The wide world of sports counseling

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Describe the role of a sports counselor.
Robert Nejedlo, Patricia Arredondo and Libby Benjamin defined sports counseling as “a process which attempts to assist individuals in maximizing their personal, academic and athletic potential. This is accomplished through a proactive, growth-oriented approach that incorporates the principles of counseling, career development, movement science, psychology and human development.”

I have a part-time private practice in which my specialty includes sports counseling. I work with youth, high school and college student athletes and their families. Additionally, I provide career planning and development, identity development with adults facing a transition away from sports (via retirement or a career-ending injury, for example), as well as mental health counseling for issues such as depression, anxiety and stress, adjustment disorders and grief/loss. Previously, I was a full-time academic counselor working with Division I college athletes as well as an academic coach for high school student athletes. I provided academic advising, life skill development, career planning and development, as well as personal development.

Can counselors make a career of this, or will it be only one aspect of their careers?
Both! Advisers for athletes are those helping professionals whose responsibilities include academic advising, life skills development, performance enhancement and psychosocial development (career planning and development, identity development, interpersonal relationships, transitions from sport) at both the collegiate and high school levels.

The professional counselor may hold similar positions as an academic adviser for athletes, may be in private practice for clinical and mental health issues or may hold full-time positions within professional sporting organizations, colleges/universities, school settings or community agencies, to name a few. Additionally, opportunities exist to work with international athletes.

Describe the setting in which a sports counselor practices.
Sports counselors can be found working with athletes and/or their families within a variety of settings, such as schools and higher education institutions, community-based agencies, outpatient clinics, private practices, rehabilitation centers, youth organizations, professional and amateur sporting agencies and with international sporting agencies.

Briefly describe the qualifications or training needed.
The sports counselor should have specialized awareness, knowledge and skills beyond the basic counselor preparation and training. Sports counselors should possess a mature multicultural perspective, operate from a holistic and ecological framework, operate from a strength-based model, conduct counseling as a self-reflective practice, engage in ethical practice and possess shared professional values.

Additionally, counselors working with this population should be multicultural sports counseling competent. As part of my dissertation research in 2005, I developed the Multicultural Sports Counseling Competencies, which utilize the language and statements from the Multicultural Counseling Inventory.

What type of individual would excel at this job?
Professionally, the individual should be multicultural sports counseling competent and knowledgeable about the NCAA, NAIA or JUCO/NJCAA rules and regulations, knowledgeable about career development issues specific to the athlete population and knowledgeable about playing or coaching competitive sports. Furthermore, the individual should strengthen skills in crisis intervention, stress management, performance enhancement and understanding transferable skills.

Personally, the individual should value self-reflection, respect, unconditional positive regard, genuineness, diversity and multicultural experiences. Additionally, the individual should be caring, empathic and willing to serve as a mentor and advocate and have the ability to form cross-cultural, rewarding relationships.

Why would you encourage counseling students, new professionals or established counseling professionals looking for a new career path to consider this option?
The sports counseling field is a unique career path that will be around as long as sports continue to permeate our society. As long as there are sports, there will be a need for specialized counselors to work with the athlete population.

What makes this career path unique?
One, sports are an important and unique cultural thread woven throughout our society. Sports are also a major influence on psychosocial development across the life span. Sports promote socialization, social competence, family bonding and the development of cross-cultural friendships.

Two, the athlete population is a diverse cultural group with special issues and unique developmental needs that differ from their nonathlete peers. Within the athlete population, there are subgroups and diverse populations based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, the physically challenged, sexual orientation, etc., each with specific developmental needs.

What challenges should counselors know about before diving in?
Ethical issues may arise from counselors’ lack of multicultural sports counseling competence, which may impact service delivery to the athlete population, a unique cultural group.

Another challenge is that the research regarding the athlete population in the counseling discipline is limited. Much of the research regarding the athlete population and sports counseling has been conducted in other academic disciplines, including psychology and movement science. An extensive program of research examining the developmental needs of the athlete population needs to be undertaken within our professional discipline.

Where can interested counselors get more information?
Interested counselors can get more information by joining the American Counseling Association’s Sports Counseling Interest Network. Additionally, they may want to contact colleges and universities that offer training programs or courses.