The Privileged Few:
Special Counseling Needs of Athletes

Wayne Lanning
University of Wyoming

Counseling education and practice has for years addressed itself to the needs of special populations. Numerous articles in counseling journals have appeared identifying groups with special needs that counselors should be addressing. These groups include the handicapped, women, minorities, gays, the elderly, alcoholics, "mature students," and others. "Privileged" groups have seldom been the focus of attention in the counseling field. We seldom see programs or articles on the special counseling needs of millionaires, university presidents, heart surgeons, or football coaches. Lack of attention within the counseling profession does not mean that these groups do not have unique counseling needs, only that the profession typically places its energies and focus upon groups that have been somehow "deprived" of their rights and therefore have special needs for advocates and counseling. One of the groups that has been considered "special" and therefore is unattended by the counseling profession is the scholarship athlete.

A number of athletic departments have recently advertised for an academic counselor to work with the athletes, but those counselors are not trained to deal with the special counseling needs of athletes. Their training typically consists of a bachelor's or master's degree with some work experience and a lot of interest in athletics. Therefore, many academic counselors are ex-coaches, coaches' wives, graduate assistants, or people trained in student personnel. The academic counselor is usually the one who does all of the scheduling for the athletes, checks their eligibility, runs the study tables, hires tutors, maintains academic records, and perhaps participates in the campus recruiting of athletes. Few of the job descriptions require actual counseling with athletes. This is probably because the job descriptions are written by coaches, ex-coaches, or an athletic department member who has lived within the world of athletics, where winning and eligibility are more important than working with special problems of the athletes.

Others who have worked with athletes include sport psychologists and clinical or counseling psychologists. They have mostly been external to the athletic departments and have been used to working with athletes for very specific reasons. The sport psychologist has been primarily concerned with working with the psychological aspects of athletic competition for the purpose of maximizing athletic performance. The focus has remained upon the athlete as a performer. The clinical or counseling psychologist has been used within athletic programs to correct or compensate for...
specific behavioral or emotional disorders that were disrupting to an athlete, a team, or an entire athletic program. The emphasis for them was nearly always upon remediation of some difficulty within the athlete.

Athletes, however, have additional difficulties and needs that are not being met in any systematic way by any of the people who work with them. The fact that tendered athletes are given special treatment means they have special needs that can be addressed by trained counselors. Bostic (Note 1) found that athletes face personal, academic, and vocational problems unique to them in addition to the pressures and problems that students in general face. Some attempts are being made to call attention to these special problems (Remer, Tongate, & Watson, 1978; Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981), but no systematic attempt has been made to address the training needed for counselors to be able to work effectively with athletes.

The rest of this article will present and discuss some of the special counseling needs that athletes have and then briefly present a training framework in which counselors are being prepared to work in athletic settings.

**Special Counseling Needs of Athletes**

The world of the scholarship athlete is dominated by coaches, fans, administrators, and other athletes. When counselors become involved in the world of athletes they often respond as sports fans and see the athlete as someone special and privileged. It has been very difficult to see past the “stardom” and realize that the special situation in which athletes live creates unusual and special needs. The special attention athletes get produces additional pressure and problems not encountered by the nonathlete.

**Specialized Peer Group Problems**

Student athletes do not relate to others as “just other students” because they are different. Most major athletic programs have student-athletes heavily involved throughout the school year in the sports for which they receive their scholarship. Peer relationships and friendships are most frequently developed within the group of athletes in the same sport. These relationships frequently involve a sense of competitiveness not found in relationships between nonathletes. The sense of competition and immersion in the goals of the team permeate the athlete’s peer relationships. This, coupled with the “public eye” upon an athlete, results in few peer relationships being automatically comfortable and safe.

**Time Management and Study Skills Problems**

Periodically, scandals develop over the failure of major college athletes to earn their degrees in 4 or 5 years. The most recent exposé suggested that a majority of major college football players never receive their degrees (Underwood, 1980). Tendered athletes in other sports suffer from a somewhat lower percentage of nongraduates, but the point of Underwood’s article is that American colleges and universities exploit the athletes to whom they give scholarships. Although one of the reasons for the lack of degree completion may be exploitation by some athletic programs, more subtle reasons exist. Not all coaches actively or even implicitly desire to exploit an