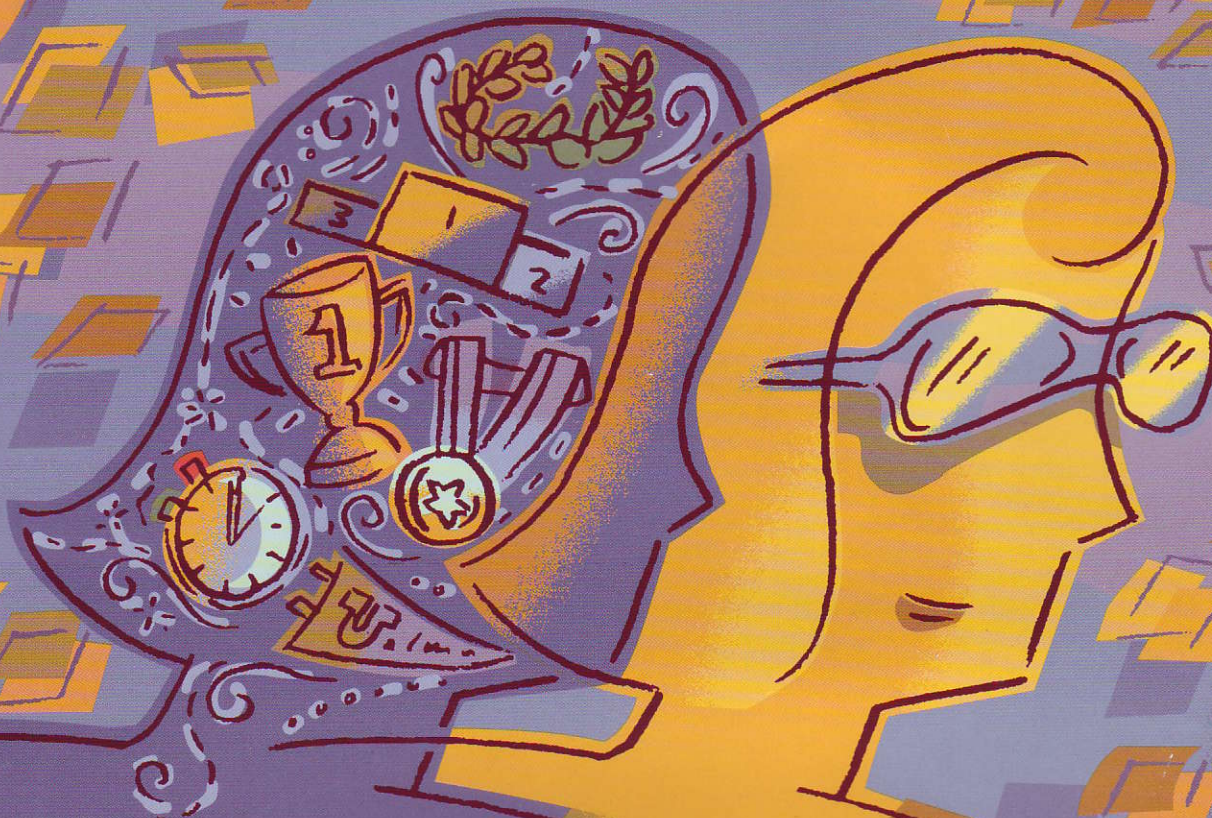


UNION

COLLEGE



The playing
fields of
the mind

Alumni in the growing
field of sport psychology

STORY PAGE 2



petition day, I was so nervous for the athletes, I had to leave the warm-up room! The media can also be really intrusive. Some athletes, like Jim Shea [the first American to win a world skeleton title, and a member of the Olympic skeleton team], are good at handling it. He was still able to focus and get the gold. But for me, seeing the amount of pressure these folks dealt with, and succeeded in spite of, was a real learning experience.”

Peterson began her undergraduate days in fine arts at Syracuse University and transferred to Union, where she moved into biopsychology, then psychobiology, and then psychology, eventually doing her senior thesis on sport psychology. She also was on the varsity field hockey, basketball, and softball teams. How did she find time for academics? “Actually, I did my best work when I was involved in sports. It made me more organized—I just got more done.”

The power of permission

It’s all right to feel fear and anxiety, says **Janet Sasson Edgette ’78**, a clinical psychologist who works with adolescents and equestrians.

The common thread: Seeing and accepting what is—in the adolescents’ case, accepting that they’d rather not be in a therapist’s office; in the riders’ case, accepting the butterflies in their stomachs.

“Sometimes anxiety is actually good judgment, and trying to get rid of it can be a mistake,” she says. “In any case, we need to acknowledge these feelings, listen to them, and learn to perform well in spite of them, rather than try to suppress them and risk getting hurt, or have them burst out at the wrong moment.”

Edgette co-directs The Brief Therapy Works in Rosemont, Penn., and is active on the equestrian show jumping circuit. She writes a column for a national equestrian magazine and has published several books, including *Heads Up! Practical Sports Psychology for Riders, Their Families & Their Trainers* and *The Rider’s Edge*. She’s also hosted a weekly call-in show called “Horse Sense” on a Pennsylvania radio station.

As a professional jumper-rider who recognizes the importance of the mental game, she’s pioneered the application of sport psychology principles to all aspects of equestrian sports. She believes that helping athletes relax and get into a zone is an oversimplified version of what sport psychology can offer.

“Relaxation techniques, for example, are very context dependent—you can meditate

at home, but once you get to the horse show, it’s another story. I’ve found that the traditional approach encourages athletes to spend an inordinate amount of time worrying about whether they’re relaxed.”

Edgette uses a perspective she calls the Power of Permission, focusing on how an athlete can do what he needs to do despite his nervousness, and avoid the conundrum of trying too hard at something that goes best when he is not trying. “This goes for musicians and vocalists and other performing artists too. The freedom to be nervous makes you less nervous! As a human being in a competitive endeavor, anxiety is expectable. Fighting these legitimate feelings is counterproductive.”

She says the Power of Permission grew out of an incident when she was ten and was invited to sleep over at the home of a friend, Kathy, who had a pony and an older brother. “The problem was that I would get terribly homesick. My friends’ mothers would say to me, ‘Oh, you’ll have such a good time,’ but every time, at about 9 p.m., they would have to call my mother to come and get me.

“Kathy’s mother was different. She was brilliant: ‘Well, Mrs. Sasson,’ she told my mother in front of me, ‘I guess we’ll be seeing you in a couple of hours.’ She was the first person ever to give me permission to feel homesick! I trotted around all night, saying to myself, ‘I can get homesick anytime I want,’ and I was able to stay the night. How important it is not to fight what we feel.”



Training for the bigger picture

In his first two years as a Union student, **Wally Bzdell ’94** played hockey. “But I had an injury and had a tough time coming back. I began wondering what happened in between loving the game and having trouble getting out to the rink. I’d been a good practice player, but during games, I didn’t want to take risks. I’ve since learned this is very common among athletes. But nobody had ever talked to me about the mental side of sports.”

That, plus the psychology courses he’d taken, made him want to explore sport psychology. He did a senior honors thesis, with adviser Don Spring, on using mental imagery with elite athletes. “I got a grant from Union to do my research, spending the summer between junior and senior years at Lake Placid. Ned Harkness, who was there, put me in touch with seven or eight national governance boards. That was the beginning of my career path.”

Now staff psychologist in the counseling center at Siena College and adjunct faculty member in Siena’s psychology department, Bzdell initiated a sport psychology course last summer, and when he offered it again this fall, it was the first psychology course to fill up. He also sees the general student population and works with student athletes and coaches, as well as local teams and private clients.



Wally Bzdell



Janet Edgette



Kirsten Peterson



Mark Hurwitz



Michael Sachs

In graduate school at Boston University (he has an Ed.D. in counseling psychology), Bzdell developed an interest in youth sports. He worked with the Massachusetts Youth Hockey and USA Hockey Coach Education programs, promoting psychosocial development, healthy lifestyles, and strong character habits for young men and women through sports. As he points out, "Most people won't become competitive athletes, but every one of them can use sport to make friends, and increase physical and mental health."

"Elite athletes will always be able to find a consultant," adds the coauthor of *Character and Coaching: Building Virtue in Athletic Programs*. "But I'd love for youth sport participants to be able to take advantage of what's out there."

One of the toughest parts of the work for him is seeing the turmoil kids experience through their parents. "There's too much competitiveness at the youth sports level. The focus on winning and losing takes away from the experience. Not that winning isn't important, but research indicates that the win-at-all-costs mentality can create a lot of damage."



Principles that can apply anywhere

Mark Hurwitz '85 arrived at Union to play basketball and left frustrated by the experience, but wanting to make a difference.

So when he heard about Springfield College's brand-new graduate program in athletic counseling, he realized he could combine his psychology major with being a competitive athlete. Today he has applied sport psychology principles to customized peak performance training for corporations and local businesses alike, teaching transferrable skills such as working one on one, communication skills, and positive self-talk. He sees private clients of all ages and skill levels, teaches undergraduate sport psychology at the University of Connecticut, and is working on a book on baseball and sport psychology for children, titled

Diamonds in the Rough: Sport Psychology for Kids.

Like Bzdell, Hurwitz works with high school and college-age athletes, commenting, "It's amazing to see how many high school seniors and college freshmen have adjustment issues, and no one to work them through with. If more programs had sport psychologists, it would be a huge benefit. As I found out on an intramurals basketball team, being a frustrated college athlete puts you more in the majority than in the minority."

In youth sports, he adds, "Intense emotions and confrontations are typical, but unfortunately, just among the parents. These issues are not addressed well enough. I think we have to get involved with the towns and make training in dealing with this mandatory—get administrators to buy in. Coaches, too."

Hurwitz speaks affectionately of one high school field

hockey team he worked with, pointing to a framed poster of the front page from the local newspaper. A photo of three girls from the team hugging accompanies the headline, "Cougars Stayed Focused on State Title." Surrounding the article are twenty-two handwritten messages to Hurwitz, signed by each team member. "They'd lost in the state championship games the year before," he explains, "and came back the next year facing huge expectations of parents, fans, and even opposing coaches. So I worked with them on getting through the season handling that kind of pressure, and focusing on their own individual performances. They ended up winning! I take no credit for that—it's always about the individual athletes—they're the ones who go out and perform. But I like to think I helped along the way. That's the kind of thing that keeps you going."



For more information on sport psychology, contact:
 Michael Sachs, msachs@temple.edu
 Janet Edgette, janetedgette@cs.com
 Kirsten Peterson, kirsten.peterson@usoc.org
 Wally Bzdell, wbdell@siena.edu
 Mark Hurwitz, mark.hurwitz@worldnet.att.net