Giving counseling a sporting chance
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Sports counseling provides access to client issues that extend well beyond the playing field

By Jonathan Rollins

Without her participation in sports, Taunya Tinsley doesn’t know if she would have even attended college. But her prowess on the basketball court led her to Augsburg College in Minneapolis, where she was an all-conference performer her senior year. Even as her star was shining athletically, however, someone asked her a question that adjusted her perspective: “What are you going to do after your ‘retirement’ from sports?”

That conversation not only offered Tinsley a wake-up call but also helped her discover her life’s calling. She realized all student-athletes could benefit from counseling on issues that stretched far beyond the basketball court or baseball diamond. “Even as a high school student-athlete, I knew that sports really meant something to me,” says Tinsley, a member of the American Counseling Association and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision. “I decided I wanted to work with athletes on how to use athletics for personal growth.”

While earning her master’s degree in higher education with an emphasis in student development from the University of Iowa, Tinsley worked in the women’s athletic department, focusing on academic support and career development. After a stint providing academic support to student-athletes at the University of Pittsburgh, she moved on to Duquesne University, where she obtained her doctorate in counselor education and supervision with an emphasis in sports counseling. Today, she is an assistant professor at California University of Pennsylvania and program coordinator for the National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame’s Play It Smart Program. As described on the Play It Smart website (http://playitsmart.footballfoundation.com), the educational program is “designed to take a student-athlete’s passion for sports and intense dedication to their team and transform it into a force for greater good in their lives.”

Shaun Tyrance became a sports counselor in large part because of the counseling he didn’t receive during his days as an athlete. “During my college career, I could have really used someone to talk to outside of the (football) program,” says Tyrance, a four-year letter winner who played quarterback at Davidson College in North Carolina from 1996 to 2000. “I struggled academically and had my ups and downs on the field,” including operations on both knees. “As an athlete, there’s only so much you feel that you can tell your coaches. In male macho sports like football, where any sign of weakness is looked on negatively, you don’t feel comfortable talking about your personal life or your self-doubts.”

During his senior year, Tyrance found an article about the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team employing a sports psychologist. “I thought, ‘Wow, I would have performed a lot better on and off the field with that kind of help.’” Inspired in part by the article, he went on to earn his master’s degree in sports psychology from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

While going through the doctoral program in counselor education at North Carolina State University, Tyrance also took a job in the school’s athletic department as an academic counselor for freshman and sophomore football players. That experience opened his eyes even wider to both the need for and impact of sports counseling. “That job was 15 percent academic support and 85 percent counseling,” he says. “It was completely about building trust and relationships with those students. I was the first person they called when issues came up — and not just academic issues. A lot of it was really about their transition from high school to college. They had left girlfriends behind, they were sitting on the bench for the first time, they were away from home for the first time or they were feeling the pressure to perform right away.” Today, Tyrance is a sports counselor and performance enhancement specialist in private practice who contracts with both professional and college sports teams. Those interested in discussing sports counseling can contact Tyrance, a member of ACA, at shaun.tyrance@gmail.com.

From skeptic to fan

If the mixture of sports and counseling seemed like a natural fit to both Tinsley and Tyrance, Lisa Lopez Levers needed convincing that the specialty was legitimate. An associate professor in the Department of Counseling at Duquesne, Levers listened reluctantly as doctoral students (including her advisee, Tinsley) approached her about sports counseling’s efficacy. “I thought, ‘Great, just what we need — another counseling specialty,’” says Levers, a member of ACA and ACES. “To be honest, I looked down my nose at sports counseling. It’s a very easy notion to dismiss. I had to get past my initial bias that sports is just a game. But the work of my doctoral students intrigued me, and as I began to unpack the issues, I could see just how relevant it was.”
What ultimately sold Levers on sports counseling was the realization that its uses weren’t limited to high-level athletes and that the issues it dealt with weren’t limited to the playing field. She recalled a program in southern Africa that used soccer as an incentive to bring in young people who needed treatment and counseling related to HIV/AIDS. “I started seeing sports counseling from a human development perspective and the role it played with kids impacted by AIDS,” she says. “What a wonderful intervention: sports with some counseling around it, some mentoring around it. I decided it could be an enterprise that was very helpful with young people.”

She also perceived that sports counseling possessed an important multicultural element. “We can formulate initial relationships across cultural, ethnic and religious lines through sports,” Levers says. “I think athletics is one of those arenas that breaks down divisive barriers.”

Witnessing the reaction of her master’s students who were working with adolescents in schools further convinced Levers that sports counseling deserved wider attention. “I saw my students get so excited when I raised the subject with them,” she says. “Sports counseling was something they could really envision using to work effectively with kids.”

Now one of the leading proponents of sports counseling, Levers decided to work with Tinsley to put together an ACA Sports Counseling Interest Network, which was approved in March 2006. “It seemed it was time to have a more systematic, more formalized conversation about sports counseling,” Levers says. “People have been doing (sports counseling) for a long time, but it’s been under the surface. I thought we needed to name it and say exactly what we’re doing.” Today, of ACA’s eight special interest networks, the sports counseling group has the largest number of participants on its Listerv.

Many arenas, many ‘athletes’

Levers studied with a kung fu master for 13 years, so she was naturally interested in the connections between physical and mental health. Today she sees a plethora of applications for sports counseling, from helping young athletes improve their academic and social skills to teaching tai chi to senior clients who want to remain physically active despite suffering from arthritis. “The approaches may seem very different, but they’re both on the spectrum of sports counseling,” she says.

Sports counseling can be particularly effective at the high school level, Tinsley says. While the Play It Smart Program’s focus is academic support, student-athletes also receive personal, career and social counseling, she says. Play It Smart counselors, known as “academic coaches,” work with student-athletes from the ninth grade on. On one level, they help students determine their interest in attending college, examine which schools might fit them best and look into potential majors and careers. Counselors also take the student-athletes on college visits.

Just as important, Tinsley says, the program helps these students explore who they are and who they can become outside of the world of sports, because for many, their identity is completely wrapped up in being an athlete. Tinsley has brought in members of the National Football League’s Pittsburgh Steelers to talk to student-athletes about life after sports and the importance of having something else going on in their lives. “Even for those athletes who only play in high school, it can be really hard for them to give up sports and make a successful transition,” Tinsley says. “We want to help them look at how they can define themselves otherwise and how they can use the skills they’ve learned as an athlete in other areas of life — skills such as teamwork, discipline, preparing themselves to compete, commitment and so on. For example, the commitment they show for studying film (to prepare for a game) should be the same commitment they show to preparing for the SAT.”

Some people may wonder if sports counseling is just another term for sports psychology. But as Levers explains, sports psychology focuses almost exclusively on developing athletic skill and enhancing performance, while “sports counseling has a more holistic, ecological focus. It looks across spheres of a person’s life to see what role sports can play in academic and psychosocial issues.”

Of course, the line between the two is not always distinct. “A lot of performance enhancement and sports counseling goes hand in hand,” says Tyrance, whose clients include the University of North Carolina at Charlotte’s women’s basketball team. “If someone’s struggling on the basketball court, I’ve found that they are usually struggling in another aspect of their life. They may be struggling academically, have family issues or dealing with something else off the court,” he says. “If a player has an issue handling pressure in key moments of a game, I’ll teach them relaxation techniques, but I’ll also dig deeper. I want to find out where this is coming from.”

“I really believe that I’m doing something preventative (as a sports counselor),” Tyrance continues. “I don’t want to be the one they call only when somebody needs to be ‘fixed’ athletically.” He says a large part of his job is simply spending time fostering relationships with the athletes. “Sports is a very close-knit, family environment, so you have to make them comfortable with you. This job doesn’t work if you make yourself an outsider. You can’t be a once-a-week counselor. If that’s the only time they see you, they’re never going to trust you.”

Tyrance also tries to make the athletes understand that he is their advocate. “I tell them, ‘I’m not here for Coach. I’m here for you. Nothing you tell me will ever go to Coach. This is a complete partnership between you and me.’”
An emerging field

Tyrance, Tinsley and Levers each envision a healthy future for sports counseling, in large part because it can be utilized in a variety of settings and for various populations. At the highest level, Tinsley says, many professional teams employ a director of player development who helps athletes with issues such as career development (post-sports) and degree completion. In addition, she says, many professional athletes and their families want to work with counselors who understand the issues and pressures athletes experience. Common areas of concern include anger management, marriage problems and strained relationships with children, according to Tinsley, who is pursuing this niche in her private practice.

In many instances, counselors can help athletes access the support systems available to them outside of the coaching and training staff, Tinsley says. “They’re often not sure if support is out there for them,” she says, “because people tend to see them only as an athlete, not as a person.” Even community counselors or mental health counselors who don’t specialize in sports counseling can help athletes with transitioning to life after sports, when they may face issues such as substance abuse, eating disorders, depression and questions about starting a new career. “But having an understanding of the athletes’ world is going to be beneficial,” she says.

At the collegiate level, Tyrance says, athletic departments increasingly are looking for individuals with master’s degrees in counseling to serve as academic advisers. One of the best places to find these openings is on the National Collegiate Athletic Association website at www.ncaa.org. Under “employment,” look for jobs that say “counselor” or “academic adviser.”

But sports counseling isn’t limited to purely athletic arenas. As Levers points out, there are plenty of opportunities to utilize sports counseling in both private practice and schools. Another potential growth area? “In this country, I don’t see quite so much emphasis on sports counseling in community agencies, but I could see it blossoming there in the kinds of programming aimed at pulling young people in and helping them to develop good social skills in the process,” she says. A growing amount of research confirms that athletics can help young adults build positive social skills, she says.

Abundant employment opportunities in sports counseling are already available, Tinsley says. What is missing, she asserts, are adequate training opportunities for counseling students interested in this specialty. Tinsley has developed and taught a course on “Issues and Techniques in Counseling Athletes” at both Duquesne and California University of Pennsylvania. California University has also proposed an online nine-credit sports counseling certificate to begin next summer. At the moment, however, such courses are the exception rather than the rule in counseling programs.

Tinsley hopes that counseling programs will eventually recognize athletes as a distinct and diverse population and make specialized training available to counseling students. One of her goals is to see sports counseling programs accredited by CACREP. “Because of the number of kids who participate in athletics in the United States, it’s important to include them in our counseling courses,” she says. Tinsley firmly believes, for instance, that the counseling profession needs to do a better job of preparing school counselors to work with student-athletes.

To join the Sports Counseling Interest Network, e-mail Holly Clubb (hclubb@counseling.org) at ACA with your name, e-mail address and ACA membership status. Participants often post research related to sports counseling on the interest network’s Listserv.

In addition, the Sports Counseling Interest Network will be meeting at the ACA Convention in Detroit on Friday, March 23, from 11 a.m. to noon to discuss next steps in promoting and developing the specialty.