related to parents’ beliefs that sports should not be the number one priority in life and that therefore, using a sport psychologist for help was really unnecessary. For example,
when explaining why his father might be opposed to him working with a sport psychologist, an African-American male mentioned how his father felt about sports versus academics:

**Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** [...] my family, my dad’s a physician and he’s always just like, “How’s school?” and [I’m] like “Uh, I did well in [sport]” and he’s like “So, how’s school?” so I mean I never really, my family is not like that, I’m not like that too much [...]  

**Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** [...] I don’t think that he values sports that much to think that I need to go sit down and talk to someone about sports or [laughing] [...]  

**Interviewer:** Oh, okay, he doesn’t? Okay, he thinks sports are cool but academics and other things are [...]?

**Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** Yeah, he likes [sport] because it pays tuition, that’s it.

Meanwhile, an African-American team sport athlete spoke of how she thought her mother might first react if her mother knew she was working with a sport psychologist:

**Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport):** She’d probably be like, “You’re doing what? Like why?” She wouldn’t say, “No.” But she would just be like, “What is it? Why? Is it helping you?” Ok [laughing] she might be a little skeptical about it. Just probably because she’s not familiar with it. She would just wonder. Cause to her sports is like, she [thinks that] sports is just like something that I do and it should never consume me as a person. She is adamant about sports being only something that I do and not something that consumes me. And so if I were to tell that I was going to a sport psychologist, she’d be like, “What? Is it really that important that you need to go see a psychologist about it?” That might be her first question, but she would support me if that’s something I chose to do.

This sub-theme did not emerge from any interviews with white athletes but also was not present in the interviews with all of the African-American athletes.

**No Interest in Sport Psychology**

Several athletes voiced a general lack of interest in sport psychology, either because they felt they were overexposed to the field, or because there were others in their lives who the athletes believed served as their own “sport psychologists.”
No Interest in Sport Psychology: Because of Excessive Use of Sport Psychology

While many athletes made comments suggesting that their coaches would be reluctant to consult with sport psychologists, one athlete actually felt that her coach used sport psychology too much and that this deterred many members of the team from being interested in sport psychology:

**Interviewer:** Okay. Do you think your coaches have ever heard of the terms sport psychology and sport psychologist?

**Athlete #3 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** Yeah, too much [laughs].

**Interviewer:** Too much? [Laughs] Why do you say that?

**Athlete #3 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** Cause they, it’s like an overkill. Half the people on our team are just so sick of talking about everything and it’s just an overkill. At some point, you can’t talk about stuff, you’ve just go to do it.

No Interest in Sport Psychology: Because They Speak to Others

In a number of the interviews with student-athletes, sport psychology was something in which they had little interest because of other individuals in the athletes’ lives who they consulted. For example, one athlete spoke about his father and his coach:

**Interviewer:** Okay, do you think that you would ever consider working with a sport psychologist?

**Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** [...] I doubt it.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Why?

**Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport):** Because I pretty much have a psychologist for my father because just in terms of like “What are you thinking?” he always just tells me what I’m thinking I need to act on even if I feel that there’s something outside restraint put on me he always tells me if one of my coaches was talking to me and they needed or said something to me and I needed special attention or if I needed something special don’t be afraid to go talk to him. Last year was like [the coach at school he formerly attended] he’s just this great coach or whatever [and] everyone in the nation knows about what he’s done to [the school’s program] and there’s times when I always needed certain things like I wanted to talk to him one-on-one but it’s so hard to talk to him, to get a hold of him but here
Interviewer: So are you saying that you think anything you needed that a sport psychologist might work with you on, you could just get help from […]?

Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): Yeah, I could go ask if I needed something here […]

Interviewer: From your coach or your dad?

Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): From my coaches or my dad, yeah.

Interviewer: So you feel like you wouldn’t need it because you could get help other places?

Athlete #13 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): Right.

A female athlete said the following about her coach:

Athlete #1 (African-American female; junior; individual sport): […] I think that she [Coach] wants us to come talk to her. If we have problems, with [sport], she always says, “Come talk to me, anytime. I would talk to you.” And not [that she’s] saying that “Don’t talk to her, the sport psychologist, come talk to me.” But she really […] if you have a problem [sport]-wise, she kinda treats herself as sort-of the sport psychologist a lot.

Meanwhile, a female athlete in another sport also felt her father served as her sport psychologist:

Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): I never knew that sport psychology existed really in high school until my friend that played [another sport] said that he saw one, and I was like, now that’s a little weird, but I think that’s because my dad could be seen as my sport psychologist. I’d never thought of it, but just talking to him, he just kind-of […] I assume that when you talk to one, they just kind-of speak back to you what you’re thinking and just kinda give positive reinforcement, just kinda help you through your hard times and that. I don’t know, that’s just in my mind.

When asked if she had ever considered working with a sport psychologist as a way to improve her athletic performance, another female athlete’s reply suggested that she viewed her high school coach as somewhat capable of filling that role:

Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport): […] previously I never really knew that there was such a thing even. But even since having, in college, like I guess I’ve talked to people, not necessarily sport psychologist,
but I’ve talked to people that, like I always go back and talk to my high school coach. Always I just usually spill everything. He’s the person just cause he knows me well as a [athlete in sport], and as a person that way can he can like fill me in. But I guess I’ve never come in contact with a sport psychologist although I think it would be helpful. But that’s just me, where I am. Some people, I don’t know, I kinda keep everything in. I think it’d be better if I would talk about my [competition], talk about my [sport] and I think I would benefit from them.

Another male athlete also pointed to his coach as serving the role of the team sport psychologist:

**Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport):** [...] coach] could definitely have an idea of what sport psychology is just because it’s big that he reads a lot. He loves to read and he reads a lot of the stuff. And I think he is definitely, if he didn’t have a great impact he could definitely serve as a sport psychologist. He doesn’t mess with your head, but he kinda gets in your head and he works with you. He makes you a lot more mentally tough than when you came in. He works really hard. He just tries to get in your head so you understand what’s going on with [sport] stuff. He wants to mess with your head so you’re just like, you’re totally deep down, and you don’t understand what’s going on, you’re so confused why are we doing this or whatever. So when you get to that [competition] day that you’re going to be like, no matter what you feel you’re ready. [For example] we this year at our [conference championship], the [piece of electrical equipment malfunctioned], and the [competition] was delayed a half-hour right before I was [preparing for the competition]. Had I not been mentally tough I was like, don’t worry, don’t worry, there’s nothing I can do. But [Coach] had just been messing with my head all year trying to get me to be really mentally tough like nothing’s going to get in our way this year, he was trying to get me to see him all the sudden as an opponent, as an obstacle, and so I had to overcome him like the adversity. And so, then nothing’s going to get in my way this year. And so when that [piece of equipment malfunctioned], I just sat down, [and thought] it’s not a big deal, and got [ready to compete] and [had] the best [competition] of my life. And so he definitely knows sport psychology and he definitely uses it daily. I don’t really think he knows it happens, but he really, really uses it every day, every time he talks to you, just every single word, every single mannerism he has and characteristics about him. He uses it [...] [trailing off]

**Interviewer:** So in a way, are you saying he does things indirectly that [...]?

**Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport):** [Nodding in agreement] Um-hmm [...]
Interviewer: [...] that get you to be mentally tough? So it’s not like he’s necessarily saying let’s work on this aspect of your thinking but he’ll do things that indirectly help you?

Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport): He never sits us down and says, “Okay today what we’re going to work on pregame, your game face and whatever.” He just, while you’re [competing] one day, he’ll just make some comment to you about your [technique], and you get really mad at him, cause you’re [practicing], you’re tired and you can’t deal with everything, and it’s like he knows better, he tells me everyday I’m not a [certain type of athlete in his sport]. And, like that’s, I really don’t [perform certain way]. I’m a [certain type of athlete in sport], and he tells me I should be doing the [event]. And I hate that, I don’t want to do that. And he tells me every day cause he knows that I’ll work that much harder to be a [certain type of athlete in sport]. Like I’ll get that much more mentality of a [certain type of athlete in sport]. And it’s just like, he does this all subconsciously throughout the whole day. He never really lets his defenses down. I think that’s the way to do it, too. Like you don’t really realize you’re working on it until at the end of the season all of the sudden you realize that’s what he’s been doing the whole year. And, a lot of times you get mad the way he goes about it. He just [...] he almost makes you mad, like you’re supposed to get mad at him. But, it works well, it works real well for him actually.

A male student-athlete reported that his coaches practice their own sport psychology:

Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): [...] I think our coaches here, they try a little bit of it [sport psychology] themselves. Like, our coaches every now and then [unclear] [...] year they’ll send us quotes or motivational material from different authors and stuff. We got, I remember one, they sent us a poem from one of my professors that I had. So, and they would do stuff like that and they try to talk to us. And they do things, like, try to psyche you out, say [for example], this player, he’s giving up this many [term describing part of game] and “Why aren’t you doing something like that or something like that?”

Later, the same athlete mentioned that his mother and high school coach serve as his sport psychologists:

Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): [...] I kind of do [work with a sport psychologist] already, but it’s not on the professional level, because my mom and my high school coach are kinda like my sports therapists.

Interviewer: Okay.
Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): Or, my sport psychologists.

Interviewer: And how are your mom and your high school coach, in a way, like your sport psychologists? Explain the kind of stuff they do that make them like a sport psychologist.

Athlete #11 (African-American male; sophomore; team sport): Well, they know how I am when things aren’t going good for me and I’m real down on myself and they’re always help me, they always have something to say to help me out and help me pick myself back up and keep going.

Finally, when asked if he ever considered working with a sport psychologist as a way to improve his athletic performance, a male student-athlete mentioned what his coaches did with his team in high school:

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): I haven’t for me, because in high school, we had visualization before a game. We’d all lay down in a room and he’d [coach] talk us through how the game was going to go. So, I would be able to do that on my own.

Good for the Team

Another theme or meaning that emerged from the interviews was that of sport psychology being “good for the team.” Though a number of student-athletes reported that they felt their coaches would be somewhat reluctant to have a sport psychologist with the team, many of the same athletes felt that their coaches and their teams would truly benefit from such services. For example, one male athlete said:

Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport): [...] if my coach was working with them [sport psychologists] to teach him how to mentally train the athletes, I think that would be a really good thing.

Interviewer: [...] why is that?

Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport): [...] because maybe the coach would see the importance of some of the mental training of why there needs to be some instead of like everything’s either [technique performed in sport] or [technique performed in sport]. And there’s no drills [...] doesn’t concentrate on anything else but what you do on a [competition]. There’s no other sort of practice or training.

Interviewer: So do you think that maybe your coaches don’t realize the importance of the mental as much?
Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport): I don’t think they do at all.

A female athlete had the following to say about her coach:

Interviewer: Okay. What about if your coach was working with one [a sport psychologist]? How would you feel?

Athlete #3 (White female; sophomore; team sport): [...] I think that would make me feel better just because I think sometimes the coaching staff, they don’t realize how the players interpret things. And I think it’s a good [...] that’s the best thing that it brings. It’s a good mediation between like the coaching staff and the players from an outside point.

Interviewer: But, you think sport psychology brings, or the sport psychologists are good mediators in between?

Athlete #3 (White female; sophomore; team sport): Yeah from what [sport psychology consultant] has done so far, like I think that’s the best things that [the consultant has] brought because a lot of times a third person [...] a third party has a different view on the issue and they can kind-of rationalize for both sides. And, thinking about it, that’s been the best thing that’s done for our team.

A female athlete from another sport said:

Interviewer: What about if you knew for a fact that your coach was working one-on-one with a sport psychologist? How would you feel about that?

Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): I think it would be really good. I think coach is doing that because it’s like if the team is against the coach, it’s [number] kids to one sometimes and it has to be hard. And I’ve never been in that position, but going against a bunch of teenagers every day and challenging them almost, it’s got to be tiring on your brain and just thinking of new ways to get to them [...] especially with how times do change, and I think it would be really good for a coach to go one-on-one so they can really clear their mind with what they think. They can get help also at the same time that psychologist could if, for instance, [sport psychology consultant] had met with us, and she knew what we were going through, if she met with coach one-on-one, she could maybe relay something into their conversation not necessarily saying, “Oh, the team said this”, but in his own way, in bringing it to coach’s insight without bluntly saying, “Well, they think this, this and this. And you should do this.” So just bring it in a way that makes [the coach] more comfortable with the situation or just make a better understanding for everyone in general [...]

57
Interviewer: So, do you think in a way you’re saying that you see a sport psychologist, one of the good things about them, is that they can be a mediator between a team and the coach?

Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): Definitely a mediator.

The same athlete added:

Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport): Yeah, cause once again [sport psychology consultant] is younger and it’s almost like the college life is a lot fresher in her mind than it is, cause my coach has been here for [number] years. So, it’s a lot fresher in her mind what kids do and what they go through, the peer pressures, the academics, just the classes, the professors being a pain in the butt, and then practice every day of the week, and lifting, and still trying to excel. And so, I do think that they try, they’re like a mediator or whatever. Not only between the coach and the players, but also between like the player as an individual and the rest of what they have to deal with. They can offer suggestions how to deal with better, or how to cope with stress, how to help the simple situations, hard situations and make them easier to deal with.

Meanwhile, another female student-athlete expressed the following:

Interviewer: Okay. Do you think your coaches have ever heard of the term sport psychology or sport psychologist?

Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport): […]Coach] probably has cause [the coach has] been around forever.

Interviewer: Since [that coach has] been around forever, [do] you think [Coach] has an idea of what it is, then, or what they do?

Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport): No.

Interviewer: No? Why not?

Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport): Well, I don’t think [Coach] [laughing] has any idea about actually communicate with us about how we’re thinking. So I doubt if [Coach] could use sport psychology cause when it comes to, trying to, communicate effectively with us, [Coach is] not very good at it.

Interviewer: Okay. What about if a coach, one of your coaches, was working with a sport psychologist? How would you feel about that?
Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport): Yeah, that’s good.

Interviewer: [...] Why? Why would that be good?

Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport): I think it would probably help them be better coaches.

Interviewer: [...] any ideas how?

Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport): Well, just back to the whole communication thing. Maybe if they understood the mentality of your athletes and you can communicate with them further.

Another female athlete had the following to say:

Interviewer: What about if a coach of yours was working with one [a sport psychologist] like for himself? How would you feel about that?

Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport): That would be awesome. Because in our case, like I said, if [sport psychology consultant] comes and watches us and doesn’t have a background in [sport], and [sport psychology consultant] can just see things that aren’t related to [sport] as far as team camaraderie or conflicts on the [playing surface]. It’s, like sometimes our coach, like coaches can’t see that because we’re with each other every single day of the entire year. And, I don’t know. I think maybe, in our case our coach isn’t so much into us outside of [sport]. [Coach] likes to keep that distance, that’s just [Coach’s] view on [Coach’s] profession, and for us that would, I know that [sport psychology consultant] is working with [Coach] right now so it is helpful I think. Because [sport psychology consultant] maybe puts things a little bit more into perspective for [Coach] because [Coach] is not real in tune to our outside lives. So I think it really helps.

Interviewer: [...] and you’d feel the same way if [Coach] had a sport psychologist work with team? Cause, well, [Coach] is doing that so you feel the same way?

Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport): Yeah.

A male athlete provided the following response on the issue:

Interviewer: Do you think your coach would ever consider working first of all with a sport psychologist for [himself...]? 

Athlete #7 (White male; freshman; individual sport): I think that a sport like [mine] is hard as a coach, cause it’s, unlike anything else, to kinda go see
a sport psychologist because you really, the thing that could help [my coach] in seeing a sport psychologist is in [sport]. [My coach] needs to try to get the best out of [his] players. There’s nothing [he] can really do or say strategically like a [another] coach or a [another] coach. [My coach] has to be someone that can say the right things to, when it comes [the day of competition and being prepared to compete]. [He] can get everything out of [his] team. So I think in that aspect it would be worth [my coach] going or it would be beneficial for [him] if [he] were to go see a sport psychologist cause maybe [he] could learn a few […]

Interviewer: Do you think he would?

Athlete #7 (White male; freshman; individual sport): Maybe. I very much think he would be open to that.

Interviewer: What about, would he ever consider one work with your team, then?

Athlete #7 (White male; freshman; individual sport): Oh I know he would. I absolutely know he would.

Interviewer: And why do you think?

Athlete #7 (White male; freshman; individual sport): I think especially now since our team isn’t doing as well as we had hoped reading some of the goals we had originally set, I think there comes a time when we need to bring an outside agency in to maybe talk to the team and help kind-of, I guess for us kinda rebuild around. Get us thinking back to our original plan and our original goals.

Interviewer: […] you say outside agency. So why do you think that can be helpful?

Athlete #7 (White male; freshman; individual sport): I think for our team, it’s such a […] we have [number] players and a coach. It’s a very [small] group of people. And when things aren’t going well, that feeds from the top down whether you’re the [number] guy, the [number] guy, the coach, or anywhere in between, when the success you hadn’t originally planned isn’t occurring, I think everyone starts to doubt themselves. Now if someone were to come in from the outside and take an outsider’s viewpoint and bring another idea into the equation. It’s like we have a team meeting. And although it’s the same people that say something at these meetings, it’s not really benefiting the team as a whole. Where, if someone were to come in from the outside, they could have some fresh ideas and help lead us in the right direction.
A female athlete reported:

**Interviewer:** What about if your coach was working with a sport psychologist to help his coaching in some way? What would you think about that?

**Athlete #8 (White female; junior; individual sport):** [...] I think it would be positive. Cause sometimes, I just know with my coach, that she gets stressed. Obviously she has a life, she has a family, plus she has a job, plus she deals with all of us, and it’s stressful. I think it would be beneficial if she could get out her stress other ways so that we don’t [laughing] feel it when we’re at practice and we don’t feel it at a [competition] or whatever. But I think it would be beneficial.

In addition, when a male athlete was asked how he might feel if his coach was working with a sport psychologist either for himself or with the team, he replied:

**Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport):** [...] actually with [Coach] I would be a little scared. I don’t know what he’s going to try to do with us next time. He might, but not actually, no, I wouldn’t have a problem with that at all. I think it’d be good.

**Interviewer:** Why do you think it’d be good?

**Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport):** I think it would make him a stronger coach. I think he’d be more, realize what he does has a big effect on us. I think that maybe sport psychology would help him realize when he goes around and he’s nervous about something, that if we can tell that and we become nervous and that’s gonna change our [competition], I think we would have more confidence in him.

**Gendered Experience of Sport**

In talking about sport psychology, female student-athletes appeared to focus more than male student-athletes on interpersonal relations, team dynamics, and the importance that the teammates “get along.” The emphasis on sport psychology as being extremely helpful for the team as a whole appeared to be gender-related, but not gender dependent. In other words, it emerged from interviews with both males and females, but was more central in female interviews. For example, one female athlete mentioned how she thought sport psychology could help her team:

**Athlete #3 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** [...] I think it [sport psychology] might help. A lot of teams aren’t as close, I don’t know. And they might have team bonding issues. I think it could help in that aspect a lot. Cause I know if our team weren’t so close I think it would help. Cause for as a team as a whole. I think that would be [...] cause she, [sport psychology
consultant] has been having us do some different team activities, and like if you weren’t really close to the team I think it would be good.

Another athlete made remarks relating to team dynamics as well. When asked what she thought sport psychologists did with athletes, she said:

**Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** [...] I think they really have to observe first, because you can talk the basics about your goal-setting and, peak performance and all that stuff, but you really have to observe, especially our team. You have to go out and watch our team, kinda have to have a background of information before you can specifically get into the minds of the players or the coaches for that team or whatever team it might be because that’s the only way it’s really gonna, benefit you most. It’s [...] if a sport psychologist sees maybe what the problems are, what he thinks you can work, like what we could work on it really helps to hear from [sport psychology consultant] because I guess he doesn’t have a solid background in [sport], I don’t really know. It’s one thing in [another sport], but we could, my teammates and coaches and everything can talk about why we’re not doing this right, what we need to do, but it really helps to get from an outside person what he sees not knowing anything, maybe he sees is our problem. That’s always helpful to hear from him.

Later, she spoke of “team” again:

**Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** [...] and this year we’ve been working with [sport psychology consultant]. Last year we worked with coach which didn’t work as well as it does now because I feel like the team gets more out, and [sport psychology consultant] is kinda mediator between us and coach so, no, I never considered it before I got here. Now, I, my view on sport psychology is it’s good for a team thing, but it’s more of a personal choice whether you want to do it one-on-one. And for me I haven’t ever gotten to that point where I thought that I needed that just because, I guess that I don’t like to think about it too much. I just like to go out and play, so I think it’s good for our team to do it because we need to make sure that everyone’s on the same page. I see it working for our team as a whole, so, I mean, I definitely have faith in it, but individually, I haven’t just chosen that option yet.

Then, when speaking about how she thought others would view her if she were working with a sport psychologist, the same athlete made additional references to “team”:

**Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** [...] just like my coach, I think they would think there’s something wrong, maybe, or I know, if I knew a teammate was coming to one, I would feel like there’s something I need to do to help them cause I would just automatically assume that something’s not going right with them on the team or they’re not feeling like they’re fitting in
or something like that. So, I think that I would reach out to them more, and not ask them why are they seeing them, but I would just, maybe, be kinda concerned.

Finally, the same athlete finished answering a question by saying:

**Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport)**: [...]That would be comforting to know that my teammate is doing everything they can to make the team better.

A third female athlete made references to the team concept in the following response:

**Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport)**: [...] say I was having serious issues with one of my teammates or the coach, or just how I was being forced to play, like if I was being forced to change my way, my style of playing. I’m not sure that I would be really wanting everyone to know that I was really upset. Not necessarily upset in an emotional sense, but, was just really, really affecting my style of play that if they forced me to change my style I just wouldn’t want people to know that. And especially if I had a really big problem with a teammate on the team the sport psychologist would be, after I tried to confront the teammate and after I tried talking to coach and it’s still not working, they would be the option. They would be [...] I guess, the last option almost to try to help me figure out how to deal with it better and to just put it aside when I’m playing and not let that be the center of my of my focus. Like, oh my God, she hates me, what am I going to do, how can I fix it, how can she start to like me? Instead, just focus on how to get over that and just play.

She further stated:

**Athlete #4 (White female; freshman; team sport)**: [...] I think the team as a whole could be a lot more productive especially like a team sport. [For example] maybe if I was a [athlete of another sport], then one-on-one may be a little bit more beneficial, but I’m not sure how [that sport] is, I don’t know. But as for the team sport, when everyone does have to work together and click, then I think it’s good that we do work together.

The idea that females should not take sport too seriously was also revealed in some of the dialog between athlete and researcher. For example, when one female athlete was asked about how she thought fans would react if they knew she was working with a sport psychologist, she reported that they might think she was obsessed:

**Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport)**: Yeah [trails off], cause then someone could think she’s so obsessed with performing
that she’s paying someone to talk to her about her [...] about sports. I can see some people being skeptical.

When speaking about how she thought her parents would feel if they knew she was working with a sport psychologist, another athlete reported that they might think something was wrong:

**Athlete #6 (White female; sophomore; team sport):** [...] I think my parents would think that there’s something wrong. Because that’s something that they know I’ve never had to deal with before. I’ve never had to go see a sport psychologist before or any kind of psychologist because they know what kind of person I am and I think they think that I’m a real strong-willed. I’m a very independent person and, if they thought that I had to go see someone else for help, they would know that was kinda out of character for me and I think they would be concerned that there was a problem when maybe it wasn’t a problem.

Similar feelings that females should not take sport too seriously were reported by another athlete when she stated how her parents would feel if they knew she was working with a sport psychologist:

**Athlete #5 (African-American female; sophomore; individual sport):** She’d probably be like, “You’re doing what? Like why?” She wouldn’t say, “No.” But she would just be like, “What is it? Why? Is it helping you?” Ok [laughing] she might be a little skeptical about it. Just probably because she’s not familiar with it. She would just wonder. Cause to her sports is like, she [thinks that] sports is just like something that I do and it should never consume me as a person. She is adamant about sports being only something that I do and not something that consumes me. And so if I were to tell that I was going to a sport psychologist, she’d be like, “What? Is it really that important that you need to go see a psychologist about it?” That might be her first question, but she would support me if that’s something I chose to do.

While females tended to focus more on team dynamics and interpersonal relations than the males, the males were more likely than the females to emphasize or place an importance on being mentally tough. For example, when one male athlete was commenting on how he thought his coaches would react if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist, he made a reference to the importance of mental toughness:

**Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport):** I feel that some of the coaches here would think that maybe something was wrong.

**Interviewer:** Why do you say that?
Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): [...] because they just have almost a negative view on going for outside help.

Interviewer: Okay. Any ideas why?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): I really don’t have any idea why. They think that if someone would go to a sport psychologist that they’d view something as being wrong with them because they [the athlete] couldn’t handle it themselves or come to a coach with it or something like that.

Interviewer: Meaning the coaches would view that that means they’re doing a bad job? Is that what you mean?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): No. They just think there was [laughing] something wrong with the kid. I don’t think the coaches here ever think they’re doing a bad job. I just, I wouldn’t see it [...] They would probably blow it off or think that something was wrong with the kid.

Another athlete mentioned mental toughness and its importance when he talked about what he thought his teammates would think about him if they knew he was working with a sport psychologist:

Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport): [...] it would be hard to tell. That would be an awkward situation for the team, I think because they wouldn’t talk about it. We’ve had some people who have had depression and they’ve been on medication and stuff like that and the word’s kinda gotten around, you don’t say anything. But you try not to act different around them, but you sort of do. You just start to, you just don’t talk to them as much, you talk to them too much, and it starts to be different. I think the team might, a lot of the guys would be a little ignorant on the subject of sport psychology. They wouldn’t understand why you’re going to see one. I think a lot of them would think something’s wrong with you and you have a problem, but I think a lot of people would understand. Like “Hey, that’s great, you’re working hard, it’s going to help you out” and be supportive. But I’d still kinda be [...] the majority of us would be a little, like what’s wrong with this kid? Does he have issues, is he gonna crack under the pressure at [conference championships], is he gonna not do well in the [event], is he gonna blow it off or something? You know, stuff like that.

Later, when talking about how he would view others who did the same, the athlete stated:

Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport): [...] I might actually think he’s a little weak at first. Honestly that would be the first [...]
Interviewer: Weak?

Athlete #9 (White male; sophomore; individual sport): I think he’s [...] I don’t think people would [...] if I worked with a sport psychologist, I don’t know necessarily if I’d want my competitors knowing that cause it might be something I might not think of it as a weakness. But if they perceive that I have that weakness, that’s gonna be one-upping them. They’re gonna think, “Oh, he’s not gonna do as well.” Their confidence will be boosted by this. But, I think it would be actually good for them, I’m sure it’ll help them out, but I just, it has a little stigma of them being weaker, so I think that’d help me out as a [athlete in sport]. So I can see that as my competition is weaker, and I’d [...]

Male athletes also perpetuated the idea that it was okay for them to be distressed by sport, but that females should not take sport too seriously, and if females became distressed by sport, they were “head-cases.” This is evident in the following quote:

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): [...] it would depend. It would really depend on the situation. I could see if a star player all of a sudden started having a mental breakdown, yeah, then they might incorporate it [sport psychology], but until one of the selected special few had problems, I don’t see it happening.

Interviewer: Okay, you mentioned mental breakdown. What do you mean by that?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): [...] as a student athlete, mainly you’re able to keep separate your athletic life and your student life. But once something goes wrong, one or the other pressures start building on you and you keep trying to file them in and then all of a sudden something minor happens and it becomes a huge fiasco because you’ve been, I don’t know, putting aside all the other problems you’ve been having and all of a sudden they all come in bundled as one. You just really lose it for a couple minutes or a little bit.

Interviewer: Have you ever thought about talking to or working with a sport psychologist as a way to improve your athletic performance, and why or why not?

Athlete #12 (White male; freshman; team sport): I haven’t for me, because in high school, we had visualization before a game. We’d all lay down in a room and he’d talk us through how the game was going to go. So, I would be able to do that on my own. But I have a sister that swims and she’s a head case. It’s funny, because she starts thinking about, my dad tells her to think before the race, she gets up on the block and starts to think about it. And so she struggles with it and sometimes she has breakdowns but it would help
sometimes, especially this year, being red shirted. I red shirted, I was injured and stuff like that so, yeah, I think it would help.

Some of the male athletes interviewed also discussed doing everything possible to improve their performances, while the female athletes did not discuss their involvement in sport in the same way. For example, one male individual sport athlete said why he would want to work with a sport psychologist:

**Athlete #2 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** Yeah. Just because it will help me get the most out of my performance mentally because I keep, well [athletes in his sport] a lot of times, I don’t know about other athletes in other sports, but you know there’s […] we [get] a mental block. [For example] if we get up to [measurement] you want to be a [measurement] [athlete], but we mentally create a block that says we can’t get over [measurement]. And so a lot of times a lot of [athletes in his sport] don’t, unless they take time off or do mental training and stuff […]

Meanwhile, another male mentioned his willingness to try anything when he spoke about how important his performance is to him:

**Athlete #7 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** […] starting about my junior year when it became apparent that a lot of the guys on like the [name of professional league] were starting to get bigger and stronger, I too at age of about 17 figured lifting weights writing on a little clipboard. So I tried to make my […] just get into better physical shape. Be more of an athlete versus just kinda going out there with what, I guess I was just born with. And that’s one thing I think it’s just maybe besides being in better shape working a little harder, too, just on everything.

**Interviewer:** Have you ever thought about talking to or working with a sport psychologist as a way to improve your athletic performance and why or why not?

**Athlete #7 (White male; freshman; individual sport):** I think it’s something that I’d look into. I mean it can’t hurt, I’m willing to try anything. There’s people I know that, in other sports, and other people who have had success working with a sport psychologist. It’s nothing I’ve personally tried, but it’s nothing I’d be opposed to. And I think it could definitely be helpful.

**Summary**

Through interviews with student-athletes, five major themes and nine sub-themes emerged related to the meanings that the athletes attach to sport psychology (see Figure 1). In addition to revealing what sport psychology means to the athletes in the current investigation, the themes also provide insight in why they hold those meanings and how their meanings were formed.
Theme #1: Mental Aspects of Sports

In summary, when asked what sport psychology means to them, athletes indicated that it means addressing the mental aspects of sports. The student-athletes in this study described a number of ways this occurs. Some reported that they thought sport psychologists understand what athletes go through and that they listen to athletes, offer advice, act as outlets for athletes, act as mediators between athletes and coaches, act as motivators for athletes, provide positive reinforcement, administer tests to athletes, present hypothetical situations to athletes, or simply make various observations of athletes. Others who were interviewed believed that sport psychologists work with athletes on anything that causes stress or deters them from doing their best in their sport, or that they work with athletes on family issues, goal setting, forming mission statements, and tapping into willpower, dealing with various emotional states, and dealing with injuries. Additionally, athletes stated that they thought sport psychologists help athletes return to a certain level of performance when they fall below that level, or that they help athletes further their talents, find and harness their inner potential, and deal with pressures and stresses in athletics and other areas of life. Other athletes reported that they thought sport psychologists help coaches deal with stress and that they educate coaches as to how to better understand athletes. Finally, some athletes believed that sport psychologists primarily worked with teams on building trust or on keeping the team together.

Theme #2: Problems and Issues

Problems and issues: something wrong. Some athletes attached negative connotations to sport psychology through the use of “problems” and “issues.” However, they indicated that they thought others would feel that way. In other words, the athletes stated that they did not feel that way themselves. Instead, most said they would consider working with a sport psychologist and similarly reported they would be supportive of teammates who wished to do the same. In these athletes’ opinions, certain negative connotations or stigmas of psychology existed and these ideas might influence others’ perceptions of them if they worked with a sport psychologist. These “others” included coaches, non-athlete friends, sports fans, and parents. The athletes in the current study reported that others might see sport psychologists as working with people who lost their minds, who are crazy, depressed, nuts, head cases, or psycho, who need medicine, or who suffer from low self-esteem or low self-worth. Other athletes believed that others would think those who worked with a sport psychologist might have a mental disease, that they might have recently suffered from a mental breakdown of some kind, that they are not strong enough to deal with something on their own, or that they have some kind of phobia.

Problems and issues: teasing by teammates and friends. Another sub-theme comprising problems and issues was that the athletes reported that their teammates and friends might tease them if the teammates and friends knew the athletes were working with a sport psychologist. Again, when asked what they thought their teammates and friends might say, the athletes reported that they might think they had
problems or issues or tease them about going to see their “shrink.” Interestingly, while a number of athletes thought they might initially be teased by their teammates and friends, all of the athletes felt that the teasing would be in good fun and that their teammates and friends would completely support them if they were working with a sport psychologist.

Problems and issues: neutral connotations. While some athletes reported feeling that others would think they had problems or issues if they were working with a sport psychologist and would use the terms negatively, additional athletes felt that others would attach a more neutral connotation to sport psychology. Thus, a third sub-theme of problems and issues was that problems and issues were not necessarily bad. These references to sport psychology fell more along the lines of athletes working to overcome obstacles or challenges in sport. Furthermore, there was a sense that all or most athletes faced such challenges at one time or another. The majority of the comments comprising this sub-theme were the athletes’ own opinions of sport psychology rather than how they thought others perceived the profession.

Theme #3: Lack of Support

The most common theme that emerged from the interviews with student-athletes was that sport psychology meant an overall lack of support; that is, student-athletes felt that working with a sport psychologist would not be supported by important others. Several sub-themes comprised this theme.

Lack of support: betrayal and jealousy. Some athletes indicated that certain significant others in their lives might feel betrayed or jealous if they worked with a sport psychologist instead of with those people. One of these athletes had a very close relationship with her father and was accustomed to telling him everything and getting advice from him. She thought he might be jealous if she were to ask advice from someone else instead of him. Another athlete believed that his coach always wanted the athletes to go to him if they needed anything at all, and therefore thought that his coach might feel betrayed if the athlete went to a sport psychologist instead. A third athlete reported that he thought that some of his teammates might think he was trying to be better than them if he worked with a sport psychologist. He also felt his teammates and coaches would feel that he should be spending his time on techniques and drills and not on the “mental stuff.” Doing so, he thought, would be seen as wasting time. It was this athlete’s opinion that his coaches and teammates did not consider the mental side of the sport to be important.

Lack of support: too individual. Other athletes suggested that working one-on-one with a sport psychologist might be too individualistic. One female athlete from a team sport felt doing so would go against the team philosophy and team cohesion that her coach was constantly trying to build. Another athlete, a male from an individual sport, thought that working alone with a sport psychologist would isolate the person and create an individualistic attitude, and he felt that such an attitude could hurt the team.
Lack of support: coaches’ reluctance. The most frequently discussed sub-theme under lack of support was the notion that many of the athletes’ coaches were somewhat reluctant to have a sport psychologist work with their teams. Some athletes reported that their coaches have been coaching for many years and did not like change. One athlete said that his coach would probably try sport psychology himself before he let someone else work with his team. Another athlete talked about the issue of time and explained that his coach would most likely see sport psychology as interfering with the schedule. Athletes from another sport felt that their coaches enjoyed being in control too much to let someone else work with the players. An athlete from this same team stated that he thought his coaches almost had a negative view of anyone who sought outside help. An additional athlete simply said that working with a sport psychologist had never been presented to her as an option, and a male athlete in the same sport reported that he did not think his coaches understood the importance of the mental aspect of his sport.

Lack of support: parents’ belief that sports are not that important. Another sub-theme that emerged from the interviews was that a sport psychologist should not really be considered because sports do not hold enough importance in life. This sub-theme emerged from the interviews with two African-American athletes who were speaking of how they thought their parents would react if their parents knew they were working with a sport psychologist. One athlete talked about how his father always emphasizes academics in conversation and only likes the sport because it pays the bills. The other athlete mentioned that her mother feels that sports are just something one should be involved with but that sports should, in no way, consume the person. This sub-theme did not surface in interviews with any of the white athletes, nor did it emerge from every interview with African American athletes.

Theme #4: No Interest in Sport Psychology

Another theme that emerged was the idea that sport psychology was of no interest to the athletes. One athlete reported that her coach used sport psychology too much. She felt that her coach’s overuse of sport psychology hurt the team by turning them away from its principles. Other athletes indicated no interest in working with a sport psychologist because there were other people in their lives (e.g., parents and former coaches) who filled that role. These athletes believed that the significant others filled the roles of a sport psychologist because they know how the athletes think, they offer sound advice, they are always there for them, and they know how to “pick them up” when they are down.

Theme #5: Good for the Team

Another frequent theme to emerge from the interviews was the idea that sport psychology could benefit the team. Numerous athletes reported that they felt either their coaches or their entire teams would be helped but such services. Athletes felt that a sport psychologist could help coaches become more aware of the importance of the mental aspects of sport, help coaches better relate to their players, improve
coaches’ communication skills with their athletes, help coaches deal with their own stresses as coaches so that the coaches do not project their negative energy onto the athletes, and help coaches become more aware of how their actions and attitude can affect their athletes. Athletes also stated that sport psychologists could act as mediators between coaches and athletes, thereby helping the coaches to better understand their athletes’ points of view. In addition, the student-athletes who were interviewed said that, because they were an outside source, sport psychologists could offer fresh, innovative ideas to help the team perform better. Finally, the athletes reported that sport psychologists could benefit teams by helping athletes deal with issues outside of athletics, which is something that coaches often refrain from doing.

**Gendered Experiences of Sport**

During the interviews with student-athletes, it became apparent that sport psychology sometimes held different meanings for males and females. When female athletes discussed what sport psychology meant to them, their descriptions often centered on interpersonal relations and the dynamics of the team. Meanwhile, the male athletes often talked about the importance of being mentally tough and how lacking mental toughness meant one was weak. In addition, though they stressed the importance of mental toughness, some males seemed to acknowledge and accept the idea that male athletes could become distressed by sport. At the same time, they felt that females should not become distressed by sport and labeled them “head-cases” if they did. It was as if female athletes should not take sport too seriously and that working with a sport psychologist represented doing so. This idea came from female athletes themselves as well as from female athletes’ ideas of what parents and others would think of them in certain situations. Furthermore, the idea seemed to only apply to working individually with a sport psychologist; team consultations appeared to be acceptable in the eyes of female athletes.

**Raced Experience of Sport**

One sub-theme that emerged under “lack of support” was the idea that parents believed that sports were not that important. This sub-theme was only recognized in interviews with two African-American athletes, indicating the possibility of the sub-theme being race related, though not race-exclusive.

**Concluding Remarks**

The five major themes, nine sub-themes, and the gendered and raced experiences that emerged in the current investigation reveal much about the meanings that the collegiate athletes in the study attach to sport psychology. Furthermore, the information gathered from the interviews with student-athletes provides insight as to why the athletes hold these meanings and how their meanings were formed. The next chapter will offer a further discussion and interpretation of these results.
Chapter 5
Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to ascertain the meanings that NCAA Division I athletes attach to sport psychology. In so doing, the investigation explored what sport psychology means to athletes, why sport psychology holds the meaning it does for them and how athletes come to know what they know about sport psychology. This chapter contains a discussion of the key findings in relation to the extant research on sport, intercollegiate athletics, and sport psychology. Implications for practice, suggestions for future research in the area, and limitations of the study are also presented.

Although the athletes indicated that they first heard of sport psychology in a number of different contexts, these “first impressions” appeared to be only partially responsible for the meanings they attach to sport psychology today. The themes and sub-themes that emerged in the interviews reveal not only the meanings sport psychology holds for them today, but also why sport psychology holds the meanings it does for them. These findings are discussed next in relation to the extant research.

Sport Psychology Equals ‘Mental’

Although analysis of the interviews revealed that sport psychology holds a variety of meanings for student-athletes, a common theme that emerged was that sport psychology meant dealing with the mental aspect of sports. The term “mental” was used by the athletes in a large number of the interviews. These findings represent an extension of past research because the athletes in the current study were given the opportunity to elaborate on what they meant by the term “mental.”

Past Research

Past research investigating the meanings that athletes have of sport psychology failed to allow the athletes to explain in detail what sport psychology meant to them. Rather than interviewing athletes in an attempt to understand the meanings they attach to sport psychology and performance, past research provided fixed categories and asked athletes to place the profession in a two dimensional space relative to other sport and mental health professions. One of these dimensions consisted of “mental” at one extreme and “physical” at the other. In one such study, when asked to place sport psychology into a two-dimensional space, male athletes placed the profession closer to the mental end of the mental-physical dimension (Van Raalte et al., 1992). In this study, sport psychology was being compared to other sport and mental health professions, and athletes viewed the profession as more mental than some other sport professions (e.g., coach, performance consultant, strength coach, nutritionist, sports medicine specialist) but less mental than mental health professions (e.g., clinical psychologist, hypnotist, psychiatrist, psychotherapist) (Van Raalte et al., 1992).
Current Study

The athletes’ placing of sport psychology closer to the mental end of the mental-physical dimension in the past research is somewhat consistent with the student-athletes in the current study who believed that sport psychology may help them improve their physical performance through assisting them with mental and/or emotional issues (e.g., stress, inability to focus). And while the current study did not ask athletes to compare sport psychology to other sport and mental health professions, it did allow for the athletes to expand upon the idea of sport psychology as “mental” through the use of additional questions during the interviews. These additional questions revealed that the use of the term “mental” by student-athletes when describing what sport psychology means to them has a variety of meanings. The current study has therefore helped to provide a picture of what student-athletes mean when they say that sport psychology deals with the mental aspects of sports. According to the athletes in this investigation, the “mental” component of sports includes factors such as finding one’s inner potential, coping with pressures and stresses both inside and outside of the sports setting, dealing with injuries, tapping into willpower, setting goals, receiving positive reinforcement, receiving help with motivation, and team building. The athletes’ extensive description of the mental aspects of sports appears to indicate that they feel the mental component is an essential part of the athletic experience.

Sport Psychology Deals with ‘Problems’ or ‘Issues’

Continued discussion of what sport psychology meant to the athletes in the present study revealed another common theme. The majority of the athletes reported that they believed and/or they thought others believed an athlete would only work with a sport psychologist if he/she had some kind of “problem” or “issue.” The athletes in the current investigation were asked to further explain their use of the terms “problems” and “issues” and subsequently provided a number of explanations. Some defined “problems” and “issues” as “something wrong,” others speculated that teammates and friends would tease them if they knew the athletes were working with a sport psychologist, and still others used the terms “problems” and “issues” in a much more neutral manner.

Past Research

Athletes’ perceptions. Past research investigating the meanings that athletes attach to sport psychology did not allow the athletes to elaborate on what sport psychology meant to them beyond the primary objective of the studies. Instead, athletes were given a fictitious scouting report of a football player who was either working with a coach, a sport psychologist, or a psychotherapist to improve his consistency, and were asked to rate how strongly they would recommend drafting the player (Van Raalte et al., 1992). The results indicated that the athletes did not derogate the football player who worked with a sport psychologist, nor did they
assign lower draft ratings to the football player if he worked with a sport psychologist instead of a coach (Van Raalte et al., 1992).

The use of the problem label “consistency” in this study did not have the terms “problem” or “issue” attached with it in the description that was read by the athletes. Therefore, the athletes in the study were forced to assign their own values or meanings to the phrase “to improve his consistency.” Because of the nature of the investigation, it is impossible to know for sure if the subjects of the study considered the football player in the scenario to be having a “problem” or “issue.” Likewise, it is equally difficult to know whether the athletes in the study attached a positive, negative, or neutral connotation to the idea of working with someone on improving one’s consistency in a sport.

*Non-athletes’ perceptions.* In a study by Linder et al. (1989), non-athlete students assigned lower draft ratings to athletes who consulted a sport psychologist to improve their consistency, and they also considered the same athletes to be less emotionally stable and difficult to get along with. In another study by Linder et al. (1991) using the same procedure, similar ratings and qualities were assigned to athletes by non-athlete adults and non-athlete males.

*Current Study*

While almost all of the athletes in the current study appeared to have favorable opinions of sport psychology, they seemed to think that others would not feel the same way. More specifically, the athletes thought that coaches, parents, sports fans, and non-athlete friends might attach negative connotations to sport psychology and might therefore judge athletes who work with a sport psychologist in a negative manner. The finding that sport psychology involves “problems” and/or “issues” and that negative connotations are attached to such is somewhat consistent with past research investigating non-athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology.

Although the athletes in the current investigation attached positive or neutral connotations to sport psychology and indicated that they would consider working with a sport psychologist, the fact remains that they thought significant others in their lives might see things differently. Surely, coaches, parents, sports fans, and non-athlete friends are groups of people who might fill the roles of “important people” in the lives of athletes. Furthermore, if these important people have negative views of sport psychology and if the athletes are aware that they have these negative views, one might wonder if those athletes who were interested in seeking the services of a sport psychologist might be afraid to do so for fear of what the significant others in their lives might think. While this did not seem to be the case with the athletes in the current study, it is surely possible that this could still occur.

Additional problems could present themselves if the athletes in the current investigation are correct, and indeed, these “others” have negative views of sport psychology. If coaches, parents of athletes, non-athlete friends, and sports fans have
negative views of sport psychology, part of the reason could be because they have misconceptions of the field and of what exactly sport psychologists do with athletes. Such misconceptions and negative views by significant others in the athletes’ lives have the capability of hindering the expansion of the field. Furthermore, the same negative attitudes and misconceptions could also contribute to a belief that help-seeking professions are unnecessary or that those who seek such services are severely troubled, when in actuality, help-seeking professions are extremely beneficial to many, and few athletes who work with sport psychology professionals qualify as being severely troubled.

**Gendered Experiences of Sports**

One gender related issue that emerged during interviews with some male athletes centered on the idea that sports were extremely important. More specifically, some male athletes reported that they were committed to doing all they could to improve their performances and stated that working with a sport psychologist is therefore something they would consider doing in order to achieve such ends. Meanwhile, the female athletes in this study did not discuss sport psychology and their sport involvement in this way. While this might be interpreted as a lack of devotion to their sport, according to Sage (1998), the organization and structure of sport serves to perpetuate ideologies of male superiority and dominance while downplaying female athleticism. That is, sport is organized and structured in such a way as to make it more “normal” for men to take it seriously than for women to place a high value on sport achievements. Therefore, it should not be surprising if some female athletes do not appear to try as hard or to show as much commitment to sport as male athletes. What appears to be a lack of effort, seriousness, or dedication may in actuality represent female athletes’ consenting to the gender order in sport. In other words, if in their years of competitive sport involvement they experienced little support and encouragement to excel, or if in taking their sport performance and its improvement “too seriously” their femininity is questioned, female athletes may downplay their involvement and/or cease to show the maximum level of effort of which they are capable in sport.

**Gender Role Conflict**

Introduced in 1981 by O’Neil, the concept of gender role conflict refers to a psychological state that occurs when “rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles, learned during socialization, result in personal restriction, devaluation, or violation of others or self” (O’Neil, 1990, p.25). Men who would fall into this state experience male gender role conflict, or MGRC. According to O’Neil (1981), men who experience MGRC are typically afraid of being perceived as “feminine.” Consequently, in terms of attitudes toward help-seeking, results of a number of studies have suggested that men seek and/or accept psychological help much less often than women (Chamarow, 1978; Cheatham, Shelton, & Ray, 1987; Good, Dell, & Mintz, 1989; Haffner, 1983; Rice, 1978; Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1992; Sher, 1979). Results of studies such as these suggest that male athletes would construct different meanings of sport.
psychology compared to females, especially if the male athletes suffered from gender role conflict. Interestingly, gender role conflict did not seem to be present in the male athletes who were interviewed. Instead, the male athletes appeared to be in favor of seeking sport psychology services because they wished to do all in their power to maximize their performances.

**Athletes Receive Little Support in Seeking Sport Psychology Services**

Another rather large theme that emerged from the interviews in the current study was *lack of support*. The athletes made a number of references to coaches, parents, or teammates and indicated they felt they received very little or no support from these people in seeking the services of a sport psychologist. They believed that coaches were reluctant to having them work with a sport psychologist because the coaches did not like change, because the coaches liked being the boss and felt capable of doing everything themselves, because there was no time, because they had a generally negative view toward outside help, or because their coaches did not feel that the mental aspects of performance were that important. Some of the athletes believed that their parents would be reluctant to them working with a sport psychologist because of their parents’ belief that sports should not be that important and education should be the number one priority. Finally, the athletes in the current study thought that teammates might be reluctant to support them if they worked with a sport psychologist because the teammates might view such an intervention as being too individualistic and going against the concept of a team. The athletes also believed that both their coaches and teammates might feel jealous and/or betrayed for the same reasons listed above if they were to work with a sport psychologist.

None of the past research investigating perceptions of sport psychology examined athletes’ support or lack of support in seeking sport psychology services per se. From the work of Linder et al. (1989, 1991) we know that non-athletes have derogated athletes who seek the services of sport psychologists. None of the non-athletes in these studies were coaches, parents, or teammates of the athletes in question, however, as the scenarios that were used were fictitious. Therefore, the current study may offer the first clear evidence that some athletes perceive coaches, parents, and teammates may be reluctant to having their athlete, son/daughter, or teammate work with a sport psychologist. And again, as is the case with those who view sport psychology negatively and associate it with “problems” and “issues,” additional implications arise when coaches, parents, and teammates fail to support athletes who desire to seek the services of a sport psychologist; their performance may be hindered, their health may be at risk, and their overall enjoyment may be unnecessarily low.

**‘Others’ Fill the Role of Sport Psychologist for Some Athletes**

While many of the athletes interviewed stated that they would consider working with a sport psychologist, a few athletes seemed uninterested because of other people in their lives who they felt served as their “personal sport psychologists.”
Interestingly, none of these people were sport psychologists by profession, but for various reasons, the athletes felt that the people filled the same or near similar roles. For example, one such athlete said that his father is like his sport psychologist because he receives advice from him about his thoughts regarding his sport. The same athlete also related his coach to a sport psychologist because his coach encourages the athlete to contact him whenever he needs anything. Other athletes saw current coaches, high school coaches, or parents as their personal sport psychologists for a number of additional reasons. Those who believed their current coaches were like their sport psychologists explained by stating that their coaches always tell them to talk to them if they have any sport-related problems, reported that their coaches can get into the heads of the athletes and make them more mentally tough, or said that their coaches provide motivational reading material to the athletes and know how to “psyche out” the athletes for competition. Those athletes who thought that their former high school coaches served as their sport psychologists explained by saying that these coaches know them well as athletes and know how the athletes feel when things are not going well, that these coaches always have something to say to pick them up when they are down, that the athletes are able to spill everything to these coaches, or that the coaches had taken the team through visualization exercises before competitions in the past. Finally, those athletes who reported that their parents served as their sport psychologists explained by stating that they can always tell them what is on their mind and that their parents then offer positive reinforcement and help them through hard times, or that the parents know how the athletes feel when things are not going well and always have something to say to pick them up when they are down.

Past research examining athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology has not revealed specific information regarding athletes’ views of others who served as their “pseudo” sport psychologists. Research by Maniar, Curry, Sommers-Flanagan, and Walsh (2001) investigating student-athlete preferences in seeking help when confronted with sport performance problems suggests that athletes are most likely to seek help from those who best understand them and their sport-related problems. It is therefore easy to understand why some of the athletes in the current study might have considered their coaches or parents to be their “sport psychologists,” as these people had proven to that athletes that they understand them and the problems that the athletes face. One must also take into account the possibility that those athletes who used significant others as sport psychologists might not have been given the opportunity to work with a professional sport psychologist due to the reluctance of their coaches or to lack of available resources.

Implications for Practice

While the current research has no aim at generalizing to the larger population, the results do raise questions about athletes’ and others’ views of sport psychology. Below, answers to these questions that are within the realm of the current investigation are provided, and possible implications for practice are offered.
Do Athletes’ Perceptions of Sport Psychology Fit With Those of Professionals?

First, when describing what sport psychology means to them, the athletes in the current study seemed to provide a picture that would match that of sport psychology professionals. Those athletes who were currently working with a sport psychology consultant seemed to offer richer descriptions, but almost all of the athletes’ meanings of sport psychology contained pieces of information that would probably match with professionals in the field. Still, the athletes’ meanings of sport psychology did not capture everything that sport psychology professionals would capture when describing the field. For example, the athletes’ meanings did not include descriptions of sport psychology interventions such as concentration control, relaxation training, and imagery. This may very well be due to the athletes’ lack of experience with sport psychology professionals, or to the values and meanings that significant others in their lives place on sport psychology. In the course of the interviews with the student-athletes, many reported that coaches, parents, teammates, and others might view sport psychology negatively or be opposed to seeking such services. But while the athletes’ descriptions of what sport psychology meant to them may have differed at times compared to the way in which sport psychologists would describe the field, the meanings provided by the athletes actually add to our definitions of sport psychology. That is, we now have a clearer picture as to what sport psychology may mean to collegiate student-athletes.

Certain Obstacles Could Deter Athletes from Seeking Sport Psychology Services

Many of the athletes in the study speculated that they would face numerous obstacles if they were to work individually with a sport psychology professional, including teasing by teammates and friends, lack of support from coaches, parents, and teammates, and the knowledge that significant others may attach negative stigmas to sport psychology. Furthermore, research by Ferrante, Etzel, and Lantz (1996) suggests that numerous barriers may prevent athletes from seeking counseling of any kind on campus. They point to lack of time, myths about the student-athletes, the personalities of the athletes themselves, the fear of losing one’s playing position, and the high visibility of athletes on campus as being some of the major factors that make student-athletes reluctant to seek counseling and/or psychological services. The authors also note that both male and female athletes typically have an attitude that assumes they are to be tough and that seeking counseling or psychological services of any kind would be a sign of weakness, which they are not supposed to have as athletes.

Interestingly, although the athletes made note of some of the above hindrances, most stated that they would still consider working with a sport psychologist. It is difficult to know why some athletes would consider working with a sport psychologist despite all of the above obstacles while others might avoid seeking such services. Regardless, sport psychology professionals and those who support sport psychology practices would benefit from knowing some of the obstacles that athletes could potentially face should they choose to seek such assistance.
Knowing, however, that the above obstacles could potentially exist may not be sufficient. Rather, those employed in the field of sport psychology could benefit more by attempting to resolve the problem. Perhaps a most effective first step in doing this would be to educate coaches, athletes, and parents about sport psychology, so that each groups’ meanings of the field would more closely resemble one another. This starts by making sure that sport psychology professionals have an agreed upon “definition” of what sport psychology is and what services sport psychology professionals aim to provide.

*Derogation of Athletes Who Seek Sport Psychology Services: Does it Occur?*

Based on the meanings of sport psychology that the athletes in the current investigation provided, it appears that what was found in past research on perceptions of sport psychology still holds. That is, the results of the current study seem to agree with those found by Van Raalte et al. (1992) in that the athletes stated that they would not have a problem with other athletes (i.e. teammates, high school athletes, athletes at other colleges, or professional athletes) working with a sport psychologist. In fact, a majority of the athletes in the present investigation reported that they thought working with a sport psychologist was a good idea for many athletes, including themselves. Meanwhile, the results of the this research also agree with the work of Linder et al. (1989, 1991) which found that non-athletes may derogate athletes who seek sport psychology services. In the present study, most of the athletes reported that they thought significant others in their lives might have negative views of sport psychology or might be reluctant to support them if they were to use such services.

*Do Athletes Consider Sport Psychology to be a Valuable Service?*

The majority of the athletes in the current study reported that they thought sport psychology could benefit their teams by improving the overall chemistry of the team or by helping the coach to learn how to better relate to his/her players. Furthermore, many of the athletes stated that they would also consider working individually with a sport psychologist. Thus, the athletes in the current study clearly seemed to believe that sport psychology services could be of value to their athletic endeavors.

*What Might These Findings Suggest?*

The results of the current investigation show that the majority of the athletes in the study have a view of sport psychology that is at least partially similar to that of professionals in the field. Furthermore, it is evident that regardless of whether or not they have personal experience working with a sport psychologist, most of the athletes feel that sport psychology services could be valuable for them individually as well as for their entire team. But while their interest in sport psychology services is clear, the results of the study also suggest that the athletes face numerous obstacles to seeking help from sport psychology professionals. These obstacles are in the form of teasing by significant others, a general lack of support from significant others in seeking such
services, or simply the knowledge that others might attach negative stigmas to sport psychology or to those who work with a sport psychologist.

*When and where are athletes introduced to sport psychology?* Knowing when and where student-athletes are introduced to sport psychology may be useful to practitioners in the field as they attempt to provide their services, as it will give them valuable marketing and educational ideas. While it did not emerge as a meaning, the results of the current investigation suggest that student-athletes learn about sport psychology from a variety of sources. When asked where they first heard of the term “sport psychology,” many of the student-athletes stated that they first heard of sport psychology as high school students. For example, some were introduced to the term by coaches who used sport psychology principles or they learned about sport psychology while on recruiting trips or when attending sports clinics in high school. Others overheard high school trainers talking about sport psychology, learned about the field when reading articles about athletes, or had friends who had entered college and worked with a sport psychologist. Other athletes reported that they first heard of sport psychology when in college. Some of these student-athletes came across the term when they first arrived at college as freshmen or when they were searching for a college major. Others were introduced to the term in undergraduate courses that they had. In addition, one student had an acquaintance that was pursuing study in the field of sport psychology. And finally, another athlete first heard of sport psychology when he learned that an opponent at a rival university was working with a sport psychologist.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Based on the findings in the present study, a number of suggestions for future research can be made. One suggestion for future research is to interview athletes from additional sports such as soccer, baseball, wrestling, lacrosse, tennis, volleyball, gymnastics, and ice hockey to see how the themes that emerge compare to those of the athletes in the present investigation. While no clear distinctions were found between the perceptions of athletes from individual versus team sports in the current study, it would still be fruitful to investigate the perceptions of athletes from additional sports. Due to the unique environments surrounding each sport, it is always possible that the perceptions of athletes from certain sports could yield findings far different from others. Finally, future research might also examine the meanings that athletes from NCAA Division II and Division III schools attach to sport psychology in order to see how such meanings compare to those of NCAA Division I athletes. The potential exists for different themes to surface from these populations due to the structural differences between Division I, II, and III athletic programs (i.e., no scholarships or only partial scholarships in D-II and D-III, coaches less likely to lose jobs if teams lose in D-II and D-III). Because of the structural differences, coaches may have different attitudes about sport psychology services, and this may affect their athletes’ opinions about working with a sport psychologist.
The current investigation examined the meanings that athletes attach to sport psychology at one point in time. Moreover, most of the athletes interviewed were college freshmen or sophomores. By examining the perceptions of these athletes only once, there is no way of knowing whether or not they will change over time. Thus, future research involving a longitudinal study that examines the meanings student-athletes have of sport psychology at multiple times during their college careers might reveal more information. For example, interviewing them once per year, or as freshmen and then as seniors, might reveal that the meanings that athletes develop regarding sport psychology change with time.

With regard to changing perceptions, future research might also examine how athletes’ meanings of sport psychology change after they work with a sport psychologist for the first time. Some of the athletes in the current study had never worked with sport psychologists, so perhaps after seeking sport psychology services, their perceptions of the field would be different. Other athletes in the current investigation had previously worked with a sport psychologist or were currently working with a sport psychology consultant. Thus, future research might also look into how athletes’ perceptions change if they work with different sport psychology consultants or different intervention programs over the course of their collegiate careers.

Another area that future research might consider investigating is the impact that gender and race have on perceptions of sport psychology and on views of sport in general. The female athletes in the current study were more likely to focus on sport psychology as a means of addressing team oriented and relationship centered issues, while the male athletes were more likely to think of sport psychology in relation to improving their own personal performance. If this is the case with a large majority of collegiate athletes, such information can prove to be very valuable to sport psychology consultants as they prepare interventions for male and female athletes. Knowing what is most important to the athletes would clearly help the sport psychologists to design the most effective training programs.

Another suggestion for future research in this area is to interview coaches in an attempt to learn about the meanings that they attach to sport psychology. The athletes in the present study had much to say about their coaches. Some indicated that they thought their coaches would not use the services of a sport psychologist, and others thought that their team could benefit from such services because their coaches might learn to better understand the athletes. Examining the meanings that the coaches of these interviewed athletes attach to sport psychology might help to better explain why the athletes reported what they did about their coaches in the interviews. Furthermore, because the coaches are such an influential part of the athletes’ lives, understanding their positions might produce a clearer understanding as to why the athletes attach certain meanings to sport psychology.
Limitations

While procedures were followed in order to establish credibility and trustworthiness in the current study, a few limitations still exist. First, the sampling procedure used in the present investigation might be criticized by some. The researcher used purposeful sampling because he was interested in the meanings of a diverse sample of athletes because past research has been criticized as being limited in terms of the populations that were studied (i.e., white males only), and because more recent research in sport sociology suggests that gender and race are important in differentiating the experiences of athletes in intercollegiate sport (Sage, 1998).

Another possible limitation relates to the issue of anonymity in the present investigation. Although the athletes involved in the current investigation were assured of anonymity, there is no way of knowing to what extent and how what they reported was modified because of concerns with anonymity. The possibility exists that they could have been concerned that significant others (i.e., coaches and teammates) would somehow find out what they said and that they therefore did not report their true feelings. While the presence of common themes suggests that deception was less likely to have occurred, one can never be absolutely sure; this is one common limitation to any research.

The interviewing skills of the researcher could be the cause of other limitations in the current investigation. Although he did practice his interviewing skills in a few pilot interviews, no researcher is perfect, and the researcher in the current study could have been better. For example, in some interviews, he could have asked more follow-up questions, which could have revealed more information about the athletes. Furthermore, at times, the researcher cut off the athletes when they were talking, thus interrupting their thought processes and possibly causing them to leave out information that would have been valuable to the study. In addition, some of the guiding questions that the interviewer used may have been too narrow in focus. Had the questions been broader, perhaps more themes would have emerged from the interviews. Finally, on a few occasions, the researcher spoke for the athletes instead of allowing them to speak for themselves, which could have also caused them to omit pertinent information.

One final potential limitation in the current study is that almost all of the athletes knew the researcher. Some had even been taught by the researcher at one time or another. So, while this situation may have made some of the athletes more comfortable during the interview process, it could have also made others respond in ways that they felt would keep them in good standing with the researcher.

Summary of Study

In the minds of the athletes who were interviewed, sport psychology appeared to have different meanings depending on the context. For example, while the athletes themselves had certain perceptions of sport psychology, the athletes often reported
that they thought coaches would have different meanings of sport psychology and that the coaches’ meanings might also be different than the meanings that teammates, fans, parents, or friends have of sport psychology. Clearly, these groups of people play significant roles in the lives of student-athletes and thus their opinions have the potential of significantly influencing the actions and beliefs of the athletes. Whether or not the athletes’ perceptions of sport psychology were influenced in a positive or negative manner by these significant others is difficult to know for certain. Still, a number of themes emerged from the interviews and allow for speculation about collegiate athletes. Particularly, athletes appear to view sport psychology as dealing with the mental aspect of sport and seem to think sport psychologists could be beneficial in many ways to their own performances or the performances of their teams. In addition, it is evident that many athletes are aware of certain stigmas and negative connotations that others often attach to psychology related fields, and while the athletes themselves may not attach such images, they feel that others might. Still, athletes generally do not seem to derogate other athletes who work with a sport psychologist and often mention an interest in working with one themselves. Despite their interest in the field, however, athletes point to a number of ways in which the idea of working with a sport psychologist is downplayed, or they point to how they receive little support to seek such services. The meanings that coaches and significant others in the athletes’ lives have of sport psychology need to be examined to better understand why collegiate student-athletes do and do not seek the services of a sport psychologist.
References


Figure 1 - Meanings of Sport Psychology

MENTAL ASPECTS OF SPORTS

LACK OF SUPPORT
Betrayal & Jealousy
Too Individual
Coaches’ Reluctance
Parents’ Belief That Sports Are Not That Important (R)

PROBLEMS & ISSUES
Something Wrong (G)
Teasing by Teammates/Friends
Neutral Connotations

MEANINGS OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

NO INTEREST IN SPORT PSYCHOLOGY
Because They Speak to Others
Because of Excessive Use of Sport Psychology

GOOD FOR THE TEAM (G)

KEY
ALL CAPS = Theme
Lowercase = Sub-theme
R = Race Related
G = Gender Related
Appendix A: Open-Ended Interview

Guiding Questions:

1. How long have you been involved with your sport? Give me a brief history of your sport career.
2. What do you like about your sport?
3. Why did you start playing?
4. What kinds of goals have you set in the past for your sport?
5. When you want to (or have wanted to) improve your sport performance, what kinds of things do you do (or have you done)? Why do you do (or why have you done) those things?
6. Have you ever thought about talking/working with a sport psychologist as a way to improve your athletic performance? Why or why not?
7. Think back to the first time you heard the term sport psychology? When was it? Where did you hear the term? What were your initial thoughts when you heard about sport psychology for the first time? Why did you think that?
8. Think back to the first time you heard the term sport psychologist. When was it? Where did you hear the term? What were your initial thoughts when you heard about sport psychologists for the first time? Why did you think that?
9. In your opinion, what is sport psychology, or what does sport psychology mean to you?
10. In your opinion, what do sport psychologists do?
11. Do you think your coaches have ever heard of the terms sport psychology and sport psychologist? Do you think they have an idea concerning what sport psychology is and what sport psychologists do? Do you think they would ever consider working with a sport psychologist? Why or why not?
12. Do you think that you would ever consider working with a sport psychologist? Why or why not?
13. If you have previously worked with a sport psychologist, would you ever consider working with a sport psychologist again? Why or why not?
14. How would you feel if a teammate of yours was working with a sport psychologist? A coach? Why would you feel this way?
15. What would you think if you heard a high school athlete was working with a sport psychologist? A college athlete? A professional athlete? Why would you think that?
16. If you were working with a sport psychologist, how do you think your coach would feel about it? Why do you think they would feel this way?
17. If you were working with a sport psychologist, how do you think your parents would feel about it? Why do you think they would feel this way?
18. If you were working with a sport psychologist, how do you think your teammates would feel about it? Why do you think they would feel this way?

19. If you were working with a sport psychologist, how do you think fans would feel about it? Why do you think they would feel this way?

20. If you were working with a sport psychologist, how do you think your non-athlete friends would feel about it? Why do you think they would feel this way?
Appendix B: Consent Form

By signing below you agree to be interviewed by me (Brad Williams) and you acknowledge that you fully understand and are in agreement with the following:

- You will be interviewed regarding your sport, your sport involvement, and your opinions and thoughts about sport psychology.
- The interview will be tape-recorded and a research assistant will transcribe the interview for Brad at a later date. The research assistant will not know who you are.
- The feedback you provide will help Brad with his research project and could possibly benefit you and your team in the years to come.
- Your name and phone number is only requested because Brad will need to contact you later to make sure he recorded things accurately and to report his findings to you.
- All of the information you provide will be used anonymously. That is, your name will NEVER be attached to your responses if, or when, your information is reported at a later date.
- You are not being forced to take part in this research. It is completely voluntary, you may refuse to answer any questions, and you may stop providing information at any time.

Again, by signing below you acknowledge that you understand what is written here and that you are willing to be called upon if additional information is needed.

Signature of Athlete: ________________________________ Date: ____________

Thank you for taking the time to help me with my research project! If, at a later date, you have any questions or comments concerning the survey or interview, you may contact:

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For questions about your rights as subjects, you may contact the Office of Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching at 529-3734.