ALTHOUGH SPORT psychology is still a relatively new concept in athletic therapy, there is a wealth of evidence to suggest that sport-psychology interventions can positively influence sports-injury rehabilitation.\(^1\) Sport-psychology interventions during rehabilitation have been associated with positive outcomes including increased adherence, reduced stress and anxiety, and enhanced recovery rates.\(^1,2\) Despite these findings, however, there appears to be relatively little use of such interventions by athletic trainers and other sports-injury rehabilitation professionals.\(^3,4\)

Several reasons have been suggested to explain this low rate of use, including a lack of knowledge of the potential benefits of sport psychology among both athletes and rehabilitation professionals, a lack of access to sport-psychology consultants or services, and the perceived stigma among athletes associated with consulting a sport-psychology consultant.\(^3,5\) In order to provide injured athletes with this potentially beneficial source of support, barriers to the use of sport-psychology services must be diminished.

**Model for Successful Integration**

For sport psychology to be successfully integrated into sports-injury rehabilitation, three issues need to be considered: education, basic skill development, and referral guidelines (Figure 1). Education about the process and potential outcomes associated with sport-psychology interventions should target all those involved, either directly or indirectly, in an athlete’s physiological and psychological rehabilitation, including the athletic trainer, physical therapists, strength and conditioning staff, coaches, and teammates. It should focus on increasing individuals’ awareness of the role sport psychology can play in rehabilitation and on removing the negative stigma attached to working with a sport-psychology consultant. This could entail workshops covering topics such as what consultants do and do not do, training and competencies of consultants, and how consultants work with athletes. The cases of high-profile athletes who have used sport-psychology services during their own successful injury-rehabilitation experience might be shared to help soften other athletes’ attitudes toward sport-psychology interventions.

**Figure 1** Model for successfully integrating sport psychology into sports-injury rehabilitation.
Athletic Trainer—Frontline Practitioner

It is proposed that the athletic trainer’s role in providing psychological support should be as the “frontline” practitioner, with the sport-psychology consultant being brought in to provide selected services such as psychological-skills training. The athletic trainer’s role would therefore be to provide social support and create an atmosphere for rehabilitation that includes important psychological factors underlying successful recovery, such as adherence, motivation, and goal setting. The importance of athletic trainers and other sports-injury rehabilitation professionals in providing some degree of psychological support to injured athletes is well documented.

In order to effectively fulfill this frontline support role, it is proposed that athletic trainers also undertake some form of basic psychological-skills training. A standard training package would include communication skills, listening skills, and general counseling skills. Such skills could be obtained through workshops specifically designed for athletic trainers associated with different sports or from a sport-psychology consultant working with the athletic trainer and other support staff as part of a sports-medicine team.

Referral Guidelines

For the proposed model to function effectively, athletic trainers must also know when to refer athletes to a sport-psychology consultant. Brewer suggests that many sports-injury rehabilitation professionals might not refer sports performers to sport-psychology consultants because of difficulties they might have in recognizing poor psychological adjustment to injury. Therefore, it might be beneficial for athletic trainers to obtain assistance from a sport-psychology consultant in order to gain a better understanding of the guidelines to consider when referring athletes to a qualified consultant. Previous research has shown that such guidelines are not commonplace in many sports-medicine and rehabilitation settings and that there are inconsistencies in referral pathways. By establishing written guidelines that standardize and clarify the referral process, athletic trainers and other sports-injury rehabilitation professionals will be more likely to refer athletes to sport-psychology consultants when they confront rehabilitation issues outside their professional boundaries and competencies.

Interdisciplinary Approach

Various individuals associated with an athlete, such as the athletic trainer, coach, teammates, sport-psychology consultant, friends, and family members, can potentially influence the athlete’s psychological reactions to injury and the rehabilitation process. Therefore, a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach involving all these individuals working together for the good of the athlete is recommended. In order for such an approach to be successful, however, role clarity and coordination among professionals with the various types of training and competencies are essential. Without the clear identification and acceptance of roles within the sports-medicine support team there is the potential for conflict. Working in coordination might involve, for example, the athletic trainer or sport-psychology consultant providing the coach with suggestions as to how he or she might show support for the injured athlete. Ideally, the athletic trainer, sport-psychology consultant, and coach should work together with the athlete to produce a goal-setting program for injury rehabilitation and return to sport participation.

Professional Organizations for Sport Psychology

Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (www.aaasponline.org)
American Psychological Association (www.apa.org)
Canadian Psychological Association (www.cpa.ca)