

# MAKING AN IMPACT IN COMMUNITY ATHLETICS: TEACHING SPORT PSYCHOLOGY TO HIGH SCHOOL COACHES

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## ABSTRACT

*The Coaches' Clinic was created in order to 1) serve the community by teaching concepts and techniques in sport psychology to Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) high school coaches, and 2) to provide a training opportunity for students in the Master of Science Sport and Performance Psychology (MS SPP) program at California Baptist University. The Coaches' Clinic was formed as a result of a collaboration with RUSD and served to support RUSD's Three C's Initiative (Community, Character, Conditioning). Three 3-hour workshops were conducted over three different seasons to cover all of the coaches' off-seasons. These workshops were evaluated by the attending coaches. The results of these evaluations are presented followed by a discussion of the benefits of these workshops as well as areas of improvement. Finally, reflection is given to the benefit to the MS SPP graduate students and faculty.*

## PROCESS

The purpose of the Coaches' Clinic was to partner with the local school district in order to positively influence the culture of athletics in Riverside County. Specifically, our aim was to teach the coaches how to interact with their student-athletes in a manner that would increase their character and performance through instruction and modelling. Ultimately, we hoped that the program would lead to the shaping of high school student-athletes into productive, strong, and moral leaders that could give back to their community.

The Master of Science in Sport and Performance Psychology (MS SPP) program at California Baptist University (CBU) is a new program that launched its inaugural cohort in the fall of 2018. Currently I (first author) serve as the architect and Director for the MS SPP program. This is in addition to my role as a professor of psychology in the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences at CBU. I have a terminal degree in psychology with a specialization in the cognitive neuroscience of learning, memory, and exercise and sport

psychology. One of my major goals for this program was to use our knowledge and techniques to give back to the community, locally and globally. Thus, I engaged in multiple community meetings looking for good "fits" for our program. In the winter of 2018, I met with Dr. Keyisha Holmes, the (then) Director of Community Engagement and Extended Learning for the Riverside Unified School District (RUSD). She shared with me that the RUSD had a new "Three C's Initiative" where the athletic departments would be focusing on Community, Character, and Conditioning. They were hoping to find presenters to lead workshops for their coaches that would focus on these Three C's and tie them back to their role as coaches and ways to positively impact the student athletes. We decided that the MS SPP could lead these workshops, and the partnership was born.

To assist in the Coaches' Clinic, Dr. Ed Garrett (second author) was added to the programing team. With over 30 years of athletic experience (including a tenure as a high school coach, administrator, and official), Dr. Garrett was called upon to help

organize and instruct the clinic sessions, along with working with each presenter on topic delivery. Dr. Garrett is an Associate Professor at California Baptist University with a terminal degree in Sport and Performance Psychology and certified through the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP). He also serves as a mentor in our MS SPP program and consults many of the CBU athletic programs regularly as a part of his mentorship role in the MS SPP program.

With all the pieces in place, the MS SPP Program at CBU was in a great position to create a partnership with RUSD in order to benefit the community and the MS SPP students. Sport and performance psychology is the study of psychological techniques that increase performance. Thus, our lead instructor, Dr. Garrett, and MS SPP students were all trained in topics such as goal setting, arousal control, group cohesion, communication, leadership, resilience, and confidence building; all topics that align with the Three C's initiative of RUSD. In addition, our instructors and students are trained to effectively conduct workshops with coaches and athletes.

Participation was ensured by RUSD mandating that all high school coaches attend the Coaches' Clinic. These clinics were co-taught by CBU MS SPP graduate students (supervised by our lead instructor) as a part of the graduate students' internship, thus allowing the students to earn more direct and indirect hours toward certification as a Certified Mental Performance Coach through the Association of Applied Sport Psychology (CMPC-AASP). In addition, these MS SPP graduate student interns were working with the high school teams in order to help implement these techniques directly. Thus, the purpose of the Coaches' Clinic was to increase mental conditioning, character development, and community relations within RUSD high school athletics while providing valuable training to our MS SPP students.

## PURPOSE

Mental health continues to be a growing concern in the field of athletics. A vast majority of the resources in application of cognitive training focuses the attention on the student-athlete, but little attention is afforded the coaches in their wellbeing. It was this need to help high school coaches' mental health, as well as the desire to build character in the student athletes, that prompted the RUSD

administrators to take a bold move. They decided to quit following the wins, and instead, to focus on what matters most: the holistic development of their athletes and coaches. Mr. Stephen Bernard, Assistant Principle of North High School Athletic Department (a member school of RUSD), stated that the overarching goal of these clinics were to help create good men and women. Research indicates that some high school student-athletes are willing to put aside their morals in order to win a game (Camire & Trudel, 2010), a theme that could carry into their adult role where moral compromises could carry a much heavier weight. And, yet, sport participation has the potential to influence youth in a very positive manner.

Sports can both serve as a motivator and teach youth to continuously work hard toward a goal, even in the face of adversity and setback (Larson, 2000). Thus, the RUSD administrators made a plan to prioritize three main domains: Conditioning, Character, and Community. They still wanted to produce effective performers, but also student-athletes with good moral character. For conditioning, they envisioned not just physical conditioning, but mental conditioning as well. Mental conditioning is often neglected or only lightly touched upon in high school sports, and yet it plays a large role in the ability of the student-athlete to play well. Character refers to integrity, self-regulation, and supporting one's teammate. Learning to regulate one's emotions and to resist reacting to negative emotions leads to an increase in moral engagement and negative perception of cheating (d'Arripe-Longueville, Corrion, Scoffier, Roussel, & Chalabaev, 2010). Community is the link between the team and the outside world. It takes into account the referees and the parents of the players, as well as opportunities for the players once they have graduated high school. Thus, to build community it is important to focus on communication, especially with the coaches.

When trying to change the culture of high school athletics, and the individual student-athlete, the coach is an ideal place to start. The coaches have a large influence on their student-athletes and oversee the interaction between the team and other community members (Smoll, 2013; Waldron, 2012). And while coaches are usually in strong support of character development of their players (Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2011), most of them have

little training on how to incorporate this into their coaching practices (Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006; Trudel, Lemyre, Wethner, & Camire, 2007). By providing the Coaches' Clinic, we aimed to not only teach the coaches how to work with their student-athletes, but also how to incorporate this knowledge in their own lives. By increasing the mental health of the coaches, we were empowering them to be better coaches and to model mental health and good character on and off the playing surface (Fisher & Dzikus, 2010; McCloughan, Matthey, & Hanrahan, 2015, Powell & Kalina, 2009). Other programs have used a similar approach, educating the coaches in order to prevent bullying and establish team values, with successful results (McCloughan et al., 2015; Matthey, McCloughan, & Hanrahan, 2014). Thus, coming alongside RUSD to help educate their coaches how to integrate the Three C's into their lives and coaching practices was a perfect fit with our departmental mission of serving others.

The timing for the Coaches' Clinic played into the partnership between RUSD and CBU as, before the MS SPP program had even launched, the two entities had created internship opportunities for graduate students. Not only would the MS SPP graduate students be provided valuable internship experience, but they would be doing so by participating in a program that directly addressed a shared vision of RUSD and CBU's MS SPP program, to influence the culture of athletics to uphold good, morale character and support the community. The hope is that with successful implementation of these programs, the positive impact will be seen by neighboring counties, serving as a role model to those counties and, thus, increase our area of impact.

Through much planning, it was decided that four Coaches' Clinics would be held each year, two in the spring and two in the fall with one being on a week night (Wednesday) and one being on the weekend (Saturday), so that all of the head coaches and their assistants could attend. Only two workshops were offered per season, because while the workshops were mandatory for the coaches, they were not paid to attend. In addition, food was provided at each of the clinics. To date, six of these clinics have been completed. Each of these clinics were three hours long and covered all Three C's. The clinics were instructed and facilitated by

one of the practicum instructors for the MS SPP program, Dr. Ed Garrett, as well as the MS SPP graduate students. Additional support and feedback were provided by the other MS SPP practicum instructors. In addition, MS SPP graduate students began working with the high school athletic teams, providing an application of the concepts taught at the Coaches' Clinic, while also providing more internship hours for the MS SPP graduate students.

In addition to collaborating on the overall clinic logistics, I also worked with the RUSD Athletic Directors to decide on specific subtopics to cover under the three main topics of Conditioning, Character, and Community. The conditioning portion of the workshop covered topics such as mindfulness (emotional control), self-care, energy management, mental toughness, goal setting, pre-performance routines, and self-talk. The character portion of the workshop covered finding ones' "why," team identity, integrity-based decision making, dealing with undeveloped minds and fragile egos, adversity management, and identity for coaches and athletes. The community portion of the workshop covered communication, boundaries and transparency with players and parents, transitioning to other sports, application to outside of sport, commitment, respect, and attitude, and communicating the bigger picture (creating good men and women). Undoubtedly, all these areas have shared topics, just with a more specific focus on what they can help with. Coaches were taught these concepts of the workshops through PowerPoint presentations, activities, discussions, and handouts.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Recent increases in budget and staff, as well as the support of community partners, makes this program highly sustainable and, in fact, likely to grow. After the success of the first clinic the program was awarded the Community Outreach Grant by the Association of Applied Psychology, the accrediting organization for sport psychology practitioners. In addition, the Center for Sport and Performance Psychology (CSPP) at CBU was launched in the summer of 2019. Proceeds from the CSPP will serve to support the Coaches' Clinic, in addition to other programs affiliated with the MS SPP program. Finally, graduates from the MS SPP inaugural cohort returned to help organize and instruct the Coaches' Clinic, and we expect



this trend to continue with future graduates. With the funding we are now receiving, we can pay our graduates and instructors to help put on these clinics, as well as offer quality hot meals to the coaches at the clinics.

This program is fully endorsed by the governing board of education with full support of the mayor of Riverside. The first three clinics were a success, as can be seen by the attached evaluations, and conversations have already begun on how to improve upon the clinics in the upcoming years. Both organizations, RUSD and CBU, are committed to continued support of this program, along with ongoing evaluation and improvements.

There is a potential for expansion of the Coaches' Clinic as well. Recent conversations with the RUSD athletic directors have focused on creating additional workshops for the student-athletes and their parents, and the Riverside County Office of Education has reached out to inquire about the possibility of expanding to other cities within the county. Thus, within just a year and a half, the Coaches' Clinic has been given support by its community partners, obtained funding, increased its staff, and is using feedback from the previous clinics to improve and expands its offerings.

## OUTCOMES

Evaluations by the coaches were used to measure the success and impact of the Coaches' Clinic. Attendees of the Coaches' Clinic were asked to evaluate the clinic by filling out a survey before they left that asked questions pertaining to presentations on each of the Three C's. The surveys consisted of questions with Likert Scale response options as well as open-ended questions (Figure 1).

### *Qualitative Analysis*

For the first set of clinics given (Spring of 2019), most of the answers to the open-ended questions were very positive. For example, in response to being asked about their biggest takeaway, one coach wrote, "Being refreshed—can't wait for tomorrow to get busy, Positive!" while another wrote, "Reflect and be coachable as a coach." A few comments were given about areas that could be improved upon. One criticism was that some of the information was a bit basic, or review, for experienced coaches and they desired more depth of topic (for example, "Good stuff for young coaches," and, "As a veteran coach it was a good

**Coaches' Clinic Survey**

Please circle the following number that represents your response to the question.  
1 = low, didn't enjoy or apply 3 = not affecting you one way or the other 5=high really enjoyed or applied

**Conditioning:**

1. How well did we cover mental toughness?
2. How well did we cover goal setting?
3. Do you feel that you were given adequate tools?
4. Are you confident in implementing these tools yourself?
5. Do you feel that the activities aided in your understanding of these topics?

**Character:**

1. Do you feel that we covered enough topics that applied to character?
2. How well do you feel we covered communication?
3. How well do you feel we covered adversity management?
4. Do you feel like you were given enough tools?
5. Are you confident in implementing these tools yourself?
6. Do you feel that the activities aided in your understanding of these topics?

**Community:**

1. How well did we cover boundaries and transparency with players and parents?
2. How well did we cover developing young athletes into good citizens?
3. How well did we cover ideas for connecting with the community?
4. Do you feel like you were given enough tools?
5. Are you confident in implementing these tools yourself?
6. Do you feel that the activities aided in your understanding of these topics?

**Event Questions:**

What was your favorite part of the workshop?  
What would you want to see more of in the next workshop?  
Were there any topics that you wish we had covered?  
Were there any topics or portions that you didn't like?  
What is your strongest takeaway from this workshop?

Figure 1. Coaches Clinic Survey

'reminder' but not needing three hours. All of this information I already utilize.”). Athletic directors who had attended the clinic suggested the addition of discussions on each topic. It was postulated that some of the negative comments were from more experienced coaches that could not only contribute to the workshop but would feel honored by being asked to share. Since RUSD desired consistency across the first two sets of workshops (Spring 2019 and Fall 2019), it was decided that the changes would be implemented for the second year, starting in Spring of 2020.

Feedback from the second set of clinics (Fall, 2019) were mostly positive. Some examples of the takeaway given were, “How to apply my new coaching insight and practices to my personal life as well, especially with my employees,” and, “I still have a lot to learn.” Though again there were a couple of comments implying that the coach already knew the information (for example, “It wasn't anything I haven't heard before”).

The third set of clinics held in the Spring of 2020 incorporated more discussions to include the coaches' input. These were the first set of evaluations that did not have any comments about the material being already known or appropriate for new coaches only. Thus, we believe the addition of discussions helped to create buy-in from the

more experienced coaches. As was true in the previous evaluations, these evaluations contained many positive comments indicating impactful takeaways, such as, “As coaches we are not perfect but as long as we are striving to better ourselves. We will model that behavior for our athletes.”

One common thread throughout all three sets of clinics were comments about the topic of community not being well represented. Some of these comments were, “I don’t think community was covered at all” (Spring, 2019), and, “Not sure where these came into play or they were only covered briefly” (Spring, 2020). Even from the beginning, there was some disagreement as to what the topic of community should cover in sport psychology, with some options being future careers for the student athletes, relationships between parents and coaches, and giving back to the community. It is this ambiguity in the definition of this topic that likely resulted in it feeling “left out.” Thus, we plan to clearly define it and then present it according to that definition in future clinics.

#### *Quantitative Analysis*

An analysis was conducted comparing the ratings of each clinic across all three sets of clinics (collapsed across days). An ANOVA was conducted for each topic comparing evaluation ratings between clinics (Spring 2019, Fall 2019, and Spring 2020). These analyses revealed a significant effect for both Conditioning ( $F(2, 203) = 5.39, p = .005, \eta^2 = .051$ ) and Character ( $F(2, 204) = 7.56, p = .001, \eta^2 = .069$ ), but not for Community ( $F(2, 200) = 1.99, p = .139, \eta^2 = .02$ ). Post-hoc comparisons revealed improved ratings on the topic of Conditioning from the Spring 2019 clinic ( $M = 4.40, SD = .587$ ) to the Fall 2019 clinic ( $M = 4.67, SD = .511, p = .02$ ) and Spring 2020 clinic ( $M = 4.7, SD = .414, p = .017$ ), and on the topic of Character from the Spring 2019 clinic ( $M = 4.17, SD = .845$ ) to the Fall 2019 clinic ( $M = 4.58, SD = .608, p = .001$ ) and Spring 2020 clinic ( $M = 4.62, SD = .556, p = .004$ ).

Thus, these results indicate an improvement in evaluations from the first clinic to the next two clinics, and the overall average scores ranging between 4 and 5 on a 1-5 scale, for the topics of Conditioning and Character (Figures 2 and 3). Average scores were more variable and dipped into the 3’s for the topic of Character, with no change between sessions (Figure 4).



Figure 2



Figure 3

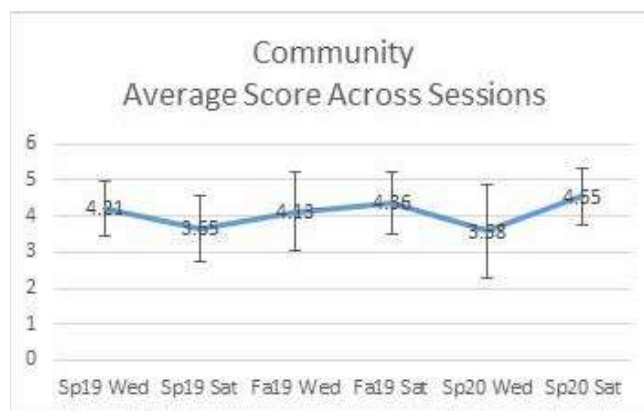


Figure 4

#### *Benefits*

The coaches that attended the clinics were educated on concepts and strategies that are useful in a variety of domains. Topics such as goal setting, arousal-regulation (for example, Controlling one’s temper), communication strategies, and self-care were taught so that they could be implemented with a family and with a team. Thus, the benefit was provided to the coaches so that they could use it in

their own lives and pass it down to their athletes. In addition, as seen in their written feedback, the coaches were inspired and motivated by the clinics.

While not directly measured, it is hoped that the high school athletes will benefit from their coaches' attendance at the clinics, and that this will, in turn, benefit others around them. RUSD benefited by receiving additional training for their coaches on topics that they found important and relevant. In fact, these clinics supported their Three C's Initiative, adding substance to their movement. Finally, these clinics were at no cost to the schools or teams, an additional benefit that is important given the limited resources these schools are working with.

### REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

The Coaches' Clinic was crafted to change the culture of high school athletics in the city of Riverside. Ultimately, we want to create successful high school athletes that will mature into adults of character and compassion. While we have a long way to go, we are off to a good start. Our work with the coaches has resulted in positive feedback from the coaches and recognition within the community. Our partnership with RUSD has been strengthened by our continued partnership with them; we are aligned with the same purpose in mind, and a dedication to continue working towards that purpose.

In addition to serving the community, the Coaches' Clinic has been impactful on the MS SPP graduate students. Students spend months preparing for these clinics. They work with their practicum instructors and, especially, the lead instructor (Dr. Garrett) to create presentations, activities, and discussion topics. Speaking in front of a room of 25-80 coaches can be very scary, especially for a graduate student. The students reported to us that they were nervous beforehand but were proud of themselves afterwards. They all stayed throughout the entirety of the clinics so that they could watch their peers give their presentations and provide them with feedback and support as well. This provided the graduate students with the opportunity to practice their public speaking and teaching of sport psychology concepts, thus aiding in their confidence through the coach's feedback and affirmation.

Personally, I have benefited from this experience

by learning a lot about high school athletics and gaining the perspectives of the athletic directors, RUSD leadership, and some of the coaches. I continue to attend all the RUSD athletic director meetings so that I can be aware of their needs, concerns, and development. My respect for them has grown as I see them struggle with limited resources while trying to meet the needs of the coaches, students, and parents. The fact that they are not only willing, but wanting, to take on the additional work of pushing for positive change in athletics is incredibly impressive and has increased my desire to collaborate with them and support their efforts. For Dr. Garrett, when he served as a high school coach many years ago there were no programs that helped coaches grow in their mental health and wellbeing. He shares that programs such as this provide a much-needed opportunity not only to build wellness building blocks for the coaches, but to increase the graduate student's ability to serve our community.

We consider the Coaches' Clinic to be a success. Feedback from the coaches that attended the event, as well as the athletic directors, and the RUSD Superintendent, indicate that the clinics have had a positive impact on RUSD's high school athletics. We have already made improvements on our content and delivery, by incorporating discussions, roundtables, and plan to make additional improvements, initially through the refinement of the Community topic. We have been strengthening our infrastructure through additional staffing and grant funds and are considering expanding both in participant type (for example, parents and athletes) and to additional districts. The goal of this program, as set by RUSD and the MS SPP program, was to make a positive impact on the culture of high school athletics in Riverside. We believe this engagement has established a solid foundation and are excited to continue our community outreach one coach at a time.

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