Understanding Identity, Value, and Meaning When Working With Elite Athletes

Gloria Balague
University of Illinois–Chicago

My goal here is to write about my experience working with elite athletes. I do not intend this to be a comprehensive review of the issues faced by elite athletes because I can describe events only from my experience, that of a female with clinical and sport psychology training. My views also reflect the athlete population with whom I have worked: mainly rhythmic gymnasts and U.S. track and field athletes. I have found that regardless of the techniques (e.g., relaxation, imagery) I may be using in work with elite athletes, understanding the larger issues of their identities and value systems and what sport and competition mean to them in their lives plays a central role in determining the quality, and probably the effectiveness, of services I deliver.

Studies of elite athletes are difficult for a variety of reasons (e.g., access, time constraints) and should probably take more experiential and ideographic approaches, at least at this stage. Research on elite athletes through in-depth interviews and case-study methods has grown in recent years (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992; Gould, Jackson, & Finch 1993a, 1993b; Jackson, 1992; Jackson, Dover, & Mayocchi, 1998; Jackson, Mayocchi, & Dover, 1998; Scanlan, Ravizza, & Stein, 1989; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991). The studies cited here are “must” readings for those interested in working with elite athletes, as is the recent text on psychological preparation and elite athletes by Hardy, Jones, and Gould (1996). In this paper, however, I am not the qualitative researcher interpreting the interview data. Rather, I am the sport psychologist telling you my story of working with and trying to understand elite athletes. Thus, most of the comments that will follow must be taken as what they are: my observations, and not the results of controlled experimental or correlational research. At the same time I hope to address the issue of research with elite-level performers and to engage in a dialogue with the rest of my colleagues.

Gloria Balague is at the University of Illinois–Chicago, 1007 W. Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607.

The majority of this paper was presented as the keynote address for the intervention/performance enhancement section of the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology at their annual conference in San Diego, California, September, 1997.
First, I will write about how I talk with elite athletes about motivation and how identity, value, and meaning are all inextricably connected to motivation in elite sport. Next, I will try to analyze the implications of identity, value, and meaning for sport psychology interventions, giving several specific examples of issues to consider at the elite athlete level. I will then discuss the person who is an elite athlete, the elite environment, and the sport psychologist working with such athletes, and end with some recommendations for training.

Motivation at the Elite Athlete Level

Athletic performance often has central meaning to elite athletes because it represents a large portion of their self-identities. For that reason I feel it is important, when talking about motivation, to back up and start with more basic questions of self-definition. Following a model from the organizational psychology field (Cairo, 1996), the first question I ask is about the athlete's identity: Who are you? How do you describe yourself? Some athletes describe themselves as "a good athlete" but not a champion. Some relate that other things are as or more important to them than being a champion. Questions of self-definition will need addressing when setting specific performance and training goals aimed at maintaining or enhancing motivation.

Where do you want to be? What needs to change? Part of the identity clarification issue is the clear description of what needs to change for elite athletes to become who they want to become. Some of the elements to address initially are a clear sense of the athletes' strengths, their problem areas, and, particularly useful in my opinion, a sense of the skills that are not being fully utilized. Often gifted athletes obtain good performance outcomes without paying attention to small details, going on "raw talent" without fully using some of the skills they have because they can achieve success without them. This is particularly the case with young athletes, who in time will realize that to maintain their success at the higher levels they will eventually need everything they have. The time to start identifying extra resources is early, before they are needed or a crisis arises.

After analyzing identity, the next area I address with elite athletes is that of values: What is important to you? I feel there is a critical distinction between what an athlete would like and what an athlete considers of great value. We need to separate would like from value. Values determine athlete priorities. The stated goals in elite sport are often clear to all involved: Olympic medals, world records, and so forth. That these goals are recognized as important and that most athletes would say that they would like very much to achieve them does not mean that all athletes really value them. Valuing them is tied to the commitment required to achieve them. We all like and want many things, but most of us are willing to make the effort to achieve only some of them; these are the ones we value.

Once we know what we value, it is easy to set priorities and move to the next step: goals. Clearly, goals should be an extension of values. Goals are most often discussed when talking about athletes' motivation, but in my opinion, if we start talking goals with an elite population without addressing self-definitions and values, we start in the middle and narrow our perspective too much, losing important information. Consistent with the general goal-setting literature, goals for the elite athlete should also be specific, flexible, written down, and imagined. For example, if an athlete has as a goal to make the Olympic team but