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## SHORT-TERM CONSULTING WITH ELITE ATHLETES

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**Abstract.** Psychological work with elite athletes has its own characteristics. The article presents a theoretical justification for the use of short-term counseling with elite athletes, discusses the goals and objectives of short-term counseling, and describes two cases of working with elite athletes. The sport of the highest achievements is always associated with various objective and subjective difficulties; therefore, the main condition for the development of personal qualities of athletes is their readiness to overcome difficulties. The purpose of short-term counseling is to help elite athletes in situations of activity crisis that distinguishes it from other psychotherapeutic practices. The methodological justification of short-term counseling is the subject-activity approach developed by the outstanding Russian psychologist S. L. Rubinstein, according to which in the process of activity there is the formation and development of personal qualities of a person, as well as the development of his consciousness. In the course of 1–3 meetings, a sports psychologist can help athletes understand their own goals better, reevaluate the crisis situation, realize their resources, develop alternative solutions, and set athletes up for a pro-active behavior strategy.

**Keywords:** short-term consulting, elite athletes, case analysis.

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## КРАТКОСРОЧНОЕ КОНСУЛЬТИРОВАНИЕ ЭЛИТНЫХ СПОРТСМЕНОВ

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**Аннотация.** Психологическая работа с элитными спортсменами имеет свои особенности. В статье представлено теоретическое обоснование к использованию краткосрочного консультирования с элитными спортсменами, рассмотрены цели и задачи краткосрочного консультирования, дано описание

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двух кейсов работы с элитными спортсменами. Спорт высших достижений всегда сопряжен с различными объективными и субъективными трудностями, поэтому главным условием развития личностных качеств спортсменов выступает их готовность к преодолению трудностей. Целью краткосрочного консультирования является помощь элитным спортсменам в ситуациях кризиса деятельности, что отличает его от других психотерапевтических практик. Методологическим обоснованием краткосрочного консультирования является субъектно-деятельностный подход, разработанный выдающимся российским психологом С. Л. Рубинштейном, согласно которому в процессе деятельности происходит становление и развитие личностных качеств человека, а так же развитие его сознания. В процессе 1–3 встреч, спортивный психолог может помочь спортсменам лучше осознать собственные цели, переоценить кризисную ситуацию, осознать свои ресурсы, выработать альтернативные решения, настроить спортсменов на про-активную стратегию поведения.

**Ключевые слова:** краткосрочное консультирование, элитные спортсмены, анализ ситуаций.

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*Introduction.* The sport of the highest achievements is always associated with various objective and subjective difficulties; therefore the psychological work with elite athletes has its own characteristics. This is due to the fact that elite-level athletes have an established worldview, take responsibility for decision-making, are focused on self-efficacy, dedication and maximum athletic performance, while contacting a psychologist is most often associated with their personal decision [5].

The methodological basis of psychological work with athletes is the subject-activity approach developed by S. L. Rubinstein [12]. The essence of which is that in the process of activity the formation and development of a person's personal qualities, as well as the development of his consciousness take place.

Within the framework of this approach, when a person is included in an activity, he must first adapt to the requirements that are necessary to perform the activity, and then build his individual style of performing the activity in accordance with his individual abilities.

Every elite-level athlete pays attention exactly to his unique individual style of performing sports activities. For example, here's what Novak Djokovic says.

“I know what my strengths are, and I try to stick to them. I have worked hard to ensure that there are literally no weaknesses in my game. Every player has weaknesses in the game. There is always something that can be improved. I want my game to be as versatile as possible so that I can play on any surface, adapt to different playing styles and implement tactics for each specific match” [9].

It should be emphasized that research in the Russian psychology of sports is based on the principle of unity of consciousness and activity, and

the athlete is considered as a person capable of realizing and controlling the level and quality of the activity performed by him [6].

It is important to note that in the subject-activity approach, the condition for the development of personality in activity is not just inclusion in activity, but such inclusion which is related to

- creative attitude to the activity, its constant improvement;
- the desire to test and reveal their strengths and abilities;
- the ability to coordinate their capabilities with the requirements of the activity, the creation of an individual style of performance of activities;
- willingness to take responsibility for maintaining a certain level and quality of activity [16].

It is important to note that the more complex the activity, the higher the role of psychological components in it, while the main condition for achieving the goals set by a person (athlete) is his willingness to overcome increasing difficulties [13].

It is obvious that the general theoretical approaches to the study of activity formed the basis for the consideration of sports, the objective and subjective difficulties that athletes face in the course of its implementation [14].

I will give an example of the classification of sports activity difficulties to Giessen L. D.[2]:

- person's subjective attitude to achieving a goal;
- Subjective assessment of the situation (positive or negative);
- The situations containing the risk of physical injury (unreliability of insurance, imbalance, etc.);
- The situations that reveal the inadequacy of mental preparedness for the requirements of competitive wrestling (overestimated tasks, the decision to approach the projectile, thoughts about possible failure, etc.);
- The situations with unexpected "accidents" (equipment malfunctions, inability to carry out the usual warm-up, unexpected failure, etc.);
- The situations caused by the rules of the competition (the need to start the competition with an «unloved» type of program, the need to perform a scoring approach in one attempt, etc.).

It should be noted that within the framework of the practical work of sports psychologists, understanding the specifics of sports activities, subjective and objective difficulties is always the key point.

By the way, elite athletes themselves often talk about the difficulties of sports activities in their interviews, and it is important to note that this is most often related to the results or results of their performances.

The Spanish tennis player Rafael Nadal spoke about how he treats defeats.

«In tennis, you lose almost every week. Defeats are an integral part of this sport. This state of affairs must be accepted. Of course, it's hard psychologically» [11].

Dinara Safina told about her main disappointment in sports.

«I really wanted to win the Grand Slam tournament, but I regret not that I couldn't, but that I didn't manage to show a good game. If I had shown it in my finals, then it would not have been so insulting to lose: I did what

I could, but the opponent was stronger, the match was cool and what could I do about it. And I wanted to win so much that emotions overwhelmed me, and I couldn't do anything all three times» [10].

The classification of sports activity difficulties can be supplemented with a classification of psychological difficulties of athletes.

The types of psychological difficulties of athletes [2].

#### *Organizational and activity difficulties*

- Experiencing dissatisfaction with the conditions of preparation and organization of training and competitive activities.
- A new higher level of competition (transition from juniors to adults).
- Transfer to a new team (transfer, relocation).
- Competition conditions (a change of climate zone, temperature, and track conditions).
- Non-fulfillment of the training plan (due to objective circumstances – illness, lack of funding, conditions).

#### *Socio-psychological difficulties*

- Experiencing dissatisfaction in the relationship with the coach.
- Experiencing dissatisfaction in relationships with team members.
- Relationship in the family (relationship with parents, spouses).

#### *Intrapersonal psychological difficulties*

- Experiencing self-doubt, personal anxiety.
- The difficulties of self-regulation of athletes – the ability to set themselves up for competition.
- Inability to regulate the psychological state.
- The fear of injury and fear of performing after injury.
- Anxiety related to competition with stronger rivals.
- Low self-organization and self-management.
- The fear for the results of the competition (expectation of failure – not to complete the element, make a mistake, not to take the prize).
- The psychological barriers to mastering new elements.
- Low stability and reliability in competitions.

It should be noted that the psychological difficulties of athletes will certainly vary depending on the level of qualification and age of athletes, gender, etc.

Meanwhile, we can note a general pattern associated with the requests of elite athletes to sports psychologists:

For elite athletes, psychological difficulties are relevant only in connection with their achievement, with their sports result.

Only when they realize that they cannot cope with the problem and this leads to a decrease in athletic performance. Only in this case does the importance of seeking psychological help arise for them.

It can be said that the request of elite athletes is most often caused by a crisis related to situations of sports activity.

We can confirm our statement with a concrete example of Ruben Gonzalez from his book «The courage to success» [3].

The four-time participant of the Olympic Games in his book gives only one example when he turned to a psychologist (or, as he writes, «an expert in putting the mind in order through the words we say»).

R. Gonzalez, luge, 25 years old had a technical error "wrong position" for overcoming the difficult sections of the track. The coaches' recommendations did not help him.

After a couple of hours of communication with a psychologist, he asked Gonzalez the question «What do you think when you approach a difficult part of the descent?» Gonzalez answered that he most of the time thought, «Well, here it is».

The psychologist was inspired and said, "Well, here it is"? That's the thing! By saying «well, here it is», you put yourself in a passive position, you become a defensive position, but you will never reach your full potential if you are in a state of protection. You need to say to yourself, «Well, here I am! The expression will make you work ahead of the curve. This will help you attack the descent and control the situation better. «Well, here I am» will switch your mind from thinking of the victim to thinking of the winner» [3, p. 208].

I would like to note that 2 hours of conversation changed the athlete's thinking and determined the behavior that helped improve athletic performance.

This example is one of the arguments in favor of choosing short-term counseling as a means of helping elite athletes.

The second argument is related to the results of our research, proving that for elite athletes, the most preferred strategy for overcoming stress is cognitive restructuring [20]. This strategy consists in the fact that athletes, when difficulties arise, try to analyze the situation, find the optimal way out of its change. On the second place there is the strategy of "emotional calming" and the least significant for them is the strategy of "finding social support" – especially for men, and less often they use the strategy of "avoiding solving the problem".

Another argument in favor of short-term counseling is the view of positive psychology that the personal resources of each of the athletes ultimately determine their success [17].

We consider resilience to be the most significant personal resource of athletes.

The concept Hardiness or Hardy Personality, as a personal resource against the consequences of negative or stressful events for health and, in particular, as a buffer of professional stress was proposed by S. Kobasa and further developed with S. Maddi [18, 19].

This personal characteristic includes three relatively independent components: involvement, control and risk-taking. A person with a high level of resilience feels necessary, valuable, constantly involved in some activities and getting satisfaction from it. He is convinced that he can

exercise control over the events of his life, and the struggle allows him to influence the outcome of what is happening. He treats unforeseen circumstances not as a nuisance, but as a challenge that enriches his experience and promotes personal development.

Sports activity is the environment in which an athlete is placed in such conditions where it is necessary to overcome difficulties effectively and solve extraordinary tasks; therefore resilience can be considered as a personal resource of athletes [1].

In the course of our research, it has revealed that under the influence of sports already in adolescence, the indicators of resilience in athletes are higher than in adolescents who are not involved in sports [21]. Resilience is significantly higher primarily due to the components of control and risk acceptance. This indicates that student athletes have a higher level of confidence in their own actions; they are able to control the events happening to them.

The development of resilience is closely related to the level of sportsmanship. The higher the level of sportsmanship, the higher the level of resilience, elite athletes are more successful in coping with situations of uncertainty and stress factors of sports activity.

Thus, we can say that if we rely on the resources of athletes, in particular their resilience and willingness to analyze problematic situations, then the use of short-term counseling is one of the most promising methods of working with athletes.

Short-term counseling is a narrow area of psychological counseling, which, in general, is based on all the principles of psychological counseling (goodwill, respect and emotional support, cooperation, unconditional acceptance), but, nevertheless, it has its differences. As the name implies, the main feature of short-term counseling is time constraints [7].

Usually these are from 1 to 3 meetings that are dedicated to solving one specific task/problem that is kept in focus throughout the entire process. Unlike conventional, longer-term psychotherapy, the emphasis here is not on the individual characteristics of a person that contribute to the emergence of a problem, not a change in character to avoid this problem in the future, and not even on the problem itself, but on the possibility of overcoming and solving it, focusing on the available resources of the client.

Thus, the professional assistance of a psychologist in short-term counseling to a client consists in determining the essence of the problem, searching for response options, making a decision and an incentive to resolve the problem situation.

The main tasks of short-term counseling in sports is to assist the person in understanding their own goals, reassess the situation, available resources, development of alternative solutions, setting up the resolve to try the solutions found, the formation of readiness and confidence in overcoming difficulties.

It is important to achieve some significant results even in one consultation.

Therefore, during short-term counseling, it is important to focus on two things:

1. Identification of desired changes.
2. Step-by-step approach to the desired situation.

An important component of the success of the work is the positive attitude of the psychologist, an optimistic attitude towards the future, faith in the client's ability to overcome difficulties.

The creators of this method saw their task as inspiring people, strengthening their confidence in achieving their goals and objectives.

A psychologist in the process of counseling constantly brings a "sense of dynamics", and the first changes in an athlete's life occur already between the decision to seek advice of a sports psychologist and counseling.

In this case, the person:

1. Realized that he has some kind of difficulty (problem). – Awareness of the problem.
2. Came to the conclusion that something needs to be changed.
3. Took a real and very concrete step aimed at a solution – asked for psychological help.

All this needs to be said.

4. The psychologist encourages you to celebrate every positive change that has happened in life. The question can be formulated as it follows: "What has changed?", "What has become better?"

The specialist tries to "develop success" by asking in detail how and where this change occurred, how big it is, who else noticed it. This allows a person to look at his life from a different angle and notice his strengths and resources. When a small change occurs, it increases the hope for big changes.

Counseling is focused on the future, a place where people build their own lives and decide their own destiny.

At the beginning of any session, the short-term approach is about what the client wants or would like, and not about how and why his life is unsatisfactory. An optimistic attitude towards the future, which is created and strengthened by setting goals, discussing strengths and resources, using strategic compliments, and identifying exceptions from a problematic history, gives the client hope.

This hope gives him the opportunity to cope with current difficulties, while it is becoming even more strengthened itself.

A well-formulated goal is a condition for the success of the work.

The goals have seven main characteristics.

- Small goals are better than big ones.
- The goals should be bright, important for the client.
- The goals are formulated in specific behavioral terms.
- The goals are achievable in the context of the client's real life.
- The goals should be perceived and requiring serious work.
- The goals describe "the beginning of something", not "the end of something".

– The goals presuppose the emergence of some new behavior models and actions, and not the absence or termination of existing behavior [8].

As part of my practical work on short-term consulting, two types of requests can be distinguished.

1. From active student-athletes enrolled in bachelor's and master's degree programs. These requests come from students who trust me as a specialist and are related to the analysis of the problems they have encountered in the process of sports activities.

2. Requests from active athletes who apply on the recommendations of coaches who know me and can recommend me to athletes in a difficult situation.

For this article, cases have been selected that demonstrate the format of short-term psychological counseling.

1. A request. As a rule, I receive a call from an athlete who was advised by the coach to contact me, and we agree on a meeting time.

2. Before the meeting, I try to collect as much information about the athlete from social networks as possible. I watch interviews, study the biography and if there is information, most often on the team's website, then I look at the game statistics and view games or analyze the results of performances, especially over the last period.

What does it give? It gives me the opportunity to get information about the athlete and not to devote a lot of time to the questions that have been answered, as well as to be ready for the current discussion of the situation.

I will briefly describe this situation. After the call of the current athlete, I have found such information as: age, biography, interview, by the way, where she notes that she has never turned to a psychologist, because she believes that the coach is the best psychologist, the teams in which she played in more than 6 countries, the most successful seasons, etc. I have watched several games in the team and that is the most importantly, learned the results of the last games and statistics regarding this athlete.

There is my resume for this athlete: a professional and experienced player, a legionnaire; works for the 2nd year under a contract; was on isolation during the pandemic (possibly was ill); the team's results are currently low because of missing games and injury of two players, and one of which is the strongest; there was a change of coaches, again in connection with the pandemic.

As you can see, even before the meeting, a certain integral characteristic of the athlete is formed and an understanding that the situation in the team is difficult at the moment, three defeats in a row.

3. As a preparation for the meeting, I also work out a scenario. In this case it was important for me to understand the athlete's goals, her expectations regarding her results (in this team, at the moment). It is also important to determine how she assesses the team's chances for the upcoming season and, that is the most important, her contribution to the team and her relationship with the coach is, as well as the relationship within the team.



It is always important to start a conversation by discussing that the information is strictly confidential and if there is a request from the coach, the answer will be agreed primarily with the athlete.

4. The first meeting lasted for quite a long time more than 2 hours, there were no strict regulations. At the same time, the duration of 1.5–2 hours is the optimal format of the meeting, which allows me to understand the request, formulate a hypothesis and most importantly focus on a positive way out of the situation.

5. After the first meeting, the athlete was assigned to undergo a number of techniques of psychodiagnostics related to the assessment of the strengths of the individual and the assessment of psychological well-being.

6. The final second meeting was held with a discussion of options for solving problems and attitude.

In the course of questions and discussion or clarification of answers, the necessary level of mutual understanding and trust between the athlete and the psychologist is formed, since the questions determine the possibility of understanding the main problems and the main resources of the athlete's success.

There are the results of short-term counseling.

1. The expectations related to professional progress have not been met, moreover, an athlete after suffering from coronavirus and Covid-19 cannot find the athletic form that she had last year. Her main problem is that there is no necessary «good athletic shape», and there is no certainty that it will appear. The key phrase of the athlete is «Tell me what to do to start playing successfully again?»

The psychologist's recommendation:

Any adaptation to new conditions is associated with subjective assessments:

- stage 1: expectation of positive changes, concentration on the «positive sides»;
- stage 2: the stage of disappointment", concentration on the negative sides;
- stage 3: realistic assessment of what is happening, concentration on setting new goals.

It is necessary to enter the phase of realistic assessment of what is happening and focus on new goals.

The first goal is to understand that the loss of a leader because of an injury has created not only difficulties in the team, but also created new opportunities for the realization for all players.

Failures are a temporary process, followed by the development of group cohesion and teamwork of the team.

Now we need to switch from failures to the situation outside of sports, which allows us to understand better that sport is not the ultimate goal and it is not a limit of possibilities.

The athlete has remembered an example when she participated in a hike and at the end of which there really was no strength, and this test was really more difficult than what she is experiencing now.

2. Unsuccessful games related to both the injury of the leader and the "quarantine" led to the fact that the athletes began to experience more external pressure – "the demands from the coach and internal pressure have increased" – as well as the contribution of each athlete to the success of the team sharply increased. At the same time, the change of coach was "unexpected" for this athlete, and she was not ready and did not agree with his requirements and, moreover, could not understand and accept these requirements. The situation began to remind her of the one when she had disagreements with the coach in the junior national team. I would like to note that the lack of understanding of the requirements and methods of the coach's work (in one of the interviews the athlete indicated that the coach was the best psychologist) was also the reason for contacting a psychologist, although the athlete did not fully realize this, but during communication this problem came out as significant and it was the psychologist who helped her to look at it from the other side and help understand the meaning of what was happening.

The phrase of the athlete "I don't understand why we have such high demands, from which I lose all motivation for sports", was translated into the thesis of the psychologist that the main motive of the coaching staff is "pressure is energy", "external pressure is necessary to mobilize the resources of the team, but pressure methods are chosen without taking into account your "individual characteristics". As the athlete later said, I finally understood what the essence of external pressure was and it was like an "epiphany".

In fact, the athlete changed her attitude to the coach, and she stopped feeling like a victim, but she concentrated on the training and competitive process.

3. Another situation that needed to be worked out and its discussion was during the second meeting, what exactly needs to be worked on, after understanding the problem.

The problem is the fear that the athlete experiences every time during the competition, as she describes her condition, "I'm just terrified" at the most crucial moment of the game.

The reason is due to the fact that during the year she had to change her "technique" and her strokes became unstable, there was a fear of "mistake".

At the same time, the fear of "mistake" was primarily associated with internal responsibility for the team's result. Moreover, the desire to help the team, the motivation to achieve maximum results was for her the main motive of behavior at the moment.

Her phrase was, "What can I do to play better?!!!"

The answer that I often give to athletes who work with dedication, the main thing in sports is always a big effort; it is also a "fight". We can only control our effort, and the result is a consequence of these efforts, only focus on the task allows us to perform it better.

It is necessary to fix it on success and progress; the success is an indicator of the right movement forward.

In fact, this ended the consultation, the athlete has agreed that she believes in the success of her team, she sees the potential of the team and she is ready to continue working.

As a result, in her subsequent interview, she has written: "The main thing is never to give up, always go to the game and show the maximum."

What does this example say about? It says only that the possible role of a psychologist in short-term counseling is not to save, but rather to help an athlete understand and assess the situation better, increase confidence in the possibility of achieving the goals that the athlete sets and realizes himself.

With short-term counseling, there is an active internal work of the athlete himself, and the psychologist acts as a facilitator of this process.

*Conclusion.* Elite level athletes may have subjective and objective difficulties in the course of sports activities. The leading strategy for most elite athletes in a difficult situation is to analyze the problem and find its solution. The role of short-term counseling is to help athletes find the optimal solution to the problem in a crisis situation of activity.

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