

## **Mental Skill Training in High School Golfer: A Qualitative Case Study**

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The purpose of this study was to identify the effect of systematic mental skills training for a high school golfer. Based on person-centered approach, this programme was designed for a single subject who competed in the high school junior varsity level in the United States. Various mental skill training techniques such as concentration, relaxation, imagery, self-concentration, and goal-setting technique was employed for his performance enhancement. The results showed that the person-oriented approach can be an effective method for sport psychology consulting to help athletes develop their performance. This case study provides some possible guidelines for sport psychologists who may wish to provide consultancy services within high school golf.

Key word: golf, person-centered approach, sport psychologist, sport consultant

### **Introduction**

The primary responsibility of sport psychologists includes a variety of tasks including conducting research, educating students, and consulting athletes in various sport contexts (Weinberg & Gould, 1995). Sport consulting is an activity that provides counseling services to athletes to give feedback and advice on solving personal or performance problems. Thus, sport psychologists as consultants offer psychology services to teams, individuals, and organizations to enhance their performance, as well as focus on resolving a client's psychological and emotional problems relative to athletic performance detriment (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Henschen, 1988).

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It has been found that athletes experience enormous stress and often complain about several issues including personal affairs, physical abilities, and concerns about injury when participating in competitive sports (e.g., Goldberg, 1991; Williams, 1993; Hellstedt, 1988). For example, youth athletes are often confused and stressed from the dual role of students and athletes in the school systems (Goldberg, 1991), take hard knocks in their relationship with coaches and peers (Williams, 1993), and experience conflict because of their parents' high expectations (Hellstedt, 1988). These are all critical factors that can decrease an athlete's performance in real situations. In this regard, sport consultants need to identify their clients' personal problems and help them face them in the process of their personal development and growth. Danish, Petipas, and Hale (1993) argue that counseling and consulting increases the likelihood of solving such problems in sport settings. Thus, the purpose of this study was to conduct a counseling service to one athlete as a case study in order to understand how the process helps athletes enhance their performance. In order to achieve this objective, the researchers conducted the one-on-one consulting sessions with a variety of mental skill training techniques with a high school golfer. Two related, theoretical backgrounds, the postmodern approach and the person-centered approach, will be used to guide this consulting effectively.

## **Literature review**

### **Theoretical-Paradigmatic Orientation**

Theoretical background in sport counseling can provide practitioners with a consistent framework for guiding effective consulting sessions. The background allows sports consultants to shape practices to fit the client's needs and deal with diversity issues to improve the effectiveness of consulting sessions. It also allows to adjust to each practical counseling situation, based on the type of consulting sessions (e.g., individual or group), the client's characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, etc.), and the practitioner's belief in the appropriate method to use (e.g., client-oriented or practitioner-oriented; Lobinger, Klampfl, Altenmuller, 2014).

### *Postmodern Approach*

The Postmodern approach is grounded on the assumption that clients have both internal and external resources to draw upon when constructing solutions to their problems (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). This approach allows practitioners to view each client differently and acknowledge that clients have competencies rather than just viewing clients as being passive followers of practitioners'

instructions. Although clients are viewed as experts on their own performance, they still can have difficulty in their own repetitive patterns that are not working well for them.

Thus, practitioners need to pay attention to what their clients are thinking, feeling, and doing to catch those factors that are inhibiting their best performance (Ronkainen & Kesti, 2017).

Communication and dialogue should be encouraged to elicit unique experiences of the clients. The quality of the practitioner-client relationship is critical for the effectiveness of this approach (Fisher, Gentner, & Egli, 2014).

### *Person-Centered Approach*

The person-centered approach is rooted in humanistic philosophy and places emphasis on the basic attitudes of the consultant. It maintains that the quality of the client-consultant relationship is the prime determinant of the outcomes of the consulting process. It is essential for the consultant to establish an understandable relationship with clients through conversation and the consultant's behavior (Aoyagi, Poczwadowski, Statler, Shapiro, & Cohen, 2017). This person-to-person relationship develops a sense of safety and acceptance, so clients can drop their defenses and come to accept and integrate the aspects the consultant discusses. Thus, it is the consultant's attitudes that are most critical to develop an effective consulting session, not the consultant's knowledge, theory, or techniques (Ivarsson, Stenling, Fallby, Johnson, Borg, & Johansson, 2015).

This approach argues that practitioners should possess three qualities, congruence, empathy, and an unconditional positive regard for promoting the client's growth, to achieve successful consulting. Congruence refers to practitioner honesty and openness in his or her relationship with clients (Gelso & Fretz, 1992). When practitioners behave like who they really are without affectation, clients are able to trust them more easily. Empathy means understanding a client's personal worldview as the practitioner's own perspective and the ability to relate to the client's emotions (Hansen, Stevic, & Warner, 1972). Effective empathy plays a critical role in enhancing a client's self-esteem and remedying a sense of alienation. Finally, unconditional positive regard means accepting clients unquestionably even when they show or share unacceptable behaviors during their interaction with practitioners. This technique helps the client destroy repeated self-destruction thought cycles and realize they do not need to protect themselves when facing other people (Aoyagi et al., 2017).

These three conditions lead to more effective consulting sessions by promoting the positive relationship between practitioners and clients and creating a mutual respect relationship (Aoyagi et al., 2017). Clients will learn to understand themselves, select meaningful choices independently, and develop a positive relationship with others in more mature ways. In accordance with sport consulting or counseling sessions, practitioners should adopt the person-oriented approach to build trust and

a positive relationship between the practitioners and the athletes, help them become purpose-oriented persons, and lead them to enhance their athletic performance by their own intentions (Ivarsson et al., 2015).

Therefore, in this paper, the researchers adopted the person-oriented approach, which emphasizes the relationship between the practitioner as a sport psychologist and the client as an athlete in the sport setting. This consulting session will consist of one-on-one individual sessions and each session were designed to deal with the client's personal problems and provide a series of mental skill training to enhance his sports performance.

## **Case Study**

### **Description of Participant**

Steve Han is originally from South Korea and came to the Midwestern area in the United States with his family three years ago. Steve is a 9th grade student and has played golf and tennis for three years. At the initial meeting, he showed his excitement about playing golf since he just passed the tryout for the junior varsity golf team. Even though he was proud of himself for passing the cut-off process, he constantly showed low self-confidence throughout the counseling sessions. He was satisfied with US life as the extreme pressure to study was much less than South Korea. He participated in golf mostly because of his mother's suggestion, but he now loves to play golf and invests much time in practice. He shows a certain passion about golf and he has set up a goal to practice hard for his future life.

### **Procedure**

From September to November, 2017, five consulting sessions were held once a week for between 40 minutes and 60 minutes. In the early consulting sessions, the researcher gave a priority to building rapport between a researcher and the athlete. The meetings consisted of natural talking and transitioned to mental skills training for performance enhancement. The researcher's house was used, and a room was made available for the consulting sessions with the researcher facing the athlete. The researcher tried to demonstrate active listening technique and empathy when communicating with the athlete. The meetings were scheduled for only four sessions prior to the first meeting, but they were extended to five sessions since the athlete showed interest and improvement in using mental skill.

### **Instrument**

The person-oriented approach, which focuses on congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Aoyagi et al., 2017), was used as a framework to guide all the consulting sessions. From the early stage to the final stage of meetings, the researcher treated the athlete with honesty and congruent behavior. Additionally, various instruments were used to assess the athlete's specific psychological skills.

### **Progression of Skills Taught**

#### *Analysis of Golf*

Golf is a closed-sport. That is, players hit a stopped golf ball with a stopped motion. Thus, there is a plenty of time for players to prepare performance before each swing. This characteristic provides a clue that golf can be affected by many psychological skill factors since players can control their own performance prior to that performance. Also, golfers' performances are not harmed by opponents' actions, which mean golfers can be successful ideally if they can control their body and performance. Finally, players are able to perform their physical skills whenever they are ready, so they can conduct themselves using mental skills during competition.

#### *Analysis of the Athlete*

Psychological evaluation of the client before the consulting session is critical since such evaluation allows a researcher to select the right training program and determine the training stages for the client (Ivarsson et al., 2015). Also, this process is usually undertaken to assess the clients' mental skills improvement by comparing his capabilities between pre- and post- training sessions.

#### *Preparation Stage*

After analyzing the client's psychological state with an evaluation, the researcher can determine the needed progression of mental skills for the athlete and set up training plan. There will be a brief lecture that includes an introduction about psychological skills training, word explanations, and attitudes toward the training. This process is critical since the impact of training sessions will be maximized if the client knows and understands the importance of mental training. However, this lecture should be designed not to be boring or cause the client to lose interest in mental skills training.

### **Mental Skill Training Taught (Training Stage)**

#### *Concentration.*

Golfers have to see, feel, and think about many things during practices and competitions because they want to hole out the ball into a 108mm cup in a wide range of golf clubs layouts. In order to accomplish this task successfully, golfers have a specific goal, namely to hole out during competition. Yet there may be another factor that allows them to aim at the goal more precisely. Golfers may only think about golf, which leads them to finish a competition with low scores. They may not try to think about other things when playing rounds or a tournament. Thus, focusing only on golf may be one critical factor that can lead golfers to devote themselves to follow up on their goals.

A player who shows consistent performance during competitions is considered to be a great player. That is, a great player is always so focused that he will perform the physical skill consistently. Thus, focusing on a consistent golf swing will enhance a golfer's performance. Enhancement in this skill will allow golfers to prevent distractions, enhance their confidence, and maximize their performance consistently.

#### *Relaxation*

Relaxation is a personal state characterized by reduced psychological and physical tension. A relaxed state helps the athlete demonstrate better performance during competitions. However, it is impossible to be relaxed by only using thoughts; the athlete needs to develop relaxation skills systematically to use that skill effectively.

#### *Imagery*

Imagery is the mental skill that creates y future performance or recreates past performance in the brain. It is important to imagine an upcoming game situation vividly and control the imagination by your will. It will be very helpful to control the imagination which predicts a performance mistake and change the imagination to preview a right performance for successful skills development.

#### *Self-Confidence*

Self-confidence is the personal belief that you can accomplish your goal or tasks. An athlete with a high sense of self-confidence never gives up even when facing obstacles in the middle of a process; that athlete always maintains positive thoughts and clear concentration.

### *Goal Setting*

The mental skill that allows an athlete to plan and decide his or her favorable goal is called goal setting. Once the goal is set up, individuals can focus on the tasks required and create a continuous effort to achieve the goals for that task.

## **Sport Psychological Intervention**

### **The first meeting (Introduction and Concentration)**

Before the initial meeting, the researcher talked to the athlete's mother to introduce mental skills training and get permission to conduct that training. During the first meeting, the researcher asked why he was participating in golf, the moment when he felt the most satisfied and what was the hardest time for him during participation, and the significant others who influence him most in performance.

As the first meeting, the researcher put more efforts into developing rapport with the athlete through talking about Korean golfers, the World Baseball Classic, and video games. The PowerPoint presentation that introduced mental skill training followed. Through that introduction, the athlete obtained knowledge about the concept, its importance, and the different types of mental skills training.

Following the introduction of the training, the athlete completed his personal profile and his psychological skills profile. This psychological skills profile was used to determine what kind of mental skills training would be best for the athlete. The athlete showed stable states in most of the psychological skills profile, but the confidence part of the profile was particularly low.

Before finishing the meeting, the researcher and the athlete talked about focus strategies for the next practices. The athlete was encouraged to use these focus strategies for his gold practices the next week.

### **The second meeting (Relaxation Strategy)**

Before the meeting, the athlete's psychological skills profile instrument showed some problems with self-confidence compared to other mental skills. Therefore, the goal of future training sessions was aimed at building confidence through mental skills training.

In order to gain rapport with the athlete, the researcher and the athlete talked about stress management strategy. The purpose for this training was followed, and the researcher led the athlete to sit in a comfortable position. The athlete practiced relaxation strategies for 30 minutes following the researcher's direction. The athlete said that he felt more relaxed than before. Due to the

characteristics of golf, the athlete said that he felt high tension during competition, but he would try to feel more comfortable by using these relaxation strategies. So, the researcher suggested that he needed to manage stress and try not to have negative thoughts in sport settings, as well as in real life situations.

### **The third meeting (Imagery)**

When the athlete came to this meeting, he was very excited with the fact that he scored a birdie for the first time in practice. However, he attempted to attribute his accomplishment to environmental factors like the wind when explaining the birdie accomplishment. So, the researcher and the athlete talked about his improvement in his physical skills and how that skill improvement had led to his accomplishments. The athlete noticed the contribution of focusing strategies to his performance. The athlete was not sure about the contribution of mental preparation, but he recalled that he had focused more on his shots than ever before.

After talking about his accomplishment, the imagery training followed. The athlete had an unrealistic expectation about imagery training, namely, that various psychological problems can be resolved by conducting imagery training. The researcher reminded the athlete that there is a need to practice systematically to learn imagery skills. At the first stage, examples and the results of athletes' using imagery training were introduced to help the athlete correctly understand the importance of imagery training.

The imagery skill questionnaire was distributed to assess the athlete's previous capabilities in imagery skills. During the meeting, the ability to use all of his senses in imagery, vividness training, and controllability training was emphasized by the researcher.

### **The fourth meeting (Self-Confidence & Goal Setting)**

The researcher presented strategies to enhance the athlete's self-confidence. Throughout the previous meetings, the athlete's weakest characteristic was a low sense of self-confidence because he did not really trust himself consistently in his performance. Based on the previous lessons, the researcher tried to incorporate almost all the previous learned content, such as concentration, imagery, and self-talk strategies, to a self-confidence development strategy. The athlete also completed the Korean version of Trait Sport Confidence Inventory. In addition, a goal setting strategy related self-confidence development was introduced. The athlete tended to focus on outcome goals, such as winning, when talking about games and a birdie on a hole. The researcher emphasized that these outcome goals were important, but those might also build a cognitive burden for him during matches and thus inhibit his performance.



When the researcher asked about the primary goal for this year, he answered that he wanted to be the best player on the varsity team. The goal he set tended to be very abstract and vague. Also, the goal was too big and unrealistic in terms of the time available. Therefore, the researcher advised him to set more specific and realistic goals and focus on performance and process goal when setting goals.

## **Evaluation**

### **About the Athlete**

Looking at the athlete's environmental factors, he is placed in a pretty normal and positive situation to pursue his golf activity. His mother has supported him very well, and he is satisfied with the relationship with his coaches and peers. He loves to play golf and tennis and shows interest in continuing his golf activity into the future. Regarding mental skills training, he did not know anything about it, but attempted to learn various mental skills as much as possible during the meetings. However, as a Korean, he did not tend to express his feeling and opinions about the training and just followed the instruction passively. Nevertheless, this characteristic illustrates that he can show improvement in his knowledge about mental skills as he learns the skills.

A low sense of self-confidence is the biggest factor that inhibits his performance. His tendency to demonstrate low self-confidence behaviors is assumed to be related to traditional Korean norms. In Korea, when individuals demonstrate accomplishments in his field or anywhere, that person learns to attribute the accomplishments to others, such as peers, coaches, parents, and/or environmental factors. This behavior is called humility in Korea. However, it can interfere with one's self-confidence development since a person will not believe that he or she is the one who accomplished the goal.

As a result, the curriculum of training sessions was developed to give positive feedback whenever he made accomplishments in golf. Also, when he came to the meeting with a bad performance experience, we discussed ways to improve his performance, using mental skill training, so he would not focus on the bad experience. Through these processes, the researcher hopes that this athlete can obtain self-confidence, not only when playing golf, but also in his regular life.

The following is a summary of each consulting session.

At the first meeting, the athlete usually answered the questions the researcher asked and did not show much interest in mental skills training. During the second meeting, the athlete also did not talk much. He answered the questions in abstract ways. Even though he did, feel relaxed due to the relaxation exercises, he also looked bored since the exercise took more than 30 minutes.

The athlete came to the third meeting excited because he made a birdie during the last practice for the first time in his life. It was a great opportunity for the practitioners to cement his motivation about mental skills training. The researcher tried to connect the previous training sessions to this accomplishment, and he agreed partially. Due to that very satisfying performance, he began to show more interest than before in mental skills training. At this point, it seemed that the success of his sport psychology consulting might depend partly on the athlete's successful experience. In a similar vein, it might be a good idea to encourage sport psychology researchers to use examples that show specifically the positive relationship between mental skills training and performance enhancement to catch clients' interest. It may not be the training that caused him to demonstrate better performance, but he indicated that he focused more on his swing than before as he learned, and he began to believe in the contributions of mental skills to better performance.

At the fourth meeting, he paid more attention to the lectures. He told me frankly that his weakness was his low sense of self-confidence. This issue was already known through the questionnaires he completed the athlete's psychological skills profile and the golfer's performance profiles. Hence, it was easier for the athlete to focus on the meeting and the lecture.

It seems that the person-oriented or client-oriented approach may be an appropriate method for sport psychology consulting to help athletes develop their performance, and marketing process. In terms of coaching education, to date, the communication between athletes and coaches mostly has depended on over-the-transom direction by coaches to athletes. A different communication method like the person-oriented approach can close the gap between coaches and athletes. It can help athletes to open their hearts and to develop greater motivation for performance enhancement.

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