A Rebuttal to Danish and Hale: A Committee Report

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Danish and Hale (1981) have written an article that raises some important issues for sport psychologists. Questions about role definition, the need for a set of ethical standards, the need for some type of licensure or certification, and the identification of theoretical or training models are certainly timely. In fact, sport psychology societies (i.e., ISSP, NASPSPA, and CSPLSP) have all had committees investigating these issues for more than 2 years. These topics have also been central points for discussion at national meetings.

In their effort to present the issues, Danish and Hale have disregarded a great deal of information that would have resulted in a more balanced presentation. The unfortunate result is that they have created a controversial straw man which does not accurately reflect upon the field. Their straw man, if believed, is one that is likely to polarize individuals rather than draw them together as the authors desire.

In “Toward an Understanding of the Practice of Sport Psychology,” Danish and Hale have characterized the field and the practitioner in the following ways:

1. The field is in a state of flux without any defined roles.
2. Individuals within the field fall into one of two camps. The first camp consists of applied researchers. The second camp is composed of “clinical” practitioners. It is stated that communication between these two groups does not exist, and if anything, they are growing further apart.
3. The “clinical practitioners” are described as clinical psychologists who use traditional, pathologically oriented personality theory to describe athletes. They are in effect clinicians who specialize in treating disturbed athletes. This group is further characterized as:
   a. Bent on creating a monopoly that would prevent coaches and educators from working with (counseling) athletes.
   b. Using tests solely and inappropriately for selection and screening purposes. It is implied that the individual needs of the athlete are ignored in order to respond to management’s need to win.
   c. Creating dependency in athletes by labelling them as sick or as having problems, and by fostering dependent relationships.

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According to Danish and Hale, the tool that psychologists can and will use to accomplish their goals of higher fees, more dependence, and so on will be licensure laws. It is argued that attempts to license individuals as sport psychologists will lead to all of the problems outlined. It is further stated that licensing is not a useful procedure. Rather than protecting the public, the authors believe it prevents competent people (e.g., coaches) from practicing.

The issues raised are important; as members of the NASPSPA and CSPLSP ethics committees, we would be the last group to suggest problems do not exist. Let’s put the problems in perspective, however.

Defining the roles of sport psychologists (e.g., Nideffer, 1981) is an important issue; it therefore would have been helpful to get more ideas from Danish and Hale about what roles and services might be provided. With a definition of roles we will be in a position to evaluate what we have to offer and to provide others with a better understanding of who we are. We need to work together to decide the best way to deal with the fact that “psychologist” is a licensed title. How can we proceed to build our own reputations and avoid the problems that a confrontation over licensure laws would create?

The way Danish and Hale characterize the field of sport psychology is particularly damaging. First, the applied research and the practitioner do communicate, as any NASPSPA or CSPLSP meeting will indicate. In fact, much of the time practitioners and researchers are one and the same. More recently, many applied researchers have been moving into the area of application—including some of the leaders in areas like motor learning and motor development.

Currently, close to one-half of the NASPSPA membership has identified its primary interest as “sport psychology.” This group contains a majority of the “practitioners” and consists of about 150 people. Of those 150 people, fewer than 15 are clinically trained. Of those who are clinically trained, less than three would describe themselves as clinicians who specialize in athletes. Instead, as Danish and Hale suggest, these practitioners see themselves as teachers and educators.

Salmela (1981) has collected data on 652 individuals from 42 different countries. All of these people can be described as working in the general area of sport psychology. Based upon this sample and the descriptions these individuals have provided, the field of sport psychology can best be characterized by a disciplinary and professional cross-over.

Danish and Hale’s article creates an artificial dichotomy that may prevent the membership of organizations like NASPSPA and CSPLSP from taking steps like certification and the adoption of ethical standards, which may be important for their survival. The NASPSPA and CSPLSP committees have some strong feelings about the things we need to do. First, we would agree that the potential for mistreating athletes and coaches does exist. Psychologists and other sport psychology practitioners have abused tests in the past. Athletes have been used and discriminated against, and at times, inappropriate dependency has been created. Most of us have seen, read, or heard of others who offer services which were either inaccurately presented, undocumented, invalid, or useless.

Next, in their discussion of the issue of licensure of sport psychologists, Danish and Hale were inaccurate in suggesting that Harrison and Feltz (1979) were advocating licensure. They were advocating certification, which is a very different procedure having different implications. We will say more about this later.

The idea that sport psychologists should be licensed is not really at issue. The title