

Dr. Oretzky Interview for *Great Jobs in Sports* (Feldman, 2019)

Interview with a Sport Psychologist

Dr. Shira Oretzky is a licensed clinical psychologist and sport psychologist. She is a faculty member at San Diego State University, where she works with NCAA Division I athletes, and she has a private practice in Del Mar, California. She has worked as a sport psychologist for ten years. She answered questions about her career by email.

Why did you become a sport psychologist?

Sports have always been an integral part of my life. As a kid I was a competitive gymnast and later went on to play volleyball and soccer. Sports were key in my development, and I saw how they have positively shaped others.

From a young age, I was also intrigued by psychology and the mind. After college, I went on to graduate school to get a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. My dissertation research looked at how yoga can improve depression, anxiety and physical symptoms in young adults. My approach to practice was influenced by seeing first-hand the positive implications of how combined treatment of mind and body can significantly improve an individual's overall health and well-being.

After graduate school I went on to complete a proficiency in Sport Psychology, honing my psychological knowledge and clinical skills to address the optimal performance and well-being of athletes as well as developmental and social aspects of sports.

Being a sport psychologist was a perfect fit. It incorporates two things that I am passionate about: sports and psychology.

Can you describe your typical workday?

I work as a faculty psychologist at San Diego State University, where I am the liaison to Athletics. I also have a sport psychology practice where I do private consulting with individual athletes, teams, and organizations.

At the University, the majority of a typical day is spent in individual meetings with student-athletes to address sport- or performance-related concerns and to develop skills and techniques for enhancing peak performance. I talk with student-athletes about a variety of challenges they experience. These include managing the pressures of performing at a high level, adjusting to college, relationships with others, clinical mental health issues like depression or anxiety, recovering from injuries, and navigating the transition from college sports to either playing professionally or an alternative career path. A typical day often involves phone calls with Athletic Medicine Doctors, Athletic Trainers, Athletic Academic Advisors, and other key supports in the athlete's life. We work together as a team to best support the athlete. Additionally, I regularly work on programming educational workshops that teach sport psychology skills and address mental wellness topics, for both athlete seminars and teams.

What do you like most about your job?

I love working with athletes. Their passion, strength, and determination to succeed continually inspires me and it's a pleasure to have the opportunity to help them reach their potential.

My job is extremely rewarding. I love to sit one-on-one with athletes and hear about their life stories, career paths, and future goals and aspirations. When I see an athlete thriving in his or her sport and life after working through mental blocks, overcoming fears, or building confidence, I find it quite gratifying.

What do you like least about your job?

The challenging part of my job has been to increase awareness of the importance of athlete mental wellness. In the past, there has been a stigma associated with mental health, especially in the sports culture. The encouraging part is that strides are being made. As professional and college athletes, the NCAA, and sport organizations continue to open up the dialogue around this area, it is exciting to be in this field!

What personal qualities do you find most valuable for this type of work?

Good interpersonal skills go a long way in this field. Being able to build positive relationships, communicate effectively, and offer genuine care about the well-being of your clients are all very important. Having an athletic background yourself with experience competing in sports is an invaluable asset to this type of work and helps to establish credibility and to be seen as relatable by athletes. Being creative and having the ability to think outside the box are also helpful. Flexibility and adaptability are key. It is important to be able to build rapport easily with athletes from diverse backgrounds and to be prepared to work with a variety of team and organizational cultures.

What is the best way to prepare for this type of job?

Education, experience, and professional connections are key.

Take courses in psychology, exercise science, and sport and exercise psychology to help determine your interest in this area. Get involved in opportunities like research or volunteer coaching. Join professional organizations such as the Association for Applied Sport Psychology and the American Psychological Association, Division 47 and attend their annual conferences. Talk to professionals in the field to learn about their career paths and internship opportunities.

What other advice do you have for students who might be interested in this career?

This is an exciting time to get involved in the field of sport psychology as it is emerging. The career path is not clearly defined, which might require a student to be creative in putting together their educational training and applied experience. With a passion for the field, ambition, and a strong work ethic there is great opportunity to build an exciting career for yourself. The work is stimulating, no two days are the same, and the rewards of helping athletes to truly reach their potential are tremendously fulfilling.

References

Feldman, H.C. (2019). *Great jobs in sports*. San Diego, CA: ReferencePoint Press.