

# The Practice of Sport Psychology: A Youth Coaches' Perspective

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research qualitatively documents youth sport coaches' perspectives of sport psychology and sport psychology consultants (SPCs) in the United Kingdom. Youth coaches are a unique population yet to be examined, despite their significance to the development of athletes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight coaches who held a minimum of ten years experience with youth performers of a county to national level. Participants represented American football, hockey, soccer, and track and field. Inductive analysis identified twenty-four higher order themes, resulting in eight general dimensions: Role of sport psychology and SPCs, a sport psychologist's clientele, perceived work for sport psychologists, perception of where sport psychology belongs, expected characteristics of SPCs, professional accountability, and the facilitators and barriers of sport psychology. Results indicate youth coaches' support for the field of sport psychology, but the barriers SPCs face within youth sport are discussed. Consequently this article offers practitioners with applied solutions to overcome potential obstacles and improve current practices.

**Key words:** Professionalism, Sport Psychology Consultancy, Youth Sport Coaches

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sport psychology and its importance in sport, has become increasingly prevalent over recent years [1,2]. The practice of applied sport psychology is an evidence-based discipline following theory, research, and practice [3,4]. Sport psychology consultants (SPCs) aim to apply their scientific knowledge to influence psychological change among athletes by using various skills, techniques, and interventions to ultimately enhance performance [3-5]. Despite its recent growth, the field of sport psychology continues its quest for acceptance within the sporting world. Currently there is a large discrepancy between the growing interest of sport psychology and the job market availability, as the opportunities for full-time

employment for practicing SPCs remain limited [1,2]. In order for the discipline of sport psychology to thrive as a profession, it needs to be recognized and supported by many, particularly those within the sporting world. Gardner [6] stresses a certified standard of care to be provided to all who are exposed to the services provided. Therefore, investigating the opinions of coaches who often act as the gatekeeper to many sporting organizations will help to develop the acceptance of sport psychology and its profession [6,7].

#### SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IN THE UK AND ACCREDITATION OF SPCS

Currently in the UK, the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) are the two professional bodies that have developed recognized pathways enabling aspiring SPCs and Sport Scientists to gain experience while working towards accreditation and professional status. Individuals who aim for accreditation work closely with their chosen supervisor who helps to ensure the high standards of proficiency set by the BPS and BASES are achieved and maintained. The accreditation process plays an integral role shaping the development and the effectiveness for training SPCs [8]. The importance of professional credibility is essential if applied sport psychology is to continue its growth globally [9]. For example, accreditation by the BPS can lead individuals to achieve chartered status as a: 'Sport and Exercise Psychologist'. Those accredited by BASES are able to use the title of 'BASES Accredited Sport and Exercise Scientist'. More recently in 2013, BASES gained Chartered Scientist Status (CSci) recognizing sport and exercise scientists to offer professionalism at a high standard. Such professional chartered titles add value to the profession. Such status can help individuals to gain trust in professions of sport psychology and challenge those critics who are unconvinced by sport psychology, its importance and potential to enhance sports performance [10].

#### EFFECTIVE SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Many researchers have identified favorable personal characteristics of a consultant that can potentially improve the delivery and effectiveness of sport psychology [11,12,]. Highlighting the contributing factors of effective practice offers SPCs methods of how to improve their personal practice and to improve the reputation of applied sport psychology as a profession [13]. Interpersonal skills such as a good listener, trustworthy and caring, positive and relating well to athletes are reported as effective qualities of practicing consultants [7,11,14,], whereas a lack of interpersonal skills and an over-bearing presence were highlighted as ineffective attributes [7,11,14]. Moreover, effective working relationships between SPCs and their clients can determine the success of a practitioner, and the likelihood of a successful intervention with an athlete [15,16].

#### SKEPTICISM OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Sport psychology is often scrutinized as critics question whether it qualifies as an acceptable science [17,18]. Unlike the other sport science disciplines, sport psychology is measured by subjective methodologies that have led individuals to question its credibility and validity to sports performances [16]. There is a traditional view that proven knowledge is only verified by objective measurement tools [17]. Gardner [6] states anecdotal evidence is no longer sufficient when justifying applied sport psychology as a profession and scientific field. Martens [19] believes the best theories will be developed by field research on the implications faced in the applied working world of sport psychology. Researchers have focused on understanding the perceptions of athletes and coaches of the elite population, who experience sport psychology and evaluate its delivery [12,20-24]. Understanding the

individual's perceptions and experiences of sport psychology is critical for the future development of sport psychology as a profession [20].

#### ATHLETES' ATTITUDES TOWARDS SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Numerous studies report stigmatized attitudes among athletes towards the field of sport psychology [25,26]. Ravizza [24] reports the negative misconceptions have led the public to associate SPCs as 'shrinks' working within clinical psychology. Martin [22] reported that athletes believe they would be branded as mentally unstable if they were to seek help from a sport psychology consultant. This belief is further supported by Linder et al. [25,26] who found that athletes in consultation with sport psychologists were seen as mentally and emotionally unbalanced, to be inconsistent performers and have trouble working within sports team.

However, more recently Wrisberg et al. [27] stated athletes who had previous positive experiences of sport psychology have a greater appreciation, remain receptive, and report little stigma towards seeking sport psychology services in the future [22,28]. Furthermore, Vissek et al. [29] report that practitioners within youth sport should be aware of the physical, cognitive, emotional and social development of youth athletes. Targeting other lifestyle issues within the youth population may ultimately enhance performance as a direct result of improving personal development [30]. These positive developments will help to defend sport psychology against the pathology orientation that lead to stigmatized attitudes. It is therefore encouraging to find that athletes' perceptions of sport psychology appear to be shifting from a negative nature to a positive, but Green et al. [21] concludes the research to date reveals equivocal results.

#### COACHES' ATTITUDES AND INFLUENCE ON ATHLETE'S PERCEPTIONS

A coach is one of the most significant individuals to an athlete and has the ability to shape athletes' personal experiences. Therefore the coach-athlete relationship is fundamental within the sporting environment [31]. With this in mind, it is crucial for a coach to remain open-minded to sport psychology [24,32]. Athletes are likely to view sport psychology positively if it is recommended from a coach [22]. A coach often decides whether to engage in sport psychology, to employ a consultant, or to terminate any relationship with a sport psychologist [7, 33].

Generally, there is a positive consensus regarding coaches' attitudes towards sport psychology. Partington and Orlick [7] report coaches are confident in SPCs' professional capabilities to improve performance. Nevertheless, a small minority continues to voice their uncertainty towards sport psychology [2,7,27,33,34]. Partington and Orlick [7] identified one coach who was unconvinced of SPCs abilities to help athletes. Although the majority of coaches value and acknowledge the benefits of sport psychology, a high percentage of coaches admit they do not intend to seek or integrate sport psychology services into their team and club in the near future [2,33,35].

#### WORKING WITHIN YOUTH COMPETITIVE SPORT

Questioning the potential role of sport psychology services within competitive youth sport is unique to this study. There is a widespread assumption that the sport psychology domain is exclusive and sits solely within elite sport. Therefore, the perspectives and opinions of coaches working within competitive youth sport in the UK is yet to be examined. Zakrajsek et al. [33] believe coaches and other professionals within the sporting environment should encourage young athletes to acknowledge and appreciate the range of different services such

as sport psychology that are available, and can improve their chances of success as athletes. Youth athletes are the future generation of sport and will influence the future demand for sport psychology services [20]. Providing effective services and positive experiences for young athletes will promote positive attitudes and increase their receptiveness and acceptance toward sport psychology [22].

Furthermore, developing an awareness of coaches' knowledge, experiences, and opinions of effective sport psychology will help practicing consultants to improve their professional approach. Therefore, an exploratory study into coaches' perspectives toward sport psychology may gain an insight into how SPCs can improve the appeal of sport psychology and its delivery. A coach's perspective is key, therefore, acting as the gatekeeper within this study. Understanding a coach's belief of sport psychology and its role could offer more employment opportunities and enhance the effectiveness of practicing SPCs.

This study aimed to qualitatively explore youth sport coaches' perspectives of sport psychology and of SPCs. This paper addressed if the service delivery of SPCs preferred by youth sport coaches corresponds with existing literature. Furthermore, the current study proposes to offer SPCs with applied suggestions to improve their practice and potentially widen their client base. This study intended to ask: what are coaches' expectations of sport psychology and SPCs? What are the potential barriers SPCs may face while working (with particular reference to competitive youth sport)? Consequently, what can SPCs do to increase the appeal of sport psychology among competitive youth sporting organizations? And finally, do coaches believe sport psychology is a valuable service within competitive youth sport?

## **METHOD**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

Following institutional ethical approval, participants within this study were currently employed as head/lead coaches working within competitive youth sport in the UK. Coaches were selected on the criterion they worked closely with youth athletes aged 13-18 years competing at county to national level, and had a minimum of five years coaching experience. Eight coaches took part in the study: seven male, one female, with a mean age of 43 years  $\pm$  15.57. The participating coaches represented the sports of American football, hockey, soccer, and track and field. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit the participants. Coaches from local competitive clubs were initially contacted via e-mail and were sent a copy of the information sheet. Once written consent was obtained, arrangements were made to conduct the interview.

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Prior to data collection, a pilot study was conducted using the initial interview guide with a competitive youth swimming coach. Pilot interviews enable researchers to test methods of data collection to highlight areas of improvement to allow appropriate amendments to be made prior to the final collection of data [36]. Changes were made to add clarity and fluidity to the interview: the questions were made more concise, the orders of questions were rearranged, and elaboration probes were added to encourage depth of answers and gain additional information [37].

A semi-structured interview guide was prepared and implemented to facilitate the interview process with all participating coaches. Barriball and While [38] report semi-structured interviews are effective when exploring the perceptions and opinions of individuals, offering a method of standardizing interviews to ensure all areas of interest are covered, and sufficient volumes of data are collected. Interview guides from previous sport

psychology literature shaped the creation of the interview guide within this study [7,12,20,39]. The interview guide consisted of four sections. The first section identified a coach's understanding of sport psychology; focusing on the expectations and personal characteristics sport psychologists should ideally possess. To clarify the coaches' understanding of sport psychology, a definition was provided:

Sport psychology is concerned with the psychological factors/the mental components that could influence one's sporting performances. [5]

The second section considered the job description of a sport psychologist. SPCs' potential roles, methods in how they would work and the key topics they would potentially cover were examined. Thirdly, the interview guide examined the negative and positive perceptions of sport psychology, the barriers and facilitators that limit and/or encourage the use of sport psychology in competitive youth sport. The final section of the interview guide aimed to highlight what would influence a coach to employ a SPC and if coaches believed sport psychology was important within competitive youth sport.

## PROCEDURE

Each interview was conducted on a face-to-face basis by the lead researcher, with an introductory brief utilized as suggested by Barbour [40] and similarly used by Anderson et al. [39] and Blom et al. [20]. The brief summarized the general aim of the study, the procedures, and finally emphasized confidentiality to all participating coaches. The interview was a one-off meeting with the researcher, at a time and place that suited the participant. Interviews lasted on average 65.8 minutes  $\pm$  17.6, were recorded and transcribed verbatim, collectively yielding 76 typed pages of single-spaced data.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Member checking was adopted to enable all interviewees to verify the genuineness of the interview transcripts. Each participant was asked to fully read the transcript and confirm its accuracy [41,42]. All the participants authenticated the interviews; only making minor corrections to the biographical information describing the coaches' backgrounds and experiences. As suggested by Dale [41], the transcribed interviews were then read thoroughly several times to immerse the researcher into the data, to gain a sense of whole, before data reduction. Meaningful data was thematically grouped with data of similar meaning leading to the formation of lower order themes, higher order themes and consequently resulting in general dimensions [43]. The analysis of participants' shared perspectives led to an open inductive approach of thematic analysis enabling new themes to emerge throughout the analysis, rather than assigning raw data to predetermined categories [44].

To enhance the validity of the results, the data was analyzed by the first author and was subject to respondent validation by an academic in sport psychology, whereby the raw data themes, lower and higher order themes were revisited in an attempt to enhance validity and reliability of the thematic structures [45,42]. A continued discussion took place with the independent academic to evaluate the analyzed data, in an attempt to validate the research findings by triangulation [46]. A third investigator made no further amendments confirming unanimity of the analyzed data.

## RESULTS

388 raw data themes were created from the analysis of the interview transcripts reflecting

coaches' perspectives of sport psychology. This subsequently formed 60 lower order themes, resulting in 24 higher order themes, concluding in eight general dimensions: the role of sport psychology and SPCs, a sport psychologist's clientele, perceived work for a sport psychologist, perception of where sport psychology belongs, expected characteristics of SPCs, professional accountability, and the facilitators and barriers of sport psychology. Findings are reported using descriptive quotations lifted from the transcripts allowing readers to become familiar with the data. Furthermore this enables the reader to make personal judgements of the collected data [47].

## ROLE OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY AND SPCS

Coaches voiced their expectations of sport psychology and SPCs, communicating their beliefs of what SPCs should do when working with individuals, and how sport psychology can be of benefit. Three higher order themes contributed to this general dimension. Firstly, it was assumed by the coaches that a sport psychologist was employed to assist athletes in enhancing their athletic performances: *"Ultimately it would have to come out in performance. That's what sport psychologists are there for. Sport psychology skills are used to improve an athlete's performance...to make certain that they improve."* Coaches further explained how sport psychology assistance could help with the personal development of some athletes outside of the sporting environment, as shown in the following quotation: *"Take the lessons they learn in sport, try to make them a better person in society... life lessons should make them a better athlete in sport, a better team mate too."*

Nevertheless, for sport psychologists to work effectively with athletes to enhance athletic performance or to encourage personal development, it is critical for sport psychologists to gain a deep understanding of client-athletes: *"Understand the person, I don't think you can understand a person if you don't know what makes them tick, what's their home life like, their background, their parental support... You would have to understand the individual first and foremost before anything."* Understanding the client-athlete was recognised as the third higher order theme contributing to the role of a sport psychologist.

## A SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST'S CLIENTELE

The second general dimension revealed whom coaches believe a sport psychologist should work with. Four higher order themes were identified. Initially coaches generally assumed sport psychologists were inherently employed to work solely with athletes as confirmed in the following response: *"To support the athlete... to maximise the performance of the athlete."* After further questioning, coaches recognized the potential for sport psychologists to work alongside coaches, to help improve their interactive skills and build effective coach-athlete relationships: *"Sport psychologists would be very useful to coaches... get the coaches to think a little more carefully about how they handle people... they're dealing with human beings who are all different, especially young children."* The interviewed coaches considered who sport psychologists could work with in addition to the athletes and coaches.

Parents of young athletes were recognised as individuals who could benefit from sport psychology services as represented in the following statement: *"If a sport psychologist can guide the parents to help their child, then that's very important."* Coaches continued to identify other individuals who work within the sporting environment, many of whom may be a significant other within an athlete's support base. Coaches believed there is an opportunity for SPCs to work effectively with other professionals as demonstrated in the following passage: *"Within an academy there is a lot of staff, the scouts, there's welfare who look after the boys away from the grounds, I think they could work with all those different people and*



*see if they can make a difference.”*

#### PERCEIVED WORK FOR A SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST

Potential areas of work for a sport psychologist and topical areas that appear to frequently challenge young competitive athletes in sport were identified and discussed. Two higher order themes emerged: the development of psychological skills and enhancing athletes' abilities to use psychological techniques. Every coach expressed it was common for young athletes to suffer from a lack of personal attributes that would often limit performance. The subsequent quote conveys confidence as a psychological skill in need of development: *“Confidence is the biggest one with the majority of players, confidence under pressure... confidence to deal with those situations... confidence when mistakes are made.”* Furthermore, coaches believed SPCs could improve the quality of athletic performances if young individuals were able to adopt psychological techniques effectively, such as goal setting: *“I really believe in goal setting... realistic goals... I think a sport psychologist can help athletes see that setting small goals leads to a huge goal.”*

#### PERCEPTION OF WHERE SPORT PSYCHOLOGY BELONGS

Coaches identified the type of athlete and the environment in which a SPC was likely to work. Four higher order themes emerged. Firstly, there was a widespread belief among the coaches who believed sport psychology services were better suited to particular sports. For example, one coach highlights sport psychology may be more applicable when there is a high emphasis on the cognitive element: *“The sport psychologists I've come across have been very involved in motor racing. I guess those sports benefit a lot more from sport psychology than say athletics. Mentally, that's got to be so tough... in some sports the mental aspect could be more important than the physical... they are the wealthy sports too.”*

Secondly, all the coaches were in agreement and believed sport psychology tended to sit exclusively within the elite athletic population as shown in the extracted comment: *“I've had experiences with athletes using sport psychologists... through the governing body where they provide the access to the sport psychologist... the governing body will take care of its elite athletes providing them with anything and everything they want.”* All the interviewed coaches understood and agreed sport psychology services could be beneficial for all young competitive athletes: *“People are realising that now, if you bring people in earlier... they'll have a longer training window... you've got more time to work with them, and you might start to see the full effects in time... you'll find the benefits earlier, and they'll have more time to improve and to develop.”* Further, coaches recognised how sport psychology services may be more appealing to older athletes: *“You tend to find in athletes that they will naturally improve as they grow and develop into their late teens... but when they get into their 20s, you need to put in the extra resources... if they want to find that edge that takes others on.”*

#### EXPECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF A SPC

Coaches identified the expected characteristics of a SPC that revealed three high order themes emerged. Coaches highlight personal traits and a range of interpersonal skills SPCs needed to demonstrate to build effective relationships and interact effectively with clients: *“Personable is definitely key, because some topics and the things a sport psychologist will talk about with the athlete... definitely approachable, have very clear communication skills.”* Coaches also had expectations of the professional qualities a sport psychologist should possess: *“Professionalism first of all: confidentiality, anything to do with anyone's personal problems or psychological hurdles they should keep that to themselves, so if athletes do open*

*up and share it, it should be contained.”* Lastly, coaches shared examples of negative characteristics that would diminish a coaches’ opinion of a SPC and cause potential clients to become apprehensive of sport psychology services: *“Arrogance, not being interested in the sport... someone who’s in it for the wrong reasons; if they’re not there for the players, if they have their own agenda, they see it as just a job, a way of making money, they don’t have the athletes well-being at heart.”*

#### PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Professional accountability as a general dimension was sourced from two higher order themes: becoming a sport psychologist and judging a sport psychologist. Coaches voiced their expectations of sport psychologists’ professional qualifications and secondly, the factors that would potentially influence coaches when employing a SPC. Typically, coaches were unable to give a detailed career path of a SPC, although the following quotation gives an example of the vague knowledge coaches expected route to professional status: *“Most sport psychologists would start with a sport science degree of some type... get some education into sport psychology and then you would begin to specialise. I would presume you would have to take some advanced courses and be assessed as well along the way.”* Furthermore, all the interviewees were asked how to identify a creditable sport psychologist, all the coaches reflected similar judgements of professional competency: *“I would read their background, any recommendations, if anyone else has used them, where have they worked before, were they any good or not.”*

#### FACILITATORS OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

This general dimension reflects the coaches’ perspectives of what SPCs can do to increase their work prospects, and the factors that would promote the profession of sport psychology. Two higher order themes were identified: to improve accessibility and to improve awareness. The majority of coaches were unaware of how to contact a sport psychologist or where to go, to gain further information. Therefore, the need to improve accessibility of sport psychology services was apparent as shown in the following quotation: *“The problem is the access to sport psychologists. There aren’t many around and it’s hard to know where to go to find one.”* Furthermore, all interviewed coaches emphasized the need to improve awareness among working professionals within the sporting environment in a bid to widen the appeal of sport psychology services: *“Is there a union or anything? Need to promote role models in sport psychology... like the sport psychologist who works with the British cycling team, he needs to be known... to almost be an ambassador for his profession... if the cycling guy gets exposure... he’ll benefit as so will the rest of the field. There won’t be that barrier... it’s about trending sometimes.”*

#### BARRIERS OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Barriers of sport psychology emerged as the final dimension. Four higher order themes emerged: no need for a sport psychologist, negative perceptions of sport psychology, environmental barriers, and a lack of sport psychology knowledge. Coaches highlight how others may be skeptical about sport psychology services. Adding to this, coaches recognize others in coaching positions believe they too could support the athletes in the same way a SPC would and therefore concluded sport psychology as a supplementary service and commodity or a priority: *“They may think I don’t need this person, I can help the athletes myself, and why do I need to bother with all this who-haa, and that’s the negative attitude by a coach that would perhaps limit their athletes’ ability to work at their peak performance.”*



As reflected in the following statement, all the coaches acknowledged the uncertainty and doubt that shadows sport psychology: *“Still a taboo with some sports where sport psychology is seen as negative, ‘a shrink’, it’s seen as a weakness, if you need a sport psychologist then you’re not mentally tough enough, not strong enough.”*

Interviewees identified environmental barriers such as a lack of money and time as contributing factors limiting the work and effectiveness of SPCs. One coach also recognized the need for a suitable environment: *“There’s the facilities where they come off the pitch...in a classroom within 2 minutes...you won’t always have the facilities and the space to do it effectively...that’s when it becomes difficult.”* Overall, a lack of sport psychology knowledge appeared to be the root cause for professionals shying away from sport psychology services. Therefore the need for sport psychology education to all sporting professionals was highly emphasized: *“More education of the decision makers, so, if you got heads of sport and heads of academies who understand sport psychology and its role, then they’ll be more willing to invest in it and put sport psychologists in place within clubs and different sports.”*

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore youth sport coaches’ perspectives of sport psychology and of SPCs within the UK. Through adopting a qualitative approach, an in-depth insight toward the practice of sport psychology could be attained. Furthermore, it was of interest to compare the personal opinions and attitudes of this unique sample of youth coaches to the existing literature solely featuring the elite population. It was proposed the findings of this study would offer SPCs applied information and solutions, that can be adopted into SPCs individual practices, with the hope of improving their service and potentially widening their client base.

Participants were recruited on the basis they were currently coaching competitive youth performers of county to national level in any sport. However, the uneven number of male to female coaches and those representing team to individual sports could have had an impact on the results. To date, research has revealed females and individual sport athletes utilize SPCs and sport psychology services at a higher percentage than male and team sport athletes [27,48]. Despite the uneven number of male to female coaches and those representing team to individual sports, it is reassuring to find the results of this study coincide with previous literature across both genders and sport typology. This highlights the growth of sport psychology and acceptance among those in the wider sporting context.

The perspectives held by the competitive youth sport coaches, corresponds with existing literature within the elite domain. Partington and Orlick [7], and Gould et al. [11] assessed Olympic coaches’ perspectives of effective SPCs and sport psychology services. Both groups of coaches report the necessity for SPCs to portray positive interpersonal skills and to demonstrate personable, caring and friendly qualities. Research supports such valuable characteristics to initiate, build and maintain effective practitioner-client relationships [16]. Similarly, Anderson et al. [39] report elite athletes deem effective SPCs to have the ability to apply their theoretical knowledge to the sporting environment and to ultimately engage effectively with athletes. Coaches in the current study expressed a lack of specific sporting knowledge would not affect their judgement of a SPCs professional capabilities, if an interest in the sport was shown, a willingness to learn was demonstrated, and individuals had experiences in sports with similar demands. Therefore, it is appropriate to suggest SPCs should immerse themselves within the sports they work, identify the demands of each sport, understand the rules, and become familiar with the sporting language to enhance their ability to tailor and personalize the services they offer to their clients [2].

A main aim of this study was to identify the potential barriers SPCs may face while working in a competitive youth environment. As previously highlighted, the misconceptions of sport psychology cause individuals to be skeptical of the profession and its proposed benefits [25,26]. Supporting previous research results demonstrate [22,24,48], sport psychology continues to be mistaken with its allied professions, such as psychotherapy. Subsequently, this causes individuals to have prejudiced views and associate sport psychology with 'problem' athletes [7, 22, 34]. Furthermore, results mirror those found by Maniar et al. [48], who found the professional title of a 'sport psychologist' to act as an instant barrier. The word 'psychologist' causes apprehension and can intimidate athletes.

It is important to highlight the title 'chartered sport psychologist' is protected by the BPS in the UK. This ensures only those who followed the correct educational pathway and achieved BPS accreditation are able to use this title legally. Coaches within this study expect SPCs to have the relevant qualifications to warrant credibility and considered professional status an important factor when determining a practitioner's effectiveness [12]. Despite coaches highlighting this expectation, there was a general lack of knowledge to what equaled professional status. Although this measure has been taken by the BPS, interviewed coaches report preferred titles such as 'mental skills coach' to prevent the semantics of a professional title determining individuals' willingness to seek sport psychology services. How consultants present themselves to potential clients should therefore be considered, to increase their effectiveness and likelihood of acceptance into a sporting culture.

Throughout this study, negative preconceptions of sport psychology appear to ultimately be caused by a lack of education [34,49]. Coaches admitted a lack of knowledge on their behalf, despite placing importance on sport psychology services. If coaches perceive the discipline as indispensable rather than supplementary, sport psychology would ultimately become an integral component within organizations [50]. The interviewees therefore suggested SPCs present awareness workshops to aid the education of coaches. On a similar note, Pain and Harwood [34] believe education for the decision-makers within sports organizations will significantly influence the adoption and employment of sport psychology and its services. Furthermore, Wilson et al. [2] believes National Governing Bodies (NGBs) should be targeted, with sport psychology implemented into formal coaching qualifications to ensure education is reaching an ampler population. Coaches within this study also suggested for this structure of education, but it is acknowledged it will be difficult for SPCs alone to promote change within NGBs and/or to make a lasting impact.

Coaches were unaware of how to contact SPCs, claiming they were yet to witness any advertisements of their sport psychology services. Blann et al. [51] claim the promotion of services will increase public awareness and ultimately benefit the profession. Furthermore, coaches voiced it would be useful if SPCs provided potential future employers with a history of their consultancy work experience as a means of proving their capabilities. As sport psychologists adhere to ethical standards provided by associations such as BASES, BPS and the American Psychological Association (APA) contact details of clients should remain confidential. Therefore individual professional references are often unattainable. Practitioners could create a professional portfolio for potential employers that documents the range of sports and competitive levels they have worked within, the time spent with clients and the milestones achieved. With this at hand, SPCs could accurately demonstrate their suitability and reflect their professional capabilities for future consultancy work.

Time, money, and facilities were labeled as the environmental barriers SPCs will face in sporting organizations, particularly at the youth level. Time and money have previously been recognized in past research studies as practical constraints [27,34,49]. However, the coaches

believed if sport psychology was formally implemented into sports programs, the time and facilities needed for effective sport psychology sessions could be accommodated. This demonstrates the importance for SPCs to take a holistic approach and work alongside the other professionals within any one organization [49]. Furthermore, the participant coaches report the need for SPCs to be considered as part of the coaching team and to not be segregated from the other sport science disciplines and coaching staff.

A final consideration worth noting from this study is how SPCs can be visually judged. Lovell et al. [52] examined initial evaluations when judging the competence of SPCs. Consultants of an average weight were rated more positively than those considered as overweight and SPCs clothed in sports attire were favored over those in formal dress wear [52]. Although only a minority of the interviewed coaches mentioned physical appearance as a factor determining professional accountability of a SPC, coaches believed consultants should have the 'right' appearance. Consultant effectiveness was also influenced by body mass, corresponding with the results by Lovell et al. [52]. The coaches acknowledged this as an ignorant perception, but understood why individuals might have preconceptions of SPCs. Moreover, consultants were also expected to dress correctly to suit the sporting environment. Past research reveals, SPCs often have trouble integrating into teams [49]. It would be advisable for SPCs to wear sporting attire specifically team apparel, if possible to help aid their integration into a coaching team and to effectively camouflage into the athletes' environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

Uniquely, this study aimed to identify if youth coaches consider sport psychology and the profession to be a valuable service within competitive youth sport. All the interviewed coaches believe sport psychology at a youth level would only benefit performers. Coaches expressed if young performers were exposed to sport psychology at an early stage in development, any prevalent weaknesses or areas for improvement could be identified and strategies could be put in place to help these athletes develop their abilities further. Supplementary to this, Blom et al. [20] state performers who experience sport psychology at a younger age are likely to seek sport psychology services at later stages in their career. Furthermore, a consensus has been reached when considering what makes an effective SPC. Regardless of whether athletes or coaches are of an elite or amateur level, participants have consistently identified the need for SPCs to have effective interpersonal skills [7,11,39] and professional status [12].

Unfortunately, it is accepted that sport psychology as a profession will continue to be challenged by critics. However, it is encouraging to find the lack of education appears to underpin the sceptical views held by others. Continuing to strive for the acceptance of sport psychology through education will hopefully increase knowledge and in turn increase the receptivity. Furthermore, recognized organizations such as BASES, the BPS and the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) promote the development of sport psychology. All parties enhance the professional and ethical standards of sport psychology by providing accreditation to qualified consultants and a list of certified consultants that are accessible to the general public.

To further existing knowledge regarding SPCs effectiveness, it would be valuable to assess the applicability and success of the applied solutions offered within this research. If effectively implemented by SPCs, there is potential for the profession of sport psychology to widen, develop status and result in an increase of full/part time job opportunities. Interviewing this distinctive population and exploring the barriers faced, may offer SPCs and those currently training with methods of how to counteract such difficulties in the future.

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