

### Comments on Balague's 1997 A.A.A.S.P. Conference Keynote Address

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When many graduate students enthusiastically entertained the idea of becoming sport psychologists, one of the major reasons was being able to work with athletes. Dreams of helping athletes overcome mental blocks and succeed in their sport endeavors are still popular aspirations for newcomers in the field. Although this may not be an aspiration for all sport psychology professionals, it can be a pleasant and fulfilling career facet (Andersen, Williams, Aldridge, & Taylor, 1997). The ultimate goal for some sport psychology consultants is being able to assist world-class or elite athletes.

Gloria Balague's 1997 keynote address, given at the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology conference in San Diego, California and published in the March 1999 issue of *The Sport Psychologist*, is an uncommon opportunity to read one sport psychologist's summarized experiential viewpoint of her role as a sport psychology consultant. Allowing colleagues to gain access into personal observations of one's consulting endeavors can be a risky proposition. The consultant's interpretations and interventions are open to criticism by colleagues who may have other approaches for handling similar circumstances. Different approaches to working with athletes may be equally successful, but the processes can be quite different. Yet, the opportunity to share one's insight with others who have differing and similar educational perspectives provides a unique and seldom utilized chance for vicarious learning.

Balague (1999) wrote that her consulting experiences have mainly been within track and field and rhythmic gymnastics. Although our scientific acumen reminds us that we should only generalize her work to athletes in the same endeavors, her suggestions may surely be considered in consulting with athletes in other sports. When working with elite sport participants, the variance of experiences, problems, and issues *within* a sport is probably much greater than the variance of those same concerns *between* sports. Balague's most intriguing point is that sport psychology consultants need to be knowledgeable of the "gestalt" of individual athletes. In other words, we should consider athletes in a broader context than that of their athletic role. She feels it is critical to be aware of athletes' value systems, identities, and the niche that sport competition has filled in their lives. This attention to

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values and identities really serves as the foundation for the techniques she chooses to use in consulting. Balague (1999) stated: "Sport psychology interventions must fit within the value system of the athlete and be congruent with the meaning that the activity has for that individual" (p. 91). Many sport psychologists probably do not explore value and meaning with athletes. Some believe that an understanding of this type of information is not necessary to assist athletes with their mental "game" (Rotella, 1992), whereas others probably feel that a background in counseling or clinical psychology is essential when examining these issues. Balague did not enter into a "who can do what" debate, but instead discussed specific circumstances that have influenced her approach with athletes.

One of these special circumstances is religion or spirituality. Balague often asks athletes about their religious affiliation and at times has encouraged them to return to their religious practices. Realistically, this suggestion may be appropriate only at a limited number of specific times. One such situation may be when athletes indicate to the sport psychologist that religion is a meaningful factor in their lives. This represents an instance where the sport consultant who has developed a positive relationship and good rapport with the athlete may feel comfortable with making this recommendation. Also, religious athletes may be reluctant to discuss the impact of their spiritual beliefs without first knowing the sport psychologist is open to such discussions. In this case athletes may welcome a perusal into their spiritual beliefs. Otherwise, it would probably be safer if the topic of religion and spirituality is first presented by the athlete. This type of personal inquiry and suggestion may be considered substantially inappropriate, especially if the athlete's main interest is only sport-performance-related issues, such as learning how to relax or use imagery in a more effective manner. In many cases, the topic of religion or spirituality is a very sensitive issue. Therefore, in some circumstances asking an athlete about religion may have detrimental effects on the consultant-athlete relationship. Balague's point is well made that athletes' religion may influence the type of techniques they are willing to employ. Therefore, if athletes inform practitioners that certain intervention techniques are contrary to their religious philosophy, it behooves the sport psychologist to offer assistance in a manner that is consistent with the athletes' spiritual beliefs.

Balague (1999) also discussed the need for balance within elite athletes' lives. She made two important points with regard to athletes having a balanced life. Many elite athletes resent being labeled as unidimensional. Being perceived as such (e.g., athletes are only involved in and care about sports at the expense of all other aspects of their lives) is a frustrating negative perception that elite athletes will sometimes put forth much effort to disprove. Because so much of their lives are devoted to their athletic endeavors, it is hard for others to see them differently. Also, although most athletes choose to make significant sacrifices to other aspects of their lives (e.g., family, work, hobbies), they still consider these important. Therefore, Balague suggested that athletes seek "balance within the imbalance" (p. 93). This balance seeking implies that athletes may need to devote some time to the other aspects of their lives. Although elite participants willingly allow sport to consume a majority of their time, they should still devote some efforts to these other areas so that they feel like multidimensional, well-rounded individuals. Balague made a strong argument that sport performance can be directly affected