Assessing and Maximizing Collegiate Athletes' Psychological Skills Under Constraints: A Preseason Brief Intervention Approach

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Abstract:

Time and access to teams may be limited for sport psychology professionals, particularly those working in the college sport setting. Thus, learning how to intervene with teams and individual athletes within short, defined timeframes becomes essential for working effectively in this environment. In this article, using de Shazer's solution-focused brief therapy along with Weinberg and Williams's steps of psychological skills training, the authors describe the development and implementation of a brief intervention under time-limited circumstances (15 days, 15 min/day) through a preseason training program with a National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I women's volleyball team. Then, they present data and evaluations based on the Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28 and athlete feedback, which support program effectiveness. They further reflect on the program strengths (e.g., individualization) and challenges (e.g., limited coach involvement) to provide recommendations for intervening briefly, yet systematically and effectively, to maximize athletes' psychological skills under constraints.

Keywords: athletic coping skills inventory | NCAA | needs assessment | solution focused | volleyball

Article:

Sport psychology professionals (SPPs) who work with collegiate athletes, unlike other support staff such as athletic trainers, often have limited time with each team in an athletic department. Whether due to their own very busy schedule or National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)–mandated time constraints around training (NCAA, 2014), SPPs are mostly not available or able to work with athletes and teams during every practice or competition. Moreover, collegiate coaches, often the gatekeepers for sport psychology services, are inclined to use most of their athletes' NCAA-allowed time to focus on physical, technical, and tactical training instead of psychological skills training (Zakrajsek et al., 2013). When SPPs encounter such time and scheduling challenges in their work with collegiate teams, learning how to develop and implement evidence-based interventions within short, defined timeframes to optimize athlete performance effectively and efficiently is paramount.

Sport psychology professionals first introduced brief interventions with individual athletes about two decades ago (Giges & Petitpas, 2000; Høigaard & Johansen, 2004), yet discussions

about time-limited programming with teams have been fewer and broached only more recently in the literature. For instance, McGregor and Winter (2017) reflected on their brief, solution-focused approach as one of the techniques used with an international lacrosse team during their preparation for the World Cup. Although they discussed their focused interventions within a defined competition, their work occurred in the context of an ongoing relationship with unrestricted access to the team and athletes. Thus, a gap remains in understanding how SPPs might work with teams in situations where time and access are more limited, such as in the college sports setting. In this article, we described the development and implementation of a time-limited team intervention framework, using a brief, solution-focused approach (de Shazer, 1985) and the steps of traditional psychological skills training (Weinberg & Williams, 2010). We then illustrated the framework through our program delivery to an NCAA Division I women's volleyball team. In doing so, we reflected on our challenges and successes by taking athlete feedback into account and offered suggestions for how SPPs may implement similar programs in college sports or other sports settings with limited access.

A Framework for Brief Intervention

Our framework is grounded in the solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) approach developed by the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (de Shazer, 1985; de Shazer et al., 1986). SFBT is a short-term intervention approach for working with clients, individually or in groups, who are experiencing specific issues in various life areas, such as anxiety, substance abuse, and academic underachievement, to name just a few (de Shazer, 1985; Kim, 2008). In a meta-analysis of SFBT's effects on internalizing behavior problems, Kim (2008) found it to be effective ($d = 0.26$) and comparable with other traditional therapeutic approaches in applied settings.

The key assumptions of SFBT include (a) a focus on solutions instead of problems (e.g., lack of confidence) and their causes, (b) a search for the exceptions to every problem and situation (e.g., when the unconfident athlete feels confident), (c) a belief that small changes lead to larger changes, (d) clients being the experts who have strengths and tools to solve their problems, and (e) collaboration between the practitioner and the clients to coconstruct solutions (Walter & Peller, 1992). These assumptions are consistent with the characteristics of elite athletes who often are driven by improvement and solutions; have existing knowledge, skills, and abilities that can be harnessed and directed to new situations; and are used to working with others (e.g., coaches, athletic trainers) in collaborative relationships. Assumptions d and e may be particularly applicable for working with teams—new skills and solutions from each athlete can be shared as strengths to solve problems, and small individual changes can lead to a substantial team change, because "ways of making efficacy beliefs visible might be seen as a part of team-efficacy production" (Ronglan, 2007, p. 80). For instance, when each athlete implements their strategies to build confidence, the confidence boost is "contagious," as the whole team may train or compete better and ultimately have more wins. Such successes can serve as the steps to further improvements in confidence (Bandura, 1986).

As Høigaard and Johansen (2004) illustrated in their work with individual athletes, the structure of SFBT typically involves (a) describing the problem with a focus on solutions, (b) developing well-formulated goals, (c) exploring exceptions to the problem, and (d) providing end-of-session feedback and linking it to out-of-session tasks. Given previously mentioned constraints and the logistics of college sports, we incorporated this SFBT structure into our psychological skills training program based on Weinberg and Williams's (2010) guidelines for integrating and

implementing psychological skills across four phases: (1) assessing psychological strengths and weaknesses, (2) formulating program goals and targeted solutions, (3) delivering the intervention and coconstructing solutions, and (4) evaluating program effectiveness with reflections.

Psychological Skills Training Program Implementation

SPP and Client Background

The first author was the lead SPP with the team and the organizer of the intervention program. At the time of the intervention and prior to becoming a Certified Mental Performance Consultant, he was a doctoral student trained in both psychology and kinesiology. He was a collegiate athlete in a country outside the United States, without any competitive experience in volleyball. He had worked with this volleyball team for the two previous years and had established a strong working relationship with the individual athletes, team leaders, and broader coaching staff. He consulted with the team under the supervision of the second author, a licensed psychologist and Certified Mental Performance Consultant, who also was a college athlete playing volleyball in the United States. Throughout the program development and implementation, the authors met for weekly supervision.

Our client was an NCAA Division I volleyball team, which included the team as a whole, individual athletes, coaching staff, and support staff (e.g., athletic trainer). We operated through an embedded model where we were available for 10–15 hr/week both on and off the court (Zakrajsek et al., 2013), including practice observation and individual consultations with athletes. However, most of our work was done through team training sessions, most of which were focused on psychological skills. Prior to starting our work in the summer, the athletes signed a consent form outlining the parameters for receiving the sport psychology and mental health services offered through their athletic department. Through the consent, they were informed regarding their voluntary participation in the services offered, how information obtained through the services would be treated (e.g., confidentiality, release of information), exceptions to confidentiality (e.g., harm to self), and how to contact us. The consent was approved by the university's office of general counsel in accordance with state and federal laws governing the practice of psychology.

The head coach was the gatekeeper, providing limited access for us to work with the team as a whole directly. For the 2 years before this intervention, the head coach's willingness to schedule times with the team was minimal. In the year of this intervention, due to many new team members (6 out of 15) reporting no former or limited exposure to psychological skills training, a need existed within the team for such training with a structured program. Considering the timing for effective psychological skills training (Weinberg & Williams, 2010), and through discussions with the head coach regarding team availability (or lack thereof), we identified the preseason as the ideal time to deliver the training program. Guided by previous SFBT group interventions (see Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000) and Weinberg and Williams's (2010) psychological skills training guidelines, we developed the following intervention framework:

a) One team session was implemented over each of the 15 training days across the 3-week preseason, a period that allows more hours for training per NCAA rules.
b) Each session was 15 min in length, delivered before the morning practice. This schedule provided athletes with time to think about the just-introduced psychological skills concerning what they wanted to accomplish, and then to

transfer their self-determined solutions into their physical, technical, and tactical training throughout the subsequent morning and afternoon practices. The duration of 15-min sessions has shown effectiveness for introducing psychological skills (Brewer et al., 2016).

c) In addition to team sessions, a separate 15-min meeting was held with each athlete during the preseason. These meetings occurred before afternoon practices to provide the opportunity to collaborate (i.e., coconstruct solutions) with each athlete about their goals for improving the skills that would be most helpful in reaching their goals.

Phase 1: Assessing Psychological Strengths and Weaknesses

To develop a relevant and effective psychological skills training program, SPPs should first assess athletes' (in)efficacy with psychological skills (Weinberg & Williams, 2010). Such assessments can occur through various modalities, including self-report inventories completed by athletes, SPPs' observations of practices/training, conversations with the coaching staff, and structured individual meetings with athletes. Formal assessments provide an understanding of athletes' current levels of psychological skills. The assessment data can then be used by SPPs to develop programming that is relevant, meaningful, and collaborative and to help athletes set goals and find solutions for how they want to change (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004).

In our work, the first author had been attending practices and competitions during the past 2 years, producing weekly written observations of athletes' psychological states and their subsequent performances. For instance, he had noted that the team responded ineffectively in high-pressure situations, such as performing poorly and making costly mistakes during the last few points of a set. However, the first author also noted that the team performed particularly well in the third set of a match, especially when they were down 0–2 with "nothing to lose" (the team's winning percentage was highest in Set 3 when down 0–2). Furthermore, numerous athletes on the team mentioned to the first author that they had better concentration and a mindset of "just play the game," which helped them move past being focused on winning or losing, but being present in each moment instead. From these observations and discussions, we learned that the athletes' (in)ability to concentrate and manage pressure were salient issues in their performances.

Before beginning the training program, we administered the Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28 (ACSI-28; Smith et al., 1995), a widely used measure with valid and reliable scores among collegiate athletes (Christensen & Smith, 2016), to provide the opportunity for the athletes to evaluate their psychological skills (Weinberg & Williams, 2010). On a scale of 0 (almost never) to 3 (almost always), the ACSI-28 assesses seven psychological skills:

a) Coping With Adversity—ability to remain calm and controlled when things are going badly (e.g., "I maintain emotional control regardless of how things are going for me."),
b) Coachability—ability to accept and learn from instruction, including constructive criticism (e.g., "If a coach criticizes or yells at me, I correct the mistake without getting upset about it."),
c) Concentration—ability to focus on the task at hand in both practice and game situations, even when adverse or unexpected situations occur (e.g., "When I'm playing sports, I can focus my attention and block out distractions."),

d) Confidence and Achievement Motivation—ability to consistently give 100% during practices and games with confidence and work hard to improve skills (e.g., "I feel confident that I will play well."),
e) Goal Setting and Mental Preparation—ability to set and work toward specific performance goals and mentally prepare for games (e.g., "I have my own game plan worked out in my head long before the game begins."),
f) Peaking Under Pressure—ability to perform well in pressure situations (e.g., "To me, pressure situations are challenges that I welcome."), and
g) Freedom From Worry—ability to not worry about poor performance or mistakes (e.g., reverse-scored item "I think about and imagine what will happen if I fail or screw up.").

The individual athletes' and the team's responses were consistent with our observations and reflected our ongoing conversations with the athletes. Through the ACSI-28, the athletes indicated to us that they lacked sufficient skills and strategies to maintain adequate levels of Coping With Adversity, Concentration, Peaking Under Pressure, and Freedom From Worry. Their corresponding mean scores (around the midpoint of the scale; see Figure 1) were lower than those reported by other NCAA athletes in past studies (e.g., Von Guenthner & Hammermeister, 2007). To address these areas in which improvements were most needed, we developed the training program that incorporates athlete inputs and strengths (Walter & Peller, 1992).

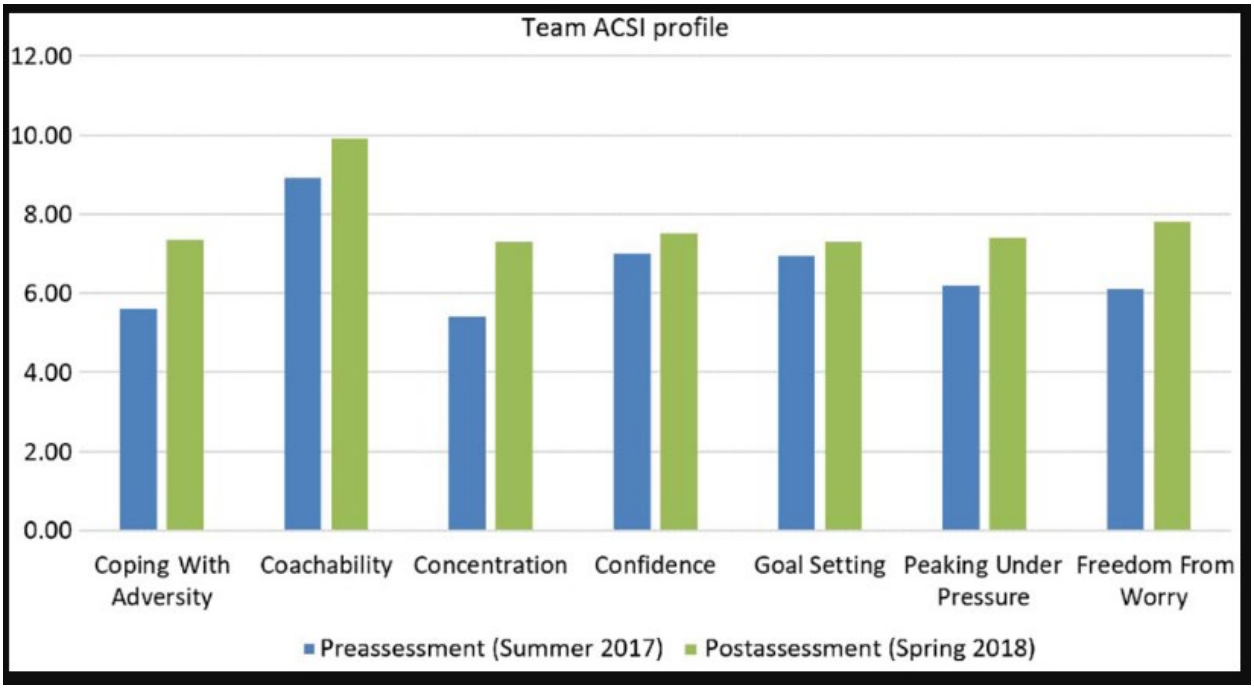

Figure 1. Pre- and postintervention ACSI-28 subscale scores (N = 10). ACSI-28 = Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28.

Phase 2: Formulating Program Goals and Targeted Outcomes

Setting specific, concrete, and realistic goals is an important SFBT component. We formulated the program goals to improve targeted outcomes by considering the coach's perspective and,

particularly, by focusing on the athletes' resources and strengths (de Shazer et al., 1986; Kim, 2008). More specifically, we kept in mind the components recommended in SFBT, including goals that (a) were meaningful to the athletes, (b) were framed positively and behaviorally, (c) emphasized athlete choices and control in implementation, and (d) could be practiced regularly throughout the preseason to deepen (and quicken) learning through small steps (Lee et al., 2007).

According to Smith et al. (1995), the team's lower scores on Coping With Adversity and Peaking Under Pressure were attributed to problems in maintaining self-control and self-efficacy (e.g., ability to play well and win against high-level opponents), respectively. Coupled with the team's lower scores on Concentration and Freedom From Worry (i.e., distraction control) and the head coach's emphasis on playing consistently across sets and matches, we identified four psychological states—concentration, control, confidence, and consistency (4Cs)—that likely contributed to their self-evaluations on the ACSI-28. When developing the program, we framed the goals through the aforementioned SFBT lens and selected psychological skills and strategies that, once learned, were within the athletes' control such that they could create these states for themselves.

Concentration. Sustained, proper concentration—attending to relevant cues (e.g., the present task at hand) while blocking irrelevant stimuli (e.g., internal thoughts)—is essential for successful sport performance (Petrie et al., 2011), particularly at a high level. Exercises that improve mindfulness—a psychological state of awareness with a nonjudgmental attitude—can subsequently improve athletes' concentration by accepting the presence of internal (e.g., negative thoughts) and external (e.g., spectators) stimuli, rather than overreacting, and by redirecting their attentional focus toward relevant cues that help them perform (Gardner & Moore, 2004). Mindfulness enhances attentional awareness, nonjudging task-relevant focus, and greater behavioral flexibility to improve concentration (Gross et al., 2018).

Control. Control is the ability to handle many tasks at once by being in control rather than being controlled (Crust & Clough, 2011). When differentiating between what they can and cannot control in their sport, athletes are more likely to monitor and regulate their thoughts and emotions for optimal performance, particularly under stress and adversity (Petrie et al., 2011). Self-talk has instructional and motivational functions that can enhance athletes' cognitive and emotional control and foster goal achievement (Hardy et al., 2001). Through this perceived control, athletes could respond to situations rationally and mindfully rather than react irrationally and mindlessly.

Confidence. Confidence is the athletes' belief in themselves even when experiencing setbacks or challenges (Crust & Clough, 2011). Intuitively and empirically, confidence influences actual sport performance (Machida et al., 2017). Through mastery experiences, either in vivo or vicariously, athletes can improve their self-efficacy and confidence (Petrie et al., 2011). Thus, we introduced motivational imagery—using all senses to create or recreate an optimal experience in their mind—as an important tool through which the athletes might improve their confidence (Cumming & Williams, 2012). Throughout the training program, we included intentional, incremental practice and provided immediate feedback to amplify the successful application of psychological strategies such as using positive self-talk during a drill. This practice increased the athletes' self-regulation and perceived abilities to create positive changes for themselves.

Consistency. Consistency—the ability to perform at the same level across practices and competitions—results from managing cognitive and psychological processes for physical skill execution (Singer, 2002). To perform optimally and consistently under pressure, athletes must develop effective ways to prepare themselves physically and psychologically. Routines before and during performance, for instance, represent one way for athletes to enhance their readiness, and thus performance consistency, in high-level competitions (see Cotterill, 2010). Such routines, which represent cognitive-behavioral strategies under complete control of the athlete, can reduce cortical associated processes, facilitate automatic activation of internal planning processes and skill execution, and enhance performance consistency in turn (Singer, 2002).

Phase 3: Delivering the Intervention and Coconstructing Solutions

After formulating the program goals (i.e., the 4Cs) in line with SFBT, we developed and sequenced the brief intervention sessions into the steps of education, acquisition, and practice (Weinberg & Gould, 2018). Within the 3-week preseason timeframe provided by the head coach, we delivered each step over 15-min sessions from Mondays through Thursdays, followed by corresponding 15-min review sessions on Fridays (see Table 1). In Step 1 (education), we introduced the athletes to each C (e.g., confidence), including a definition, theoretical rationale, and examples to help them understand the importance of the psychological construct for optimal performance. In Step 2 (acquisition), we taught them specific psychological methods and tools, each specific to the construct. In Step 3 (practice), we provided the athletes with opportunities to plan the pressure situations (e.g., tight match, unforced errors) during practices and competitions in which they applied various taught methods and tools, such as forming and executing refocusing plans, to improve their performances. Therefore, an exploration of exceptions to the problem and consultant–client collaboration were included (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004; Walter & Peller, 1992).

Table 1. A 3-Week Brief Intervention Program With Three Steps in Each of the 4Cs (Concentration, Control, Confidence, and Consistency)

Preseason training	4Cs steps
Week 1	Concentration Step 1: Keep your process goal in mind.
	Control Step 1: Control the controllables.
	Confidence Step 1: Choose confidence.
	Consistency Step 1: Always get in your zone.
	Step 1 Review
Week 2	Concentration Step 2: Focus on the present moment.
	Control Step 2: Respond to negative thoughts.
	Confidence Step 2: Repeat your peak performance.
	Consistency Step 2: Make each point count.
	Step 2 Review
Week 3	Concentration Step 3: Execute your (re)focusing plan.
	Control Step 3: Use effective self-talk.
	Confidence Step 3: Practice your routines.
	Consistency Step 3: Move toward your legacy.
	Step 3 Review

Across the three steps, the athletes actively determined the content of the psychological methods and tools and when they should apply them. They identified the specific situations in which they experienced suboptimal performances (and what a more ideal performance would look like), monitored themselves to ascertain when to apply the selected tools to make desirable changes, and then practiced them consistently and made adjustments when necessary. This active and collaborative involvement by the athletes reflected the collaboration and coconstructing component of SFBT, as well as personalization and self-regulation (Walter & Peller, 1992; Weinberg & Gould, 2018).

Concentration. Based in part on Gardner and Moore's (2004) Mindfulness–Acceptance–Commitment approach to athletic performance enhancement, we introduced present-moment focus with acceptance of one's own thoughts and emotions and discussed how process goals also could assist in directing their attention. In Session 2, we introduced mindful breathing as a tool for enhancing present-moment focus (goal/task at hand), emphasizing a nonjudgmental, nonevaluative, and nonattaching relationship to thoughts and emotions. In Session 3, relying on the tools of process goals and mindfulness, we discussed how to implement a (re)focusing plan and provided a worksheet (see Appendix) through which the athletes could create their unique solution that they could subsequently apply and practice across the season (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004; Walter & Peller, 1992). Using the worksheet, each athlete identified three to five specific competition situations in which she tended to lose focus, followed by selecting the respective psychological tools, such as instructional self-talk, that she would use to redirect her focus back to the task at hand (i.e., exceptions to the problem).

Control. As noted previously for enhancing the state of "being in control," we introduced the concept of "controllables" (i.e., things they can control, such as responding to mistakes) and "uncontrollables" (i.e., things they cannot control, such as making mistakes) and asked the team to identify specific situations that were controllable or uncontrollable concerning their volleyball performance. In Session 2, we provided the athletes with the opportunity to identify their negative self-talk and discuss with their teammates how such thoughts undermined their cognitive and emotional control. Then, we discussed how to respond to negative thoughts with self-talk building on mindfulness and acceptance—orienting toward the present rather than past/future and "controlling the controllables" while "letting go of the uncontrollable." In Session 3, we instructed the athletes to create and practice their self-talk statements during volleyball performance in general and in the face of adversity. Each athlete read aloud their self-talk statements to their teammates and us to receive feedback for refinement (i.e., coconstructing solutions).

Confidence. We introduced confidence as a psychological state, as well as a choice, that could be improved over time through the use of psychological methods and tools. The emphasis of the intervention, consistent with our assessment, was to promote sustained confidence during competitions amid adversity. Therefore, we incorporated motivational general-mastery imagery—the imagery type that signifies mastery and coping of challenging situations (Slimani et al., 2016). Specifically, we designed activities for the athletes to describe and image their best past performances (i.e., exceptions to the problem) in Session 2 and to include that best-performance imagery in their precompetition routines to enhance their confidence in successfully handling adverse situations in the upcoming match (i.e., coconstructing solutions) in Session 3.

Consistency. We introduced performance routines and focused on helping the athletes develop personalized pre and during performance routines across sessions. We asked the athletes, individually and as a team, to incorporate their preferred psychological methods and tools that they previously learned (Singer, 2002). As temporal characteristics of a routine are key to its positive

effects (Cotterill, 2010), we broke down the time frame of a precompetition routine (e.g., 2 hr, 1 hr, 30 min, 15 min before a match) and encouraged the athletes to stick to the same routine in order to develop a regular behavioral pattern for consistent performance (Lee et al., 2007). In Session 2, we asked the athletes to create their during-competition routines, between points and sets in a volleyball match, and encouraged them to use tools (e.g., a cue word, a mindful breath) that they found most applicable. In Session 3, we facilitated a team activity in which each athlete expressed what they would do consistently every day to help the team perform at their best and leave a legacy, that is, winning the conference championship (i.e., coconstructing solutions as a team).

Follow-up sessions. Due to our limited time in each session, we reviewed the corresponding steps of the 4Cs at the end of each week and provided each athlete with an information packet. The packet contained key points regarding the psychological tools taught that week and highlighted moments at recent practices in which they could have applied them (i.e., identifying small changes athletes could make by applying their stated methods and tools). In addition, the first author conducted a 15-min follow-up individual meeting with each athlete during the first 2 weeks of the program to discuss her ACSI-28 profile and individualize the choice and use of the psychological methods and tools (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004; Weinberg & Gould, 2018).

Since formal team sessions were completed during the preseason, we had worked with the athletes informally at practices and competitions during the season to help them continue to find solutions to additional problems by generalizing the psychological methods and tools they had learned. Keeping in mind that any small change can lead to larger changes (de Shazer et al., 1986; Walter & Peller, 1992), we identified "teachable moments" at practices and competitions, where we could intervene quickly to assist the team and individual athletes with internalizing and actualizing their own goals and solutions (Giges & Petitpas, 2000; McGregor & Winter, 2017). For instance, at one early season practice, the coaching staff organized a "pancake drill" (i.e., one-handed dive dig) that was designed to have a high probability of failure, even with athletes' maximum effort. Faced with this adversity, the athletes lost their energy and concentration gradually throughout the drill. After the practice, the first author gathered the team and asked the athletes to reflect on what happened during the drill, particularly in relation to their thoughts and emotions and how these contributed to their motivation and skill execution.

The athletes acknowledged how, as the drill progressed, their self-talk became more negative (e.g., "I can't get the ball"); their energy, focus, motivation, and skill execution decreased substantially; and their emotions became more negative subsequently. The athletes reflected on the fact that, at the moment, their use of psychological methods and tools had been minimal. They further recognized that their responses (e.g., attitude, emotions) during the drill should have been under their control, yet their focus went to what was not (i.e., outcomes of the drill). The first author then guided the athletes to think about and discuss how they would solve a similar type of situation in the future (McGregor & Winter, 2017). The captain and several seniors took the lead in the discussion by stating that if they implemented their individualized psychological tools and encouraged teammates to do the same, their performances in similar future situations and during adversity could be improved. Before breaking for the day, the first author asked each athlete to share her solution with the team. During some other teachable moments, the captain was able to prompt her teammates to use their preferred coping strategies without our active involvement.

Phase 4: Evaluating Program Effectiveness With Reflections

Evaluation is an essential piece of any psychological training program for determining its effectiveness and utility (Weinberg & Williams, 2010). Within SBFT, follow-up assessments generally occur 6–12 months after the intervention (de Shazer et al., 1986; Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000). Following this approach, the athletes completed the ACSI-28 again as a 6-month postintervention assessment at the beginning of the following spring off-season. We then compared these follow-up data with those obtained in the summer prior to the intervention being delivered. As a team, there were increases across all seven psychological skills (see Figure 1). Consistent with the focus of the 4Cs program, the results of a paired-samples t test showed significant increases (Mdiff = 1.20–1.90) in three targeted dimensions: Coping With Adversity, $t(9) = 3.35$, $p = .009$, $d = 1.06$; Concentration, $t(9) = 5.02$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.59$; and Peaking Under Pressure $t(9) = 3.09$, $p = .01$, $d = 1.23$. In addition, the overall ASCI-28 score also increased (Mdiff = 8.40) significantly, $t(9) = 3.14$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.99$. Freedom From Worry, another targeted dimension, also increased (Mdiff = 1.70), though the result was not significant, $t(9) = 1.70$, $p = .12$, $d = 0.54$, potentially due to a large variability of changes (SDdiff = 3.16) within the team. It is important to note that other factors beyond the psychological skills training program could have contributed to the improvements since there was not a control group.

Beyond quantitative assessment, a 15-min follow-up meeting was conducted with each athlete to gain her perspective on the program and provide her feedback (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004; Weinberg & Williams, 2010). Overall, the athletes reported to us that the program was very effective in improving their psychological skills and overall performance. They appreciated being introduced to a wide variety of methods and tools within the context of the four psychological states and being encouraged to take an individualized approach in using them. Across the team, there were commonalities as well as some differences in the methods and tools that each athlete found helpful. Specifically, most of them shared that using their breath to be mindful between points, imaging successful performances within their precompetition routines, and using visual reminders (e.g., looking at the written cue words on their wrist) were most helpful for improving their present-moment focus and confidence. Several athletes further stated that receiving reminders from us about applying psychological tools before and during competitions was helpful, especially when the first author brought a marker for the athletes to write down their cue words on their wrist. Throughout their feedback, it was clear that each athlete had, through a collaborative stance with us, coconstructed her solutions. At the end of the meeting, feedback was given to the athlete to affirm her individualized solutions and the efficacy of her implementation, and the athlete was prompted to discuss how they carried forward what they had learned to further psychological skills development and associated success.

In our own evaluation of and reflection on the program, we noted several successes. First, the athletes' increased abilities to cope with adversity, concentrate throughout a match, and peak under pressure were reflected in their performance throughout the season, where they came back from behind in matches to defeat several high-level opponents and won their first-ever conference championship. Second, we initially thought the 15-min session timeframe would be a limitation; but in reality, it forced us to distill the information in each session to its essence, which was effective in keeping the athletes engaged. Third, we delivered the entire program within a 3-week period during which the athletes also were training two to three times per day. Thus, the athletes had ample opportunities to practice the psychological tools they just learned, integrating them into the physical, technical, and tactical skills of volleyball. Fourth, meeting with each athlete

individually during the preseason to discuss their ACSI-28 profile played an essential role in the athletes individualizing and coconstructing their solutions based on their specific needs and in developing plans that were specific and behavioral and that included small steps that would quickly move them forward to their desired goal (Walter & Peller, 1992; Weinberg & Gould, 2018).

More importantly, communicating with and having buy-in from the team captain was key to program success. Although each athlete developed her solutions based on preference and applicability of the methods and tools being introduced, the captain enhanced the quantity and quality of psychological skills training, as they held teammates accountable to their plans, modeled the use of positive self-talk and mindful breathing, and encouraged the team to play one point at a time during practices and competitions. Without our prompting or presence, they also led the team in creating a team precompetition routine in addition to each athlete's routine. The first author's 3-year working relationship with the team was also crucial to the successful delivery of the program because he had a strong working alliance and trust, which took time to build, with each athlete and the team as a whole (Zakrajsek et al., 2013).

Despite these successes, we faced several challenges in program delivery. First, even though the program's brief format was engaging, we were limited in the time we had to actively help the athletes apply each psychological method and tool. For example, the athletes who were not experienced in psychological skills training reported the desire to spend more time in skill acquisition and practice, suggesting that they were struggling with learning how to use some tools and coconstruct solutions effectively. When developing such brief interventions, SPPs will thus want to pay particular attention to helping less experienced athletes learn how to implement the tools (before, during, and after practice), perhaps providing internet-based resources, including videos and mobile apps (e.g., Headspace), to facilitate the implementation. We overcame part of this challenge by having one core skill—mindfulness—across the 4Cs for the athletes to be aware of, using psychological tools to focus on the present moment and their tasks at hand and by providing a review session with handouts at the end of each week. Second, although the head coach allowed this time for the intervention, it was limited to the preseason. Ideally, SPPs would offer more follow-up or "booster" team sessions across the subsequent season to help athletes generalize and deepen their learning and implementation (Fleig et al., 2013). Even if such additional team sessions are allowed, SPPs still might consider individual meetings with athletes as a way to continue their psychological skills development and implementation when engaged in active competition.

Finally, because the head coach's emphasis was on the physical, tactical, and technical, as opposed to psychological, aspects of training, we were unable to work with him to integrate the tools the athletes were learning directly into their practices. If the coach allowed such integration, we would conduct weekly follow-up or "booster" team sessions during the season. These sessions would allow athletes to reflect on specific challenging situations in which they had implemented their coconstructed psychological tools (e.g., self-talk), as well as what skills and methods they could improve on (e.g., refining preperformance routines) in the following week. Such integration would help athletes actively practice their solutions in training with the intent of generalizing their use to competitions. SPPs may facilitate this process by collecting midintervention assessment data, as well as athlete feedback, and providing them to the coach to demonstrate program effectiveness and the need for more access and integration.

Practical Recommendations

As college coaches may provide SPPs with limited time and access to meet with their teams (Zakrajsek et al., 2013), brief interventions may become a necessary approach for providing athletes with salient psychological tools. For SPPs interested in developing and implementing such team-based programs, we offer the following recommendations. First, SPPs should assess their team, both formally through psychological inventory and informally through observation and discussions with captains or coaches, to determine the psychological skills that the athletes (or team as a whole) need to improve. Basing programming on team-specific assessment data will allow the psychological methods and tools (i.e., solutions) to be targeted and salient (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000). At the same time, SPPs need to remember that athletes within a team have unique needs and backgrounds. Thus, it is crucial to provide opportunities, within the context of team sessions, for each athlete to construct their preferred solutions and understand how such solutions may contribute to the team's overall goal and improvement. Second, SPPs need to be deliberate and thoughtful in how they introduce and sequence program material. In particular, having sufficient time to acquire and practice the tools being taught is essential. Therefore, we incorporated SFBT into Weinberg and Gould's (2018) psychological skill training phases—education, acquisition, and practice—to enhance athlete learning and retention through individualization and progression. To be time efficient, SPPs should help coaches develop practices in which the use of psychological tools is intentionally integrated into physical training so that athletes can practice and master the tools. If SPPs continue to attend practices, they can work informally and individually with athletes to help them apply what they are learning, such as by asking them how they are using their tools or offering brief reminders and suggestions for how they can.

Finally, SPPs should place a priority on educating the coaching staff regarding what is being taught to the athletes so they, on their own, can reinforce the tools. Opportunities to do so include team discussions, feedback at practices, and individual athlete meetings. If coaches are less committed, perhaps even neutral, SPPs can look for teachable moments to help coaches understand how their athletes are using the ideas and tools and how doing so may contribute to better practices or performances. Through repeated exposure, coaches themselves may better see the value of psychological skills training and move closer to having full commitment and involvement from the whole team. As de Shazer et al. (1986) stated in the SFBT application for family therapy, "change in one part of a system leads to changes in the system-as-a-whole" (p. 3); the coach plays an important part of the system within which SPPs work.

Conclusion

In this article, we described the development and implementation of a brief intervention framework, grounded in SFBT, under time-limited circumstances through the 4Cs preseason training program with an NCAA Division I women's volleyball team. We found the intervention effective in terms of increases in the athletes' self-reported psychological skills and their actual performances. We further provided athlete and practitioner reflections that highlight the unique program features, strengths, and limitations to inform SPPs in their future use of SFBT with sport teams to maximize athletes' psychological skills, especially when time and access for the intervention are limited.

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