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The path I have followed to a career in sport psychology has not been straightforward. Prior to my employment in sport, I worked in a variety of organisational contexts. I was a team leader in a welfare service where I managed programs for homeless families and adolescents. I also worked as a program coordinator and senior psychologist in mental health inpatient units for children, adolescents and young adults. I gained invaluable experience from my work in these organisations, which would later assist me in my work with athletes.

After ten years of working in a clinical setting, it was time for a new professional challenge. I returned to full-time study to complete a Master of Psychology (Sport & Exercise) at the University of Queensland. My first job in sport psychology was to establish a counselling service for the athletes who live in residence at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in Canberra. I now work as a senior psychologist at the AIS.

One of the most appealing aspects of working as a sport psychologist is the constant variety in the work. While many aspects of the job are similar to other fields of psychology, the environment in which sport psychologists work provides the variation. A typical day might involve consulting with athletes, meeting with coaches, attending training sessions, with some general administration tasks thrown in for good measure. When I'm not working in the office, I am often travelling with a sport team to national and international competitions to provide psychological services to athletes whilst they compete.

Throughout my career I have been fortunate to have been given opportunities to work on a diverse range of projects, in a clinical as well as a sport setting. I have particularly enjoyed the challenge of establishing new services. This has included setting up three new acute mental health units on the Gold Coast, as well as the counselling service for athletes at the Australian Institute of Sport. I was responsible for the provision of psychological services to the AIS women's cycling team who were involved in the devastating training accident in Germany in 2005. My current focus is on preparing for my role as the head psychologist in the Australian headquarters medical team for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

The knowledge and skills I gained in other roles throughout my career have been invaluable to my work in sport psychology. My professional experience in other fields of psychology, alongside my academic training in sport psychology, has enabled me to be a more effective sport psychology practitioner.

My most influential mentors have come from outside the field of sport psychology – supervisors and peers who have shared their expertise in their fields. These mentors have encouraged me to constantly broaden my knowledge base and apply this knowledge to my practice. Collaborating and sharing information with others provides me with insight into how I can work most effectively as a psychologist in the sport environment.

Sport psychology is a narrow field to enter with limited job opportunities in Australia. If you are considering a career in this area, your first priority should be to learn and develop expertise as a psychologist, and then apply these skills to sport. It is critical that sport psychologists develop key competencies to ensure they are, above all, capable psychologists. Once you have this solid foundation, you can look at developing specialised knowledge for sport.

Current issues in the area of sport psychology include limited employment and academic training opportunities. We also need to ensure the profession doesn't lose its professional credibility by focusing only on 'performance', as opposed to providing a holistic psychological service. These are the major challenges which we need to overcome if we are to continue to develop and consolidate our profession.

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