

Edited by Alison Pope-Rhodium,  
Sara Robinson, and Sean J. Fitzpatrick

# Excelling in **SPORT** **PSYCHOLOGY**

Planning, Preparing, and Executing Applied Work



# Excelling in Sport Psychology

Written for graduate students and early professionals who are conducting applied sport psychology work for the first time, *Excelling in Sport Psychology* is a guide for planning, preparing, and executing this work. Each chapter addresses a critical component of the internship experience, such as selecting a site for an internship, preparing to begin the work, evaluating the completed work, and marketing oneself throughout one's early career. The diverse experiences of the various authors provide a range of viewpoints for trainees to consider and apply to their growth as sport psychology or mental skills professionals. The text is written in a practical manner, with suggestions and questions that will drive this personal and professional growth. Each chapter also includes a personal account from a current student or recent graduate about their experience in that area.

This book will appeal to students in academic sport psychology programs seeking additional support and guidance about the internship process, as well as post-graduates who did not have an internship component to their program. Supervisors will benefit from reading the book as it highlights diverse ways to work with trainees. Drawn from the experience of the applied Sport Psychology Department at John F. Kennedy University, which has helped students set up internships, have successful experiences, and attain jobs for over 25 years, this book can provide a model for training programs approaching the challenges of fieldwork.

**Alison Pope-Rhodium** received her Ph.D. from Liverpool John Moores University. She is a Professor, the Chair of the Sport Psychology Department, and a Faculty Fellow at John F. Kennedy University. Alison is a certified consultant with the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (CC-AASP) and has guided many trainees and their supervisors during applied work. She is also the host of the *Wee Chats with Brilliant People* podcast.

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# Excelling in Sport Psychology

Planning, Preparing, and  
Executing Applied Work

Edited by Alison Pope-Rhodius,  
Sara Robinson, and Sean J. Fitzpatrick

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We dedicate this book to the students and trainees in sport psychology. Without you, there would be no need for a book of this kind. Specifically, thank you to *our* students, interns, and colleagues throughout the years who have helped create a strong training program at John F. Kennedy University (JFKU). This book is also dedicated to our peers in the field, many of whom have contributed chapters to this text.



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# Foreword

*Gail Solt, M.A., was the Chair of the Sport Psychology Department for 25 years, and it was through her urging, drive, and dedication that the Master's Program was created out of a specialization in Clinical Psychology. Her interest in the field stemmed from her own experiences as a parent of a talented athlete. During her time in the position as Chair of the department, she focused on developing a strong academic program that set a foundation for effective applied work with athletes and performers.*

What do you do with a family that has a strong interest in sports and has two young, growing athletes? How do you ensure that you're being the best sport parent you can be for them? It was during the 1980s that I had been thinking about and researching these questions. My children were in every athletic endeavor they could find the time to participate in. I found myself considering a myriad of questions: What should I do to improve my interactions with my young athletes? How could I effectively communicate with them before and after games? Probably even more importantly, how should I behave during their games?

These thoughts and questions stemmed from my interest in sport and from trying to be a good sport parent. I was surprised to learn there was a professional field that focused on many of these same topics, although I had never heard of the field of sport psychology until I discovered John F. Kennedy University! I lived near the campus and learned that they offered a Master's in Clinical Psychology with a specialization in Sport Psychology; I thought this might be the avenue to pursue in order to answer questions on how to be the best support possible for my young athletes. What I found at JFKU was so much more than that; I found what became a 25-year career.

I soon enrolled in the Clinical Psychology Program at JFKU so I could pursue my Sport Psychology Specialization. I was mentored by Dr. Ron Levinson and Dr. Keith McConnell, who were psychologists with a strong knowledge of and interest in sports. Under their leadership I became enmeshed in the world of sport psychology. The teaching model of the Clinical Psychology Program, with its focus on internships, greatly influenced my belief that the best way to develop future professionals is to have them doing hands-on, supervised work.

It became very clear to me that interest in the field of sport psychology was increasing and after I finished my clinical degree I felt JFKU could expand its offerings. With the help of many other faculty members, I designed the Sport Psychology Master's Degree, which started in 1990. Just as with the Clinical Psychology Program, the internships became the heart of the training experience within the curriculum. This was very important to me because I felt we had an obligation to the students (to provide professional training) as well as to their clients (to provide professional services).

Prior to my work at JFKU, as a young adult and mother, I spent many hours volunteering in my community. Based on my experience in volunteer work, I looked for a way that

our students could not only become professionals in the sport psychology field, but could also serve those in need within the community. Thus, LEAP (Life Enhancement through Athletic Participation) was established. Students, working through LEAP, completed their first internship with incarcerated youth, a practice that continues to this day. At the site, the interns spend a week teaching sport psychology/mental training skills to the young men. The skills, which are taught with an initial goal to successfully complete a high ropes course, serve as valuable life skills that can be utilized in and out of the facility. The students at JFKU are well trained and well educated. But what makes the students so special is that, through experiences like these, they come to realize that the more they give, the more they receive.

The Sport Psychology Department at JFKU is thriving as well as expanding. I feel honored to have been part of such an outstanding program and I am so proud of the work that our students have done and will do in the future. I believe that this text will help future generations of trainees as they begin their applied experiences.

Gail Solt, M.A.  
Founding Chair of the Sport Psychology Department at JFKU

# Preface

This book has been in the works for several years. Gail Solt, the founder of the original Master's Program at JFKU, wanted to produce a resource to help guide interns and supervisors based on the wealth of knowledge we have accumulated at JFKU. As editors, we wanted to share various insights about *how* to do effective work in sport psychology as a trainee or early professional. The opportunity came a few years ago and the three of us have been working on it ever since.

When we first started to work on the idea for this book, we noticed that there was a glaring need in the applied sport psychology/mental skills training literature for a resource that guides trainees and supervisors through the process of applied work. As supervisors, classroom instructors (online and on-site), and former trainees ourselves, we know how impactful the first applied experiences are. We have observed many students who have excelled, and many who have struggled (often it is the students in this second group that end up being the most successful professionals because they push boundaries!). During these first experiences, habits are created and trainees begin to develop their framework for what they believe applied sport psychology is and how they want to contribute to the field.

At JFKU we have been guiding students through the process of doing applied sport psychology work through internships for over 25 years. We aim to provide (and help find) a diverse range of experiences; we require that they complete four supervised internships to receive their M.A. Degree. During these internships they work with both an individual and a group supervisor and receive a minimum of three hours of supervision per week. From these experiences, we have developed best practices that we want to share, so that others entering internships can learn from the thousands of students who went before them. Those who have been integral in developing these best practices and processes for being successful in applied work have contributed to this text as authors, and most also continue to supervise our students. These contributors are also either current or past practitioners in the field of applied sport psychology and bring a wealth of knowledge to this book. As editors, our vision was to share the experiences and ideas from numerous sources to help students and early professionals get the most out of their early applied sport psychology work.

## How to Use This Book

This book is written for both those in training via academic programs and early professionals looking to do post-degree training. The material is written for a broad audience as we realize that educational and training experiences of individuals within the field of sport psychology are incredibly diverse. This resource is written from a non-clinical perspective given our own training, but does include extra information when clinical issues may be pertinent, including chapters from licensed clinicians in our department.

This book is written in a developmentally linear fashion; we begin with chapters most relevant to the timing prior to starting your internship. Next come chapters that address what happens during your internship, and the final chapters address topics that are important as you wrap up your work and transition from trainee to professional. Some readers may find it beneficial to move chapter to chapter as they progress through their internship. Others might want to pick it up and read a chapter or two that seem especially relevant for their needs and experiences. Though the book is written with trainees primarily in mind, supervisors should also find the book useful as a companion to their supervision sessions and some chapters have specific sections devoted to notes directed toward supervisors.

You'll find introductions of each author at the beginning of each chapter, rather than in one list at the beginning or end of the book. Each biography highlights the author's training, how they're linked to JFKU, what they're doing now, and how to contact them. We did this to help you understand who they are and to give you context to their work. Each chapter also includes a short piece written by a current trainee or recent graduate of JFKU. We hope that you find the experiences of these individuals helpful to further contextualize the chapter's information within the internship setting. All of the chapters end with questions to ponder and tasks to consider. We added these to stimulate reflective practice and encourage you to take the time to complete at least one or two before you move onto the next section or into applying the ideas. Reflective practice is a deliberate and conscious means of learning from one's experiences. It is a focus of the internship experiences at JFKU, and is a habit that we hope you develop and utilize often.

### A Few Comments on Terminology

The term *internship* is used throughout the book to refer to applied work in the field of sport psychology and mental skills training, working under another individual who is taking responsibility for that applied work. We realize that different terms may be used dependent on the program, country within which the trainee is working, professional associations' preferred terms, etc.; however, we are using *internship* to refer to all training experiences in applied sport psychology to simplify the information shared about this type of experience. The individual taking responsibility for the trainee's work is referred to as the supervisor. The internship may involve being trained as part of an academic curriculum or via an independent supervisor, and the work the trainee is doing is typically offered for free. We will be using *trainee* and *intern* to denote someone who is working in an academic program and/or someone receiving supervision. Some chapters may also refer to the supervisee, which would be the *trainee* or *intern* in that particular situation. Our emphasis in this book is based on what we teach at JFKU in the Sport Psychology Department and is therefore focused on sport, but doesn't preclude any other performance domains and many of the principles (especially for training in the field) will transfer across into other arenas.

As most of the authors are based in the U.S., we have assumed American-centric processes and procedures in sport psychology and will discuss many of the guidelines given by the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP), though much of the information will be applicable in other countries as well. If you are based elsewhere in the world, please consult your country's laws and guidelines that pertain to the work of someone in sport psychology/mental skills training. If, however, your country does not have rules and regulations in this field, we would still highly recommend you seek training and support in the form of supervision or mentorship from qualified professionals, as described in this book. If you're not already in a training program for applied sport psychology, we suggest

you begin; even if you already have a doctorate in psychology, you will still need sport psychology-specific academic coursework and supervised applied experiences. We do not intend for this book to be a substitute for supervision and mentoring, and even though we are immensely proud of what we have produced, it is no substitute for the guidance offered by a quality trained supervisor.

We are glad that you have decided to use this book on your journey to become an effective practitioner in applied sport psychology and mental skills training. Good luck! Be brilliant, and be well!

Alison, Sara, and Sean



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# Acknowledgments

Thank you to the authors who shared their knowledge and experience throughout this book. Thank you also for putting up with our seemingly endless edits and requests for “just one more . . .”. We also want to thank Gail Solt for writing the foreword and, more importantly, for developing the Sport Psychology Department at JFKU. It was her vision and hard work that laid the groundwork for this book. A hearty thank you to the students and recent graduates who added trainee perspectives to each chapter; your experiences provide authentic views of being a trainee that we could not replicate ourselves. To the publishing team at Taylor and Francis, especially Georgette, we are indebted for your hard work and your support throughout the writing process, you truly are the best in the business. We greatly appreciate the time of Stephanie Buck for her help with the book proposal and the huge help of Bryanna Bruger and Anna Shakal for their help with organizing, editing, and indexing. Without their help there would have been a lot of tears! Lastly, our thanks go to Dan, “Danny Hoops,” Ourian, Akasia J-Riggins, and the athletes at College Preparatory School in Oakland for assisting with creating our cover image, and to Karen De Jager for the fantastic photo for the cover.

*Alison:* A particular thank you to my husband, Virgil, who is my “Rhodius rock” and helps me steer through murky waters when times are tough. He still keeps me laughing after more than 28 years together, which will help us when we’re old and wizened! Thanks also to my peer support group, the CCSP (California Center for Sport Performance) for helping me be accountable and inspiring me to live large! Finally, a big thank you to my co-editors, and for being such fun team players; I have enjoyed your company greatly along the way and it simply wouldn’t have happened without you.

*Sara:* Thank you to the three gentlemen in my life who made it possible to get this book done. B, E, and N, I love you. To Alison and Sean, I am proud that we made this happen, and glad that this is the team that did it.

*Sean:* Thank you to Alison for bringing me onto the JFKU team years ago, and to Sara for being my reliable lunch companion and hijinks co-conspirator (you’re also the best acronym creator west of the Mississippi!). Lastly, to the Skype-meeting-interrupter-extraordinaire, Carl, for always reminding me that a walk is a great way to clear your mind.



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Philip Schmitz

Derek Swartout-Mosher

Damon Valentino

Joey Velez

# Abbreviations

AASP	Association for Applied Sport Psychology
APA	American Psychological Association
BASES	British Association for Sport and Exercise Sciences
BPS	British Psychological Society
CC-AASP	Certified Consultant through the Association for Applied Sport Psychology
ISSP	International Society of Sport Psychology
JFKU	John F. Kennedy University



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# 1 Pursuing Applied Work

## Are You Ready?

*Alison Pope-Rhodius, Sara Robinson,  
and Sean J. Fitzpatrick*

*The decision of whether someone is ready to begin doing applied work in sport psychology is a critical step that cannot be overlooked in the process of the training experience. Trainees must be prepared; they need to have taken the necessary coursework, gained the core competencies required, and, most importantly, feel confident that they are ready to take the next step in their development. Beginning this process too early may lead a trainee to doubt their potential, while waiting too long may hinder a trainee's development. Through self-reflection, as well as conversations with supervisors and other trusted individuals, trainees can ensure that they are ready to begin "doing" the work.*

*This chapter will help readers make this crucial decision about readiness to begin by providing information on when, in an individual's development, an internship should be considered. Additionally, this chapter will aid trainees in their decision-making process by providing several issues and questions to consider, such as how much coursework the student has taken and the timing of the internship in relationship to other training demands.*

### Background Information on the Authors

The first author of this chapter, **Alison Pope-Rhodius**, is the Chair of the Sport Psychology Department at JFKU. Having done all her formal training in the UK (Ph.D. from Liverpool John Moores University), she was first accredited for applied work with BASES in 1996 and has since become a CC-AASP. She teaches a foundational course at JFKU called Sport Psychology A and the more advanced Sport Psychology B class, and regularly supervises M.A. interns and post-Master's and doctoral trainees. She has worked as a non-clinical practitioner for over two decades, has a small private practice that specializes in elite individual performers, and is the host of the podcast "Wee Chats with Brilliant People." She can be contacted at [arhodius@jfkku.edu](mailto:arhodius@jfkku.edu).

The second author, **Sara Robinson**, received her Master's Degree in Sport Psychology from JFKU in 2006. She has taught Performance Enhancement courses in the program and supervised students since 2009. Additionally, for several years she was responsible for setting up internships for the program's LEAP (Life Enhancement through Athletic Participation) Project, which supports underserved youth. In this position, she worked directly with coaches and interns developing and supporting applied internships from beginning to end. She has worked as a practitioner in applied sport psychology for the last ten years. Sara can be contacted at [srobinson@jfkku.edu](mailto:srobinson@jfkku.edu).

Sean J. Fitzpatrick was trained at West Virginia University (WVU). At WVU Sean received his Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate in Sport and Exercise Psychology as well as an additional Master's in Community Counseling. Sean's work at JFKU focused on research methods, assessment of learning, and supervision of interns working within a wide range of sports. He is currently an Assistant Professor and Department Chair of Exercise and Sport Science at Marian University in Fond du Lac, WI. He has worked with a variety of athletes and exercisers across various sporting domains. Sean can be reached at [sjfitzpatrick02@marianuniversity.edu](mailto:sjfitzpatrick02@marianuniversity.edu).

First things first, congratulations! The decision to begin an internship in applied sport psychology is exciting for trainees to consider. In our experience, trainees often report that their first applied experience is the most influential in regard to their growth as future professionals. This is not surprising as internships have been identified as a critical component of applied sport psychology training (Owton, Bond, & Tod, 2014; Tammen, 2000; Watson, Zizzi, Etzel, & Lubker, 2004; Wylleman, Harwood, Albe, Reints, & de Caluwé, 2009). Whether you are searching for your own internship or working with your academic program or professional organization to secure a site, it is critical that you begin your internship only when you are ready. Deciding when that moment is can be difficult.

For many trainees, the choice of when to begin an internship is decided for them. When a certain milestone is reached, be it coursework or other indicators, internships can begin. Even if the decision about timing is made for you, spend time reflecting on whether or not you are prepared to begin your internship so that you can enter the experience with confidence. There are a number of factors to consider when tackling the decision to begin an internship, which we will discuss in more detail. Starting an internship before you're ready, or starting an internship too late, can have potentially negative consequences.

Beginning an internship too early, before you are ready, can lead to a loss in confidence, as well as unnecessary stress from facing challenges that you are not yet equipped to handle. Let's imagine an intern in this scenario. Pat has taken a few sport psychology courses, and was also a former athlete. An opportunity to work with a local youth soccer team as a mental skills intern becomes available, which Pat pursues and then secures. During Pat's first presentation with the team, the athletes are not engaged and Pat struggles to find an effective way to deliver the information. Over time this pattern continues, and Pat's lack of group management skills, as well as an inability to synthesize and deliver various sport psychology concepts, leads the coach of the team to ask Pat to present to the team less and less. As Pat's time with the team decreases, so does Pat's confidence. Pat's initial impression of applied work in the field is poor, and Pat believes that she is missing some *it* factor that is needed to be successful as a mental skills coach. Trainees' internship opportunities are where their future professional identities begin to develop (Foltz et al., 2015), and experiences like Pat's can lead to a premature negative judgment regarding one's potential in the field.

There are also potential ethical issues with starting an internship too soon. Without possessing the foundation needed, interns may end up doing more harm than good. A core characteristic of someone who is unprepared is an inability to realize what they do not yet know (Robinson, 1974). This ignorance can lead an intern to not consider the negative consequences of certain actions. Mental skills are taught incorrectly, identifiable emotional triggers with clients are overlooked, and/or fundamental ethical principles such as dual roles are not considered, all of which can have negative consequences for the athlete.

As Pat's case highlights, starting an internship without possessing certain competencies is worrisome. However, on the other end of the spectrum, waiting too long hinders development as well. Delaying internships can prolong the time it takes for a trainee to become a professional as this training experience needs to be completed prior to the beginning of a career in the field. Additionally, the accumulation of other training experiences prior to supervised applied work can falsely cement assumptions about working with athletes. It can be difficult to overcome the angst that may occur when a trainee realizes that prior beliefs based on their training were incorrect. Therefore, trainees who have waited too long for an internship may develop a less flexible approach to their work. Despite these potential concerns with starting internships too late, many trainees may find themselves hesitant to label themselves as ready for an internship.

At the heart of many ethical codes is a commitment to practice only when one possesses the competencies necessary. For potential interns, the calculation of whether or not one is competent can be paralyzing. There are always more classes to take, more observations of professionals to be done, or more journal articles to read. If you wait until you know *everything*, or feel 100% confident, then you will never begin an internship! Most graduate students have a strong desire to be effective in their work, and the thought of making mistakes with athletes can be a hard pill to swallow. It is only natural to be anxious ahead of your first internship (Tod, 2007), but if you have prepared correctly (and with appropriate guidance) you will find few other training experiences that are as impactful as your first. Most students find their internship experiences to be satisfying (Fitzpatrick, Monda, & Butters Wooding, 2016), and ensuring that you are ready for the internship is step number one to getting the most out of this valuable training component.

### When to Begin an Internship

What are the elements to have in place before you start your applied work in the field? There is no legal protection around the terms *sport* or *mental skills* in the U.S., thus anyone who has a license to practice psychology could, in theory, also practice *sport* psychology. However, ethically this would not be appropriate and is not something we could recommend. In addition, just taking introductory courses in this area does not qualify you to practice. After all we do not want you to start doing applied work just having read about the importance of being mentally strong or how to relax before you play! Lastly, even someone who has been an athlete and who has experienced the mental demands of sport themselves is still not ready to begin working with athletes without adequate training. Examples of individuals without training in sport psychology who are *not* ready to work with athletes and coaches are:

- Weekend Warriors or recreational athletes/exercisers
- Experienced high-level athletes
- Athletes who may have experienced working with a sport psychologist or mental skills trainer
- Personal trainers and other professionals who have experience working with athletes
- Individuals with education in and training in psychology who do not have specific training in sport psychology

The individuals in each of these groups may very well possess experiences that will aid their eventual applied sport psychology work, but they all still lack the knowledge and skills needed to ethically and skillfully practice in the field. Knowledge of particular sport