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# *Sport psychological coaching of elite athletes in Guatemala*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Preparing and competing at international championships is one major aim for many athletes. Especially when it comes to the preparation many athletes and their coaches focus on the development of technical, tactical and physiological skills and abilities. The psychological aspect is neglected or considered less important. In preparation for the Central American and Caribbean Games 2014 in Veracruz the Comité Olímpico Guatemalteco (COG) and the Confederación Deportiva Autónoma de Guatemala (CDAG) approached the German Sport University (GSU) in Cologne/Germany in order to developmentally assist the federations in order to improve their already existing sport psychological services. The condition prior to the project was that 14 sport psychologists worked for the COG and CDAG in order to work with elite athletes. Related to the education and further education of sport psychologists in Guatemala, sport psychologists stated prior to the project that they lack knowledge on recent theoretical and practical approaches and methods that can be applied with their athletes and teams. In addition, athletes mentioned that they need more and better sport psychological support than received at the moment. As objectives the COG and CDAG mentioned that they want (a) to offer high quality workshops and individual coaching sessions to elite athletes who will represent Guatemala at the Central American and Caribbean Games 2014 in Veracruz, (b) to improve theoretical and practical knowledge for sport psychologists in order to enhance sport psychological services to their athletes and (c) to convince national coaches to incorporate sport psychological services into their training schedules as important aspects.

In their mission to achieve success at international championships (e.g., Olympic Games, African Games, Panamerican Games) many National Olympic Committees (NOCs) have improved their sport psychological assistance for their athletes, teams and coaches well before Olympic Games and the Games itself (Blumenstein & Lidor, 2007, 2008; Samulski & Lopes, 2008). A special demand arises in countries that do not have a sport psychological infrastructure, which may not be well supported through intense scientific research on sport psychological issues. Consequently, in such countries the necessity to offer sport psychological services to their athletes and improve these services is most prominent.

However, little research has been done on how to developmentally assist such NOCs in countries with weak scientific background in improving and promoting sport psychological interventions. For example, little is known about how many interventions can be conducted within a certain timeframe while maintaining high quality standards. Although some studies deal with the question on what topics are important to athletes prior or during competition (e.g., Birrer, Wetzel, Schmid, & Morgan, 2012; Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Mellalieu, Neil, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2009), little is known about what is important to coaches when dealing with sport psychological issues. Moreover, almost no study deals with the question, what is important to sport psychologists who have only very seldomly received organisational or governmental assistance for their profession over the past years. Furthermore, when dealing with

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the question, how a program to developmentally assist NOCs to improve their sport psychological services can be organised, it is important to know about potential problems and challenges prior and during the project. Current research and literature is not able to answer this. Again, little is known about how athletes and coaches react on the possibility to receive comprehensive sport psychological assistance in means of workshops and individual coaching sessions, if there was little to none chance to deal with sport psychological issues before. This is even true for how existing sport psychologists react and deal with the chance to receive some further education and external assistance to further develop their own sport psychological competencies.

Answers to these questions might help applied scientific projects that aim to deliver sport psychological knowledge to NOCs that are not well developed in this area to effectively prepare, organise and conduct these projects. As a consequence, athletes from these NOCs will receive more and potentially qualitatively high sport psychological services in order to prepare for international championships like Olympic or Panamerican Games. Thus, research on specific challenges when delivering developmental assistance in the field of sport psychology might include insight into (a) how many interventions can be conducted within a certain timeframe while keeping a high quality standard, (b) which topics and issues are important to athletes, teams, coaches and sport psychologists within such a project.

*(a) Number of interventions*

The number of interventions delivered through one sport psychologist within a specific amount of time (days, weeks) obviously influences the quality of interventions. This is true for both types of interventions, workshops and individual coaching sessions. When dealing with interventions it is necessary to distinguish between formal and informal interventions, because sport psychologists do not exclusively deliver formal services. On the one hand, formal individual coaching can be defined as scheduled and planned coaching sessions at a specific time and place. On the other hand, informal individual coaching can be defined as unscheduled and spontaneous subsequent to a workshop and a training session or by meeting accidentally. As a consequence informal individual coaching sessions frequently lead to formal individual coaching sessions again (Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008).

*(b) Topics and issues*

Topics and issues raised by athletes in competitive situations in individual coaching sessions can be differentiated into a) general performance issues (e.g., motivation, self-regulation, self issues), b) specific performance issues (e.g., experiences), c) organizational issues (e.g., coaching/leadership, finances, media), and d) personal issues (e.g., social issues, subclinical/clinical issues) (cf. Birrer et al., 2012; Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Hanton et al., 2005; Mellalieu et al., 2009). To successfully plan developmental projects in sport psychology for NOCs it is necessary to know what topics are most important for athletes during individual coaching sessions and workshops. Besides knowledge about athletes' demands it is necessary to know

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about topics that are relevant to sport psychologists and coaches, and other workshop or individual coaching session participants. This knowledge will improve quality of sport psychological services and thus further enhance acceptance and effectiveness even of short timed sport psychological interventions like workshops and individual coaching sessions among participants.

Superordinate objective of the project was to assist the COG and CDAG in developing and improving sport psychological services for Guatemalan athletes, teams and coaches in preparation for the Central American and Caribbean Games 2014 in Veracruz/Mexico. This objective was pursued twofold. First, workshops were conducted with athletes, teams, coaches, sport psychologists, executive board members and media representatives. Second, individual coaching sessions were conducted with athletes.

## 2 METHOD

### *Personal Characteristics Of The Sport Psychologists*

The two sport psychologists are 32 and 33 years old, with an average of 5.3 years experience working with athletes, coaches and teams. Both sport psychologists hold a diploma in sport science and are further trained as sport psychologists and are certified systemic coaches and change managers. In addition, one sport psychologist is also trained in systemic constellations.

### *Participants*

In total, 289 athletes (54.0% male;  $M = 22.9$  years old) and 66 coaches (92.4% male;  $M = 41.3$  years old) from a variety of 42 individual and team sports, and 24 sport psychologists (57.1% male) took part in workshops and individual coaching sessions. In addition, 42 executive board members (78.6% male) and 12 media representatives (91.7% male) participated in the project.

### *Data*

The two authors kept a diary, in which they recorded workshops, individual sessions and personal experiences. In addition, the organizers from the COG collected data about the number of workshop participants, their sports and personal backgrounds. All planned and scheduled individual coaching sessions were labelled as formal individual coaching sessions. All unplanned and non-scheduled individual coaching sessions lasting more than 15 minutes were labelled as informal individual coaching sessions (brief contact interventions). Generally, athletes or coaches sought contact to one or both authors subsequently to previous workshops. Obviously small talk had to be differentiated from individual coaching interventions. Thus, when the authors felt that they were approached in their role as sport psychologists, they logged the contact as intervention. In contrast, when the authors felt that they were approached based on personal interest, the contact has not been logged as an individual coaching session. Meetings with the organizing committee were not counted as interventions. The logging of the work started with

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the departure from Germany to Guatemala and ended with the arrival in Germany after the end of the project in Guatemala.

### *Procedure*

The Institute of Psychology at the German Sport University Cologne was approached by the COG and CDAG in order to set up a 4-week project that aims towards developing and improving sport psychological services to guatemaltecan athletes prior to the Central American and Caribbean Games 2014 in Veracruz/Mexico, ending four weeks before the Games started. In preparation of the project, staff from the COG and CDAG contacted national sport psychologists and coaches in order to learn about individual demands, aims and potential workshop topics for this project. Subsequently, the two authors decided together with the COG and CDAG that workshop topics (1) motivation and goal setting, (2) performance under pressure, (3) self-talk and (4) self-confidence would be relevant for athletes and teams. All of these athletes workshop were planned as two consecutive sessions, lasting 120 minutes each. While in the first workshop session general knowledge and personal experiences were presented and discussed, the second workshop session one week later dealt with applying the developed knowledge during training and competition situations. For sport psychologists and coaches, workshop topics were developed on the spot right to satisfy their actual needs. Besides preparing workshops, individual sessions (90 minutes) were scheduled for national team athletes. While being in Guatemala, the two authors sat with the organizers from the COG and CDAG in order to change and enhance the developed time schedule. This became necessary because especially cultural circumstances lead to the fact that workshops and individual sessions were disturbed or could not start on time. The authors worked with interpreters (English <-> Spanish) during workshops and individual sessions. After returning from Guatemala, the two authors finalized their documentations and subsequently started analysing the collected data. Olympic Solidarity financially supported this project.

### *Data Analysis*

To explore the frequency of interventions, type of interventions and client groups, descriptive statistics were used.

In addition, based on all day reports, all issues raised during both, formal and informal individual coaching sessions were content analytical analysed (Mayring, 2010), using a stepwise approach. In a first step, issues were coded followed by a second step in which 22 paraphrases were generated by combining topics and issues that were mentioned repeatedly (Mayring, 2010). In step 3, based on structures derived from previous research (cf. Birrer et al., 2012; Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Hanton et al., 2005; Mellalieu et al., 2009) these 22 paraphrases were allocated into 3 categories each (performance issues, organisational issues, personal issues). In a fourth step, by allocating paraphrases into eleven sub-categories these categories were complemented (Mayring, 2010).

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### 3 RESULTS

#### Number of interventions, type of services and client groups

The number of interventions provided to different client groups during the project in Guatemala is presented in Table 1. Not included in these statistics are the daily meetings with the organizing committee and translators. In total, service for athletes, sport psychologists, executive board members and media representatives was provided in 53 workshops and 60 individual coaching sessions with a total of 1198 participants. The number of contacts with individual athletes in individual coaching sessions ranged between 1 and 3 occasions. The number of daily interventions ranged between 1 and 10, with an average of 5.38 interventions per day. On average, one intervention lasted 2 hours, resulting in 226 hours of intervention, not including preparation and following up on interventions.

The ratio between formal, planned and scheduled individual coaching sessions on the one hand, and informal, brief and unplanned individual coaching sessions on the other hand was 70% and 30%. This indicates that many athletes have individual questions about how they can be able to improve or maintain their performance and how to deal with individual challenges. Moreover, brief and informal interventions are a necessary and important aspect in coaching. Thus, this type of service needs to be considered more often when dealing with athletes, coaches and sport psychologists, and when planning group interventions.

Table 1. Type of services provided to different client groups during the project.

	Athletes	Sport psychologists	Coaches	Other	Sub-Total	Total
Group workshops	39	6	5	3 <sup>a, b, c</sup>		53
Individual coaching session <i>formal</i>	42				42	
Individual coaching session <i>informal</i>	15	1	2		18	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>		<b>113</b>

Notes. *N* = 1198. <sup>a</sup> Presidents and executive board members of national federations, Guatemala-City; <sup>b</sup> Presidents and executive board members of regional federation, Quetzaltenango; <sup>c</sup> Media representatives, Guatemala-City.

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## Workshops

**Athletes.** During the project, workshops with athletes dealt with the four topics of (1) *motivation and goal-setting*, (2) *performance under pressure*, (3) *self-talk* and (4) *self-confidence*.

### *(1) Motivation and goal-setting*

To understand the relation between motivation and goal-setting athletes learnt basic and advanced theories and strategies in this workshop. By reflecting on their own motivational methods they had the chance to change and adapt their previous strategies concerning training or competition contexts. Main issues of this workshop dealt with short-, middle- and long-term goals combined with process-, performance- and success-orientation. Within this structure athletes got to know the SMART-rule (specific, measurable, attractive, realistic, terminated) that helps to set goals in an effective way.

### *(2) Performance under pressure*

Objective of this workshop was that athletes become able to actively modify their response to pressure during training and competition. Therefore the workshop was divided into one problem- and one solution-orientated part. In a first step athletes described previous situations that put them under pressure and reflected on their individual physical and psychological responses. In a second step, to understand their behavioural reactions, athletes learnt theoretical background-knowledge on biological and psychological reactions on pressure and stress. As third step athletes thought about their moments-of-excellence in which they perceived a so-called optimal-competition-mood. To finally end up in the solution-orientated part athletes learnt practical methods on activation and relaxation they can apply before, during and after training or competition to easily find the way to their optimal-competition-zone.

### *(3) Self-talk*

To sensitize and convince athletes about the relevance of topic the workshops started with a high-coordinative team-competition. Due to many failures self-talk automatically starts to change from a task-orientation to a self-doubting and problem-orientated manner. By realizing this change and how it influences their behaviour athletes learnt about how to improve their self-talk abilities and strategies. In addition, athletes developed strategies on how to change negative self-talk into positive self-talk. Superordinate objective of the workshop was that athletes improve their conscious or unconscious self-talk during training and competition.

### *(4) Self-efficacy*

Objective of the workshop was that athletes are able to reflect about situations in which their self-efficacy decreases by in many cases unknown influences and how to react on this prospectively. Theoretical background were Banduras' (1977) four sources of self-efficacy (performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, emotional arousal). By



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dealing with these sources in form of special designed intra- and interpersonal methods athletes more and more got in touch with their self-efficacy.

Additionally, two workshops have been conducted with two teams. While one of these workshops dealt with (1) *self- and collective-efficacy* within the team, the second workshop dealt with (2) *team development* within a newly formed team.

*(1) Self- and collective-efficacy*

One female team wanted to have an individual workshop on self- and collective efficacy. During this workshop athletes and coach were asked to draw a pitch of their respective sport on a 2x1.5m piece of paper. Every team member put a 20x10cm piece of paper with his or her name on the place of the pitch where she plays or stands during the game, respectively. Afterwards all participants were asked to write down every single team members' name on a piece of paper. Subsequently, every team member including the coach spent three minutes thinking about one team member and to write down his or her strengths and abilities. After finishing this quiet work the whole team changed to the drawn pitch and one team member read out loud which strengths and abilities he or she wrote down about the team member and wrote down one strength for each member which is most important for him or her. Every team member received their individual cards at the end of the workshop, with having improved the self and collective efficacy by using Banduras (Bandura, 1977) sources of self-efficacy and transferring these to the team's context. Strategies for further developing collective-efficacy have been developed and discussed.

*(2) Team development*

One mixed sexes team wanted to conduct a team-building workshop in order to build a team out of the individuals. During the workshop athletes were asked to work in small groups of four and to write down specific attributes, norms, behaviours that describe the team best. After discussing the results, most important attributes, norms and behaviours have been identified. Subsequently, the group discussed how to achieve that all group members possess these attributes, norms and behaviours and stick to them. Finally, theoretical background on necessary group processes for team development has been presented (e.g., Kleinert et al., 2012; Zepp & Kleinert, 2014; Zepp, Kleinert, & Ohlert, 2013; Zepp, Ohlert, & Kleinert, 2014) and discussed on how to implement this knowledge into the team and the much needed team building.

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**Sport psychologists.** A major aspect of the project was to intensively work with already existing sport psychologists from Guatemala. During six workshops with this target group the five topics (1) *common understanding of sport psychological counselling*, (2) *values in sport psychology*, (3) *specific supervision methods*, (4) *periodization of sport psychological training* and (5) *methods in sport psychological training* have been discussed and dealt with.

*(1) Common understanding of sport psychological counselling*

In the first meeting between Guatemalan and German sport psychologists everybody was pleased to introduce himself to the group for getting to know each other. Secondly it was figured out what expectations the local sport psychologists had regarding the common work within the next four weeks a) with their athletes in workshops and individual sessions, and b) in the workshops of the sport psychologists. These expectations were written down on a mind-map to later evidently evaluate if the output has met the expectations. Concluding, the two authors presented and explained the “onion-model” (cf. Figure 1; Kleinert & Brand, 2011) as a fundamental basis for the sport psychological work with athletes. It shows the following three different layers of content in the work between sport psychologists and athletes: The inner layer of the onion deals with the quality of the relationship between sport psychologist and athletes. The middle layer is about to impart and develop sport psychological knowledge and abilities. The outer layer finally engages in a) the development of personality, b) maintenance of health (physically and psychologically) and c) the athletes’ generated performance or success during training or competition. Thus it is important to mention that this layer regards the subjective perceived quality of performance. By way of example an athlete could say: “Due to the methods of emotion-control that I learned (second layer) I can manage my stress before the competition starts a lot better (third layer)”.

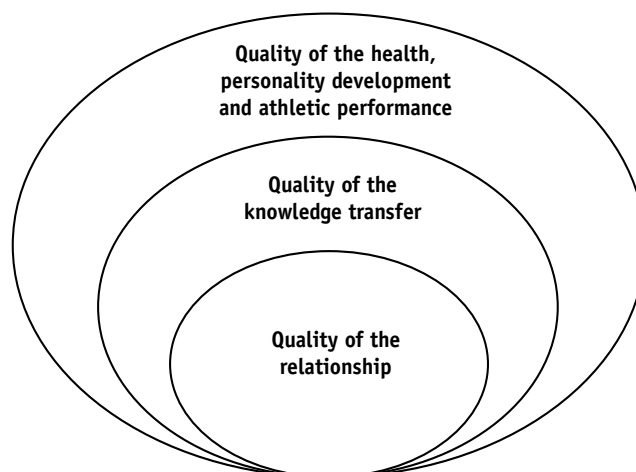


Figure 1. Quality levels of sport psychological counselling based on Kleinert & Brand (2011).

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*(2) Values in sport psychology*

The objective of this workshop was to develop an overall concept for Guatemalan sport psychologists for their daily work with athletes. For this purpose all participants (1) individually identified specific and fundamental values they perceive when working with athletes, teams and coaches. These were (2) collected, pinned up on a white board and discussed about. Then the relevance of the values (3) was sorted by the frequency of occurrences. Finally all sport psychologists (4) discussed about the deeper meaning of the values mentioned and how they can make sure to live up to them. One remarkable side-effect was the emotional and respectful way sport psychologists concentrated on the development of their concept. Obviously the sport psychologists felt more associated and thereby motivated for their work. The first ten most mentioned values were: respect, responsibility, confidence, discipline, punctuality, loyalty, cooperation, effort, honesty, and autonomy.

*(3) Specific method for supervision*

In order to prepare sport psychologists for the mutual work among sport psychologists and to work with coaches on actual problems and challenges, the "Solution house" as one specific method was presented, applied and discussed. The solution house consists of four rooms every participant has to go through individually. For every room, participants have 10 minutes of time. The first room deals with the athlete in question. The athlete and the problem needs to be described as precise as possible, answering questions like "Who is involved?", "Since when does the problem occur?", "How does the athlete behave in the situation" etc. In the second room, the participant writes down everything he or she has tried before to solve the problem. In the third room, the participant is asked to complete the sentence "Every time when, ... then...". Thus, within this room the participant deals with causalities and needs to reflect on the behaviour and the situations the behaviour is present in in detail. The last room contains hypothesis retrieved from the reflection process before and/or questions to other supervision participants on what they think about the house and its contents. For each room, participants have 10 minutes of time to write down the respective content as precise as possible. Thus, completing the house individually lasts 40 minutes. Subsequently, participants meet in groups of four in order to discuss individual cases. For each case, participants receive at least 15 minutes of time to describe fellow participants the houses' content and to find potential solutions for the problem described. By talking about the house and the rooms' contents to fellow participants, the owner of the house should be able to gain or develop new solutions for his or her problem and eventually leave the house from this last room. The sport psychologists tried this method on their own in order to be able to apply the solution house in workshops among sport psychologists or in workshops they conduct with coaches.

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#### *(4 & 5) Periodization of sport psychological training & methods in sport psychological training*

Workshops number 4 and 5 were consecutively planned. While workshop number 4 focussed on rather didactic content, workshop number 5 dealt with the methodical implementation of sport psychological training.

The task in workshop 4 was to autonomously develop a periodization schedule to impart basic mental competencies in the work with athletes of different ages. The work had to be done in groups of four to six persons. The procedure initiated with the mental skills that characterise a highly educated and successful senior elite athlete. Based on the skills identified the sport psychologists deduced certain skills that ought to be taught in the period of children (approx. 8-14 yrs.) and youth athletes (approx. 14-18). To bring together the results each of the five groups presented their ideas to the whole group. Thereby a wide base of several important skills was identified.

In workshop 5 it was discussed how exactly the implementation of the periodization to the applied sport psychological work could take place. For example, guiding questions were "Which scientific theories exist?", "What can the transfer look like?", "What difficulties can occur in different ages?", "Which specifics must be considered in the context of sport?". Finally all participants learned that there is a big difference between knowing of "what" skills must be taught and the competence on "How" exactly these skills can be taught.

**Coaches.** With coaches, topics of workshops included (1) *expectations and objectives*, (2) *coach-athlete interaction*, (3) *sport psychological case discussions* and (4) *sport psychological methods during training and competition*.

##### *(1) Expectations and objectives*

In a first meeting with national coaches *expectations and objectives* for the upcoming weeks were collected. Because it was not a voluntary event some of the coaches expressed restraint about sport psychological work. Moreover, others were looking forward for new input from a sport psychological perspective. A wide range concerning previous experiences with sport psychology has been presented, thus a general comprehension and acceptance had to be developed in the very beginning.

##### *(2) Coach-athlete interaction*

The topic of the second workshop was the coach-athlete interaction during training, but essentially during competition. The overall idea was to pinpoint the difference between right and wrong coaches' behaviour in phases before, during and after the competition. Therefore for each phase one so called paradox and one logical group were installed. Finally there were three paradox and three logical groups split up on each phase. Paradox groups created obviously wrong interventions that put athletes into a bad mood and decrease their self-confidence. Logical

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groups presented interventions that might lead to a nearly perfect mood. Interestingly coaches really enjoyed this workshop-structure and reflected their own coaching-behaviour. In the end Guatemalan coaches intensively discussed about important coaching-skills concerning the different phases. Additionally, the two authors presented theories about communication and intra- or interpersonal psychosocial issues.

### *(3) Sport psychological case discussion*

During the third workshop coaches dealt with the topic to independently work on *sport psychological case discussions*. Based on the discussion of sport psychological cases amongst coaches in Germany (Anderten & Kleinert, 2011), national coaches of Guatemalan national teams were taught the same methods like the sport psychologists to work on specific topics independently. For a detailed description of the methodological approach see *(3) Specific method for supervision* in the sport psychologists section. As a result of this workshop coaches stated that there is a strong need for more meetings like this. Coaches expressed their interest to regularly take part in such case discussions with other coaches from other sports and sport psychologists. Experience shows that coaches can learn a lot from other coaches, but at the same time do need assistance when it comes to specific questions, that for example only an expert in psychology can answer. In conclusion, coaches strive to receive more support from other coaches and sport psychologists.

### *(4) Sport psychological methods during training and competition*

Based on the results from sport psychological case discussions, in the fourth workshop *sport psychological methods* were discussed and developed in small groups to improve common sport psychological problems in athletes and teams. The general question was what coaches really know about sport psychological methods identified and how they implement and apply them in the work with their athletes. The following six topics were prepared and presented to the group by this four-level-answering-structure: 1. Why is this topic important to us in sports? 2. What do we know about it in a scientific / theoretical way? 3. What exercises do we know for this topic? 4. How exactly do we apply and implement it in our training? If necessary the two authors gave additional information. Finally, these were the six topics that were prepared and discussed: 1) mental training of techniques, 2) visualisation, 3) concentration, 4) motivation, 5) mental preparation for competition to perfectly perform under pressure and 6) relaxation.

**Presidents and executive board members of federations.** Besides working with athletes, coaches and sport psychologists, two workshops with both, national and regional leaders and presidents of federations and associations have been conducted. The aim for both workshops aim was to gain a feeling for what needs to be done to improve teamwork within and between federations, with finally leading to more successful athletes and teams at international competitions. Theoretically and empirically important aspects of successful teams have been introduced to the groups based on the theoretical framework of social processes within teams,

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developed by Carron, Hausenblas and Eys (2005). This framework has been further developed by Zepp, Ohlert and Kleinert (2014) who have identified six parameters, which are highly important for intrateam processes, and incorporated those aspects in a team diagnostic. These parameters are a) leadership, b) role ambiguity, c) collective efficacy, d) trust, e) identity and identification and f) cohesion (cf. Zepp et al., 2013; Zepp et al., 2014). Based on these parameters focus groups have been formed to discuss why the parameter is important for the federation, how others can identify from the outside that the federations and associations have this parameter and how the federation can improve this parameter.

**Media.** In addition, one workshop has been conducted to work with journalists and media representatives who will accompany athletes and teams from Guatemala to the Central American and Caribbean Games 2014 in Veracruz. Aim of this workshop was to sensitize journalists and media representatives about the impact they have on athletes and their ability to perform. Topics within this workshop dealt with ethical aspects, quality management in journalism, the relationship between media representatives and athletes, achieving choking and failure in Guatemalan athletes as a journalist and to adopt an athlete's perspective.

### **Topics and issues of individual coaching sessions**

**Athletes.** A total of 77 issues were raised in 42 formal and 18 informal individual coaching sessions. Results show that 74% of issues raised deal with performance related topics, while 16% are related to organisational and 10% are related to personal topics. Two thirds of athletes approached the two sport psychologists with problems and questions regarding mental preparation, such as preparing themselves for expected and unexpected situations during competitions, pre-event preparation for qualifications for the Central American and Caribbean Games and learning about mental techniques to overcome for example concentration and attention problems. Of all issues raised, 17% dealt with self-regulation, for example dealing with success and failure, dealing with criticism or emotion and energy management. Another 16% of all issues raised dealt were related to motivation, focussing on goal setting and lack of motivation. An additional 10% of athletes' issues were related to high expectations, which influence their performance levels. Organisational issues that were talked about during individual coaching sessions predominantly included the coach-athlete relationship (6.5%) and problems related to the sports system (6.5%). For personal issues, athletes talked about the distance to their families and other family related problems and challenges they have to face. Figure 2 provides a detailed overview over raw-data and higher order themes raised during both, formal and informal individual coaching sessions.

**Other.** Three informal individual coaching sessions have been conducted with two coaches and a sport psychologist. The coaches' questions dealt with how to apply goal setting in different situations during the season in a correct way, and specific questions regarding coach-athlete interaction.

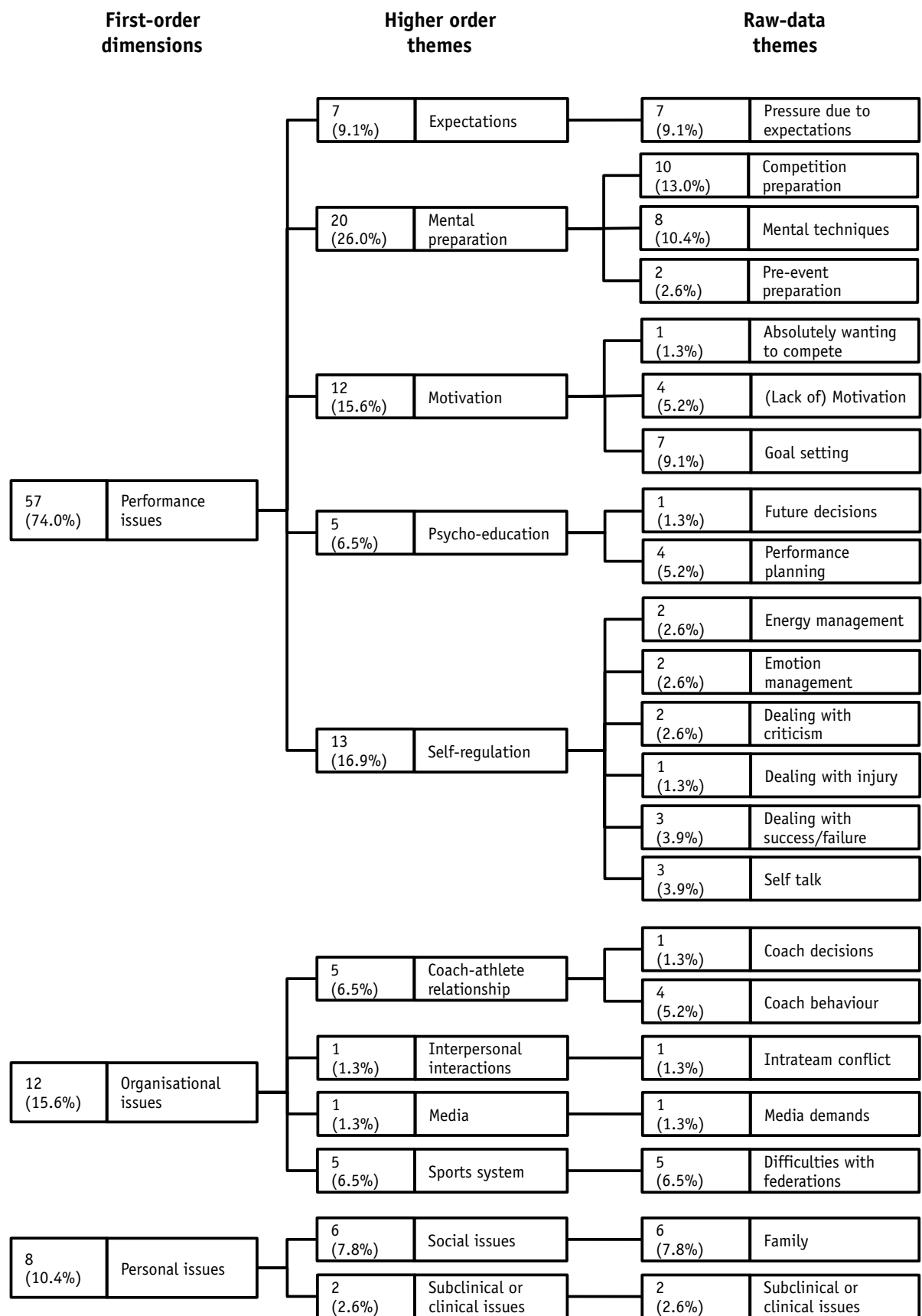


Figure 2 Number and percentages of issues raised during individual coaching sessions with athletes for raw-data themes, higher order themes and first-order dimensions. Raw data themes from coaches and sport psychologists ("goal setting", "forming a team", "coach-athlete interaction") have been omitted from the analysis.

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#### 4 DISCUSSION

This study is the first to deal with issues of number and frequency of interventions, topics and issues raised by athletes who do not have regular access to sport psychological services. Moreover, this study is the first to deal with topics that are necessary to sport psychologists who have a need for further education. First, the study shows that a total of 113 sport psychological interventions within 20 working days can be delivered to athletes in preparation for international competition. Second, the study reveals that in Guatemala athletes' issues that need to be dealt with in individual coaching sessions predominantly deal with performance issues, such as expectations, mental preparation, motivation and self-regulation. Third, there is a strong need of coaches to be supported by sport psychologists in their working on reaching athletic excellence. Fourth, sport psychologists perceive lack of support and trust from the federations. Moreover, sport psychologists need to gain more trust in their own knowledge and in specific aspects gain more knowledge in order to effectively plan, conduct and evaluate sport psychological services delivered towards athletes.

##### *(a) Number of interventions*

The total number of interventions was 113 within 20 working days. In total, two sport psychologists worked 226 hours in sport psychological interventions with athletes, coaches, sport psychologists or other participants. This time does neither include any preparation or follow-up of interventions nor regular meetings with the organising committee to further plan and schedule interventions. Thus, for further projects like this, there should be a maximum of intervention hours, in order to be easier able to prepare more follow-up interventions. Although the authors are very satisfied with the results of interventions, more time for preparation and especially follow-up would even further benefit the quality of interventions. Besides any formal coaching session, informal individual coaching (unscheduled, spontaneous), e.g. brief contact was very important during the project. Because only informal coaching sessions that lasted longer than 15 minutes were logged, the number of shorter informal coaching sessions was a lot higher. Thus, informal coaching appears to be as a corner stone in delivering sport psychology services for athletes and coaches (Birrer et al., 2012), and can be as effective as planned and scheduled interventions and frequently lead to formal individual coaching sessions (Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008). Because the number of informal interventions was high, future projects should calculate time for such interventions in order to have enough time for at least one informal coaching session after a workshop without coming late to the next one. Moreover, resulting from such informal coaching sessions there should be time slots for potential formal individual coaching sessions that develop from the informal ones. Otherwise, if all time slots are filled, athletes who have questions that develop for example during a workshop will be left unsatisfied.



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*(b) Topics and issues*

Results of the content analysis of the individual coaching sessions show that many athletes deal with performance issues. This is especially true for dealing with high expectations, motivation, self-regulation and most importantly knowledge about how to mentally prepare for training and competition. As mentioned before by Vernacchia (2008) important issues to elite athletes are dealing with lack of concentration and self-confidence. It appears that athletes have a huge lack of knowledge regarding techniques they can apply to reduce pressure, enhance their motivation, concentration and attention as well as to deal with emotions. Hence, it appears necessary that athletes receive the opportunity to learn about different mental techniques, may it be during workshops or individual sessions.

As has been seen during the project, workshops are a great source to talk about several sport psychological topics in a group and to learn from fellow athletes. Most likely, some athletes will already consciously apply several mental techniques without knowing that their individual knowledge could help other athletes. Thus, conducting regular sport psychological workshops on different topics with the same athletes might lead to a mutual learning and sharing of knowledge between athletes. Moreover, the individual learning process the mutual learning might have a positive effect on the social identity of Guatemalan athletes as a team. But besides regular sport psychological workshops there is a strong need for more individual coaching sessions for elite athletes on both, a national and a regional level. First, on a regional, and most likely a younger level, athletes need to learn about basic mental techniques as discussed for example with sport psychologists during their workshops on periodization and methods in sport psychology. Second, on a national level, athletes need to be given the opportunity to work with one sport psychologist over a longer period of time in order to learn, learn to apply and improve applying different mental techniques that eventually will help the athlete to excel their performance.

Regarding sport psychologists and their topics raised during workshops it can be identified that they know many of necessary mental techniques and sometimes even apply them. Interestingly they appear as if they do not feel self-confident enough to apply those methods and take them out to the athletes and teams. Sport psychologists also mentioned that some of them do not feel well integrated and respected by the federations and coaches, and that there is some lack of trust. In addition, some of the athletes mentioned that they do not trust the methods sport psychologists use, because they would apply predominantly questionnaires for example prior and after a competition without integrating the results of such questionnaires into individual interventions. In order to enhance dealing with important issues in sport psychological interventions, first, sport psychologists need to be given the opportunity to learn more about sport psychological methods and how to apply them. This needs to incorporate basic theoretical (sport) psychological knowledge, sport psychological methods, planning, conducting and evaluating sport psychological interventions (individual coaching session/workshops), as well as external and internal supervision of such interventions. Second, sport psychologists need to be

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provided with trust in what they do and how they do it from the COG, CDAG and the coaches. Because trust between people is important for the effectiveness and outcome of the work (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007), providing the sport psychologists with feelings of trust and a higher emotional connection, the sport psychologists' self-confidence will increase and they will more likely apply their knowledge to the Guatemalan athletes. Concomitant, the status, tasks and aims of sport psychologists within the COG and CDAG need to be clarified. This in turn will lead to more commitment to the COG, CDAG and their athletes, eventually leading to better results in sport psychological effectiveness.

Coaches raised the issues that there is a strong need for sport psychological support for the work in order to improve the athletes' performances. This combines both, working with athletes and working with coaches. While coaches emphasized that the work with athletes is crucial, they even mentioned that they need support. Supporting coaches might incorporate workshops on sport psychological knowledge, like communication skills, motivational climate, coach-athlete relationships or leadership. Moreover, offering and conducting regular (sport psychological) supervision for coaches was another issue coaches raised. Feedback on supervision during the project revealed that there is a strong need among coaches to share knowledge and experiences and to learn from coaches from different sports. Thus, sport psychological services for coaches like "coach the coach" in individual sessions or workshops for coaches should be established. Applying these methods will again enhance the cooperation between coaches and sport psychologists, eventually leading to more acceptances in fellow coaches. As a consequence, even the trust from athletes in sport psychologists will increase, because they see that their coaches successfully work with the sport psychologists.

Group workshops with executive board members of federations and associations revealed that there is a strong need for all federations to work together to reach common goals. As stated before, regular meetings of representatives and leaders are needed in order to further develop a structure to improve the assistance of elite sports. This is true on a general and a specific level. On a general level, working mutually on common goals is centered on the overall elite sports system. Thus, this incorporates basic areas such as coaches, finances, facilities etc. On a more specific level, there is a need to work detailed on improving sport psychological services, physio-therapeutical services, biomechanical services etc. Based on a common identity and leadership culture and communication habits that have been initially developed during workshops with executive board members, small focus groups that deal with general and specific issues might have a massive impact on the further development of the sports system and the athletes' performances that are part of the system.

Conducting a workshop with media representatives was very beneficial for those who attended the intervention. Although there is a strong need to respect and value the work of journalists, there is also a strong need to sensitize journalists on what effect they can have on an athletes' mental state before, during or after a competition. If there is some substantial influence,

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journalists need to reflect on this influence and the potential performance the athlete might be able to deliver, maybe resulting in choking and not meeting public expectations stirred up by the media. Hence, there is a need for conducting similar workshops with this target group on a regular level in order to develop a culture between media and sport that supports and evokes both parties going hand in hand.

### *Problems and challenges*

Problems and challenges are an important aspect that influence the acceptance and effectiveness of any intervention delivered to athletes. Thus to be able to perfectly prepare for any project that strives to enhance sport psychological services to athletes, teams, coaches, sport psychologists etc. it is crucial to know about potential hazards and barriers that might evolve prior or during such a project. During this project we identified a number of functional and organisational problems and challenges that future projects need to be aware of.

One important issue was punctuality, because many athletes, coaches, sport psychologists and executive board members came late to workshops and appointments. Although this behaviour can be referred to the guatemaltecan culture, and the authors tried to get used to it, it caused major disturbances during workshops. It appeared as if being not on time was partly accepted by some participants due to the cultural aspects, while others perceived this behaviour as disrespectful and not valuing those who were on time, the lecturer or the project as a whole. This was also true for behaviour during workshops such as answering phones inside the workshop or running in and out of the room during the workshops. After developing rules and applying them during the workshops the disturbances were significantly reduced. Besides acknowledging cultural aspects, for future projects or workshops it appears necessary to have workshop rules that are presented to the audience at the very start of the workshop or maybe even at the moment when inviting participants. This will give participants a structure that they can be guided with when attending the workshop.

Another problem both, the two authors and the audience had to face was the language barrier. Resulting from this barrier, workshops took longer due to need for translating everything that has been said. Moreover, some things said might have been translated in a different way than they were meant (lecturer->participant, participant->lecturer). Besides this, the need for interpreting from a language into another one is a time factor, because everything that is said needs to be said twice, once in each language. Thus, interventions (workshops, individual coaching sessions) take longer compared to monolingual interventions. One major issue in this regard is the confidentiality of topics discussed in workshops, but especially in individual coaching sessions. Although the experience showed that athletes did not act or behave cautious or restraint, there is a strong need for conducting sport psychological interventions (especially individual coaching sessions) with athletes monolingually.

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The time schedule for interventions was, especially at the beginning of the project, not well structured. This was recognizable on several aspects. First, there was a lack of time between interventions. In case participants arrived late (in some cases >20 minutes), the workshop started late, this affected subsequent interventions, because there was not sufficient slack time. Second, interventions were planned at different locations leading to the necessity that lecturers needed to change locations, which – depending on traffic – took a lot of time that was not scheduled. Third, the time schedule did not include any time for the preparation or follow-up of interventions. Preparing high quality interventions for workshops with athletes, coaches, sport psychologists, media representatives and especially executive board members needs sufficient time. Thus, time schedules for such projects should include time slots in which lecturers can prepare future interventions or conduct their quality management. Moreover, regular meetings with organizing managers need to be scheduled, too. Adding to this context, some workshops did not fit the specific project scope, applying specifically for the work with media representatives. This aspect is not important because of the work with media representatives, but because athletes who should and could have received individual sport psychological support did not because of the time needed for this workshop. Especially during the last project week some individual issues with athletes arose that could not be dealt with due to the external planning of interventions.

Another organisational challenge was the number of participants attending workshops, because it was not clear how many participants would be there before the workshop actually started. Thus, preparing interventions was based on estimations, which is especially true for coaches' and executive committee members' workshops.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the discussed results of the project, a number of recommendations have been developed for working with athletes, coaches and sport psychologists in Guatemala.

First, Guatemalan sport psychologists need to be identified who are highly qualified and in addition well respected by athletes, teams, coaches and at least the federations to form a strong group of sport psychologists who will intensively work with these target groups. For example, in Germany sport psychologists are identified as being highly skilled, when they fulfil the following requirements of the Federal Institute of Sport Sciences (BISp).

- *Academic education*
  - University degree in psychology, sport sciences (Master/Diploma) or sport psychology (Master)
- *Basic competencies*
  - Certified knowledge of psychology
  - Certified knowledge of sport sciences

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- *Specific competencies*
    - Sport psychological training (100 hours of education)
    - Sport psychological coaching (100 hours of education)
  - *Practical experiences*
    - >100 hours of sport psychological practice in high performance sports
    - >25 hours of supervised sport psychological practice in high performance sports

Sport psychologists who fulfil these requirements are put on a list of sport psychological experts. To stay on this list, sport psychologists have to proof every three years (1) that they worked >100 hours in elite sports applying supervision (>25 hours) for each specific competence (sport psychological training and coaching) within the past three years, and (2) that they visited 16 hours of sport psychological advanced trainings within the past three years. At the end of 2014, 80 sport psychological experts were allowed to work with elite athletes in Germany. Developing such criteria for sport psychologists in Guatemala would improve the quality of sport psychological services provided for Guatemalan elite athletes. Moreover, such transparent criteria would improve the trust of athletes in sport psychologists, and the COG and CDAG would have the chance to clearly define who would be eligible to work with elite athletes and who would not.

To develop high-class sport psychologists, COG and CDAG could develop education programs and further sport psychological education opportunities in cooperation with national or international universities. Theoretical and practical knowledge can be derived from psychological studies and practitioners, and for example systemic (business) coaches. Developing a sport psychological education program needs to be interdisciplinary in order to gain knowledge from different professions and perspectives, nationally and internationally (e.g. training-sciences, psychology, psychotherapy, coaching, mediation, supervision etc.). In addition, regular workshops on general or specific sport psychological topics for sport psychologists might help to further improve the exchange of knowledge as well as the examination and analysis of methods, approaches and potential challenges. This includes for example learning about sport psychological diagnostics, methods such as e.g., imagery, visualization, relaxation (biofeedback) or team topics, as well as organisational issues, such as evaluation, periodization etc. From the experiences during the project and subjective feedback from athletes, a strong need for further developing knowledge about how to plan, conduct and evaluate sport psychological interventions exists. Thus, even supervision from external experts might help to give feedback to how sport psychologists work and how to improve sport psychological services. Thus, creating regular advanced training opportunities on general and specific topics as well as applying regular supervision is a need for developing the quality of sport psychology in Guatemala.

Besides defining criteria to be eligible to work with elite athletes and developing advanced training opportunities there is a strong need for the implementation of a quality management

system using evaluations of sport psychological services. Referring for example to the work in the project *mentaltalent.de* of the German Sport University Cologne, every single sport psychological intervention (workshop, individual coaching session) is evaluated afterwards. With that approach, high quality standards can be maintained through identifying such sport psychologists who deliver high quality sport psychological services, and those who may need some more assistance in reaching high quality levels. One possibility to develop a first quality management could be to apply the “Quality management 17” questionnaire, which has been developed by Kleinert and Ohlert (2014), and has already been translated into Spanish. In addition, comprehensive quality management processes need to be developed. For example, in Germany sport psychological services are evaluated based on the basic model of the European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM), which has been adapted for the field of sport psychology (cf. Figure 3; Kleinert & Brand, 2011). Applying such a quality management will show athletes, coaches and sport psychologists alike that quality of sport psychological services are needed and that the federations take a close look at this. With that, again trust will be developed between athletes, sport psychologists and the federations.

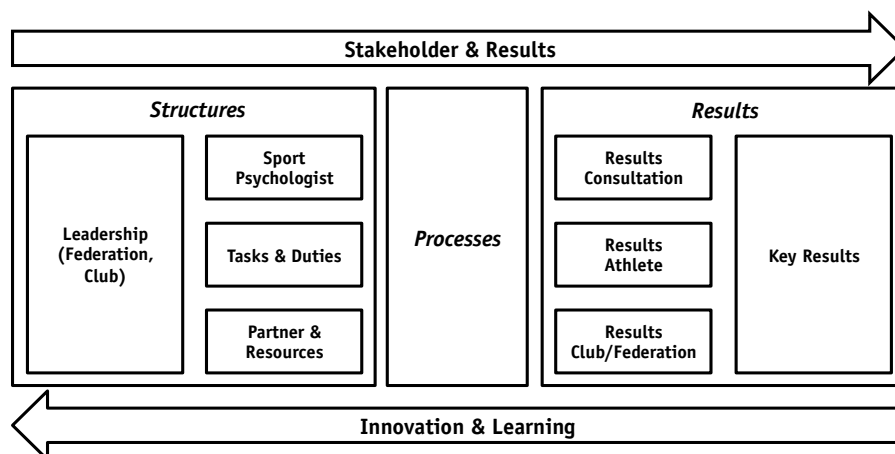


Figure 3. Adaption of the EFQM-model on sport psychological services in elite sports, based on Kleinert & Brand (2011).

Moreover, regular workshops for athletes need to be offered. Especially workshops can be open for any athlete from any sport. As has been proven during the project, athletes benefited from the fact that athletes attended workshops from a wide variety of sports. In addition, workshops should be planned applying the peer teaching method. Within this method, to a larger extent participants learn from the experiences and knowledge of fellow athletes, and to a lesser extent from the knowledge of the sport psychologist. In all interventions planned and conducted the athlete needs to be seen as the expert for himself, having the chance to find the own answers for the current question or helping other athletes by finding individual answers based on experiences of others. Such workshops could be planned for 15 athletes once a month on specific topics, and be lead by at least one or even two sport psychologists.

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The quantitative analysis of number of interventions delivered shows that there is a strong need for athletes to learn about mental techniques, about how to prepare for upcoming competitions and self-regulation. In addition, informal contact to the sport psychologists and unscheduled coaching sessions shows that athletes have many individual questions that need to be dealt with. Although this knowledge can be delivered even during workshops, the development of solutions is highly individual and is more effective during individual coaching sessions. Thus, it is recommended to offer a certain number of individual coaching sessions per month to athletes that need such assistance.

Obviously, many athletes would like to have the opportunity to work on individual questions and problems. Due to the fact that time, financial and other issues are always a limiting factor for providing services to athletes it is recommended to identify specific sports that are most likely to be successful during international competitions. Such sports could receive more funding for sport psychological services in order to further enhance the likelihood of improving performances. This approach has been successfully applied before by the British Olympic Association (BOA) in preparation for the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Besides working with athletes, working with coaches showed that even this target group has a strong demand for sport psychological support and knowledge. Thus, workshops for coaches to learn about communication, coach-athlete relationship, motivational climate, leadership and other sport psychologically orientated topics (motivation, imagery, etc.) need to be established on a regular basis. Moreover, coaches expressed a strong need for discussing individual problems and questions with other coaches in order to find solutions and to improve their athletes' performances. Hence, there is not only a need for learning new methods coaches can apply during training and competition, but even for professional exchange of experiences and supervision. To satisfy these demands, even meetings for coaches from different kinds of sports should be established. These meetings should be lead by a trained sport psychologist who is able to moderate this meeting and to apply methods that will support coaches in finding answers and solutions for their questions and problems.

### **Future projects**

Although this project provides insight into sport psychological topics athletes in Guatemala deal with, and thus, Guatemalan sport psychologists have to work on, it can only serve as a starting point for future debate and projects.

To use the momentum that has been started through this project, subsequent projects need to be planned and conducted in order to further improve sport psychological quality in Guatemala. After this first project strived to enhance interest in sport psychology and to offer sport psychological services to athletes in the first place, potential future projects should focus on Guatemalan sport psychologists. Although the two authors worked with Guatemalan sport psychologists during five workshops, the work with this target group needs to be more intense in

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order to improve sport psychological services. For example, a future project that focuses on sport psychologists and not on athletes could last four times two weeks in a year. Within each two weeks, an intense advanced training is offered for sport psychologists, including offering sport psychological workshops and individual coaching sessions for athletes delivered by Guatemalan sport psychologists. These interventions are supervised by other sport psychologists, in order to give feedback on the planning and conducting of the interventions. By applying such an approach exactly those are trained that deliver sport psychological services to Guatemalan elite athletes. In addition, those who are trained will be able and eligible to further train other and younger sport psychologists. At the same time, transparent criteria can be developed in order to identify those sport psychologists who are eligible to work with elite athletes.

Further research was planned to address the evaluation of the quality of sport psychological services delivered to athletes, coaches and sport psychologists. Unfortunately, only four people answered the online questionnaire by the finalization of this final report, resulting in not analysing individual feedback on the project. Thus, future research needs to implicitly deal with quality management by evaluating the work of sport psychological consultants and the relative impact of the different forms of interventions.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This project highlights the importance of sport psychological services for senior and junior elite athletes in Guatemala. Taking a close look at the data and experiences of the two authors, a huge demand in Guatemalan athletes exists to learn about sport psychological techniques and to discuss individual problems and challenges. Moreover, the project highlights the need for identifying distinct criteria for sport psychologists who are eligible to work with elite athletes and the need for advanced training for sport psychologists. Lastly, to keep track of the impact of sport psychological services for athletes and coaches a quality management system needs to be established. Besides these needs it has to be stated that the curiosity in sport psychological assistance and knowledge from athletes, coaches and sport psychologists was extraordinary. Moreover, the effort of all persons involved made all the work more than worth it and helped to make this project as successful as it was. In conclusion, by establishing this project the COG and the CDAG are on a very good and strong way to further enhance sport psychological services and thus to improve individual and team performances of athletes, coaches, sport psychologists and executive committee members.



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