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APA DIVISION 47
SOCIETY FOR SPORT, EXERCISE, & PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY

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Sport Psych WORKS

ABOUT SPW

SportPsych Works is a longstanding APA Division 47 newsletter-style fact sheet series, originally developed as a joint initiative of the Science and Public Interest Committees. With those committees now integrated into the Cornerstone Committee, the Diversity Collective is reintroducing and stewarding SportPsych Works for its next chapter.

Designed to be engaging, practical, and evidence-informed, each issue translates current sport, exercise, and performance psychology (SEPP) research into accessible resources for practitioners, coaches, athletes, educators, students, and organizations.

The series bridges research and practice through timely, actionable guidance while centering culturally responsive, equity-informed, and strengths-based perspectives.

SportPsych Works recognizes culture, identity, context, and lived experience as fundamental to effective sport and performance psychology and seeks to foster well-being, belonging, inclusion, and excellence across diverse performance settings.



RURAL ATHLETES

Definitions of rurality vary across geographic and cultural contexts. Broadly, rural describes communities outside major urban centers that may experience geographic marginalization, limited infrastructure, and exclusion from urban-centered sport systems. However, rural athletes bring strengths, relationships, and knowledge that are too often overlooked when we focus only on what their communities lack. In SEPP, place matters. It can shape identity, access to resources, and what athletes learn about sport and asking for help. Understanding where athletes come from helps us better support them and recognize when the environment, rather than the athlete, needs to change.

Place is more than geography. It shapes what sport means, who has access, and what kinds of support feel possible.

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RURAL ATHLETES



UNDERSTANDING THE TOPIC

Where an athlete comes from can shape what sport means to them, who is involved in their sport experience, and what they learned about toughness and asking for help. Rural communities may share some experiences, including long travel distances or fewer specialized resources, but they are not interchangeable. An agricultural community in the Midwest may function very differently from a ranching community in Wyoming or a remote Alaskan community. We should be careful not to turn shared experiences into stereotypes. Place can also be a tremendous source of strength. Sport may be closely connected to family, community pride, and belonging. In close-knit communities, though, relationships often overlap. Your coach may also be your teacher, neighbor, or relative. That closeness can be supportive while also making privacy and boundaries more complicated.

Indigeneity is also not synonymous with rurality. Understanding Indigenous athletes requires attention to sovereignty, land, colonization, culture, and the community-specific meanings attached to sport.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE

Imagine traveling several hours for practice, competition, or specialized coaching while also managing school, family, or community responsibilities. Then imagine entering a larger sport system and being expected to immediately understand resources, language, and expectations that other athletes have been navigating for years.

Coming from a close-knit community can mean having an entire town behind you. It can also mean that an injury, disappointing performance, decision to seek mental health care, or choice to set a boundary quickly becomes community knowledge. What looks like an athlete worrying too much about what other people think may reflect a reality in which people really *do* know and talk about one another. Athletes who leave home may also experience excitement and opportunity alongside homesickness, cultural adjustment, and a sense of responsibility to the people and places that shaped them.

Instead of assuming what rural identity means, start by asking: **What does place mean to this athlete?**

UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH

Research suggests that where athletes live can affect both access to sport and their experiences within it. Rural athletes may navigate greater transportation demands and costs alongside reduced access to facilities, specialized coaching, healthcare, and sport psychology services (Clement et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2026). At the same time, rural sport can offer meaningful strengths, including close community relationships, family involvement, informal opportunities for play, and a strong sense of belonging (Newport et al., 2022).

Place can also shape whether seeking support feels realistic or safe. Rural identity, limited service availability, concerns about confidentiality, and the visibility that comes with living in a smaller community can complicate help-seeking (Cheesmond et al., 2019). These experiences are not universal. Rurality intersects with race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic conditions, and other identities in ways that shape both barriers and strengths (Johnson et al., 2025). For Indigenous athletes, culturally safe practice should also recognize the importance of family, culture, community, and connection rather than treating geographic access as the whole story (May et al., 2020).

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PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1 Get curious about place.

Knowing that someone comes from a rural area tells you very little about what being rural means *to them*. Ask about their community, who is important in their sport experience, and what they learned about toughness, success, and asking for help. Maintain curiosity when an athlete's behavior differs from what you expect. Guardedness is not automatically resistance. Stoicism does not necessarily mean disengagement. Strong family involvement is not inherently helpful or intrusive. Before assigning clinical or performance meaning to a behavior, get curious about what it means in the athlete's culture and previous experiences. Coaches can take the same approach when athletes enter collegiate, elite, academy, or urban sport environments. Explain unfamiliar systems rather than assuming athletes already know how to navigate them. Help athletes learn the new environment without communicating that where they came from was somehow inferior.

2 Make support actually accessible.

Before recommending weekly appointments, specialized care, additional training, or virtual services, ask whether the athlete can realistically access them. Consider transportation, distance cost, privacy, internet access, scheduling, and competing responsibilities. This may require us to rethink how services are delivered. Brief interventions, flexible scheduling, hybrid services, team-based programming, and partnerships with trusted local professionals may fit better than traditional models. Telehealth can certainly help, but it is not automatically accessible when an athlete lacks reliable broadband or a private place to talk.

3 Know when the environment needs to change.

Mental skills cannot compensate for every structural barrier. Sometimes an athlete does not need another coping strategy. They need reasonable access to healthcare, transportation, facilities, recovery resources, specialized coaching, or an appropriate referral pathway. This is where advocacy becomes part of good practice. Sport organizations can examine whether their systems assume athletes have money, transportation, technology, specialized services, or familiarity with elite sport environments. We should absolutely help athletes build skills and navigate difficult environments, but we should also be willing to ask whether those environments could be better.

LET'S REFLECT

What assumptions do I make about athletes based on where they come from?

Am I primarily noticing what their community lacks, or am I equally curious about its strengths, relationships, knowledge, and resources?

What does my usual approach assume athletes have access to?

Think beyond whether a service technically exists. Could this athlete realistically get there, afford it, find privacy, make the schedule work, or access the necessary technology?

Am I asking the athlete to adapt to something the system could change?

Individual coping skills are important, but so is our willingness to notice and address unnecessary barriers within sport.

THE BIG PICTURE

PLACE MATTERS. ASK ABOUT IT!

RURAL ATHLETES DO NOT NEED US TO ROMANTICIZE THEIR RESILIENCE OR FOCUS EXCLUSIVELY ON WHAT THEIR COMMUNITIES LACK. THEY NEED SPORT SYSTEMS THAT ARE WILLING TO UNDERSTAND HOW PLACE SHAPES THEIR EXPERIENCES AND RECOGNIZE THE KNOWLEDGE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND STRENGTHS THEY ALREADY BRING WITH THEM.

LEARN ABOUT THE PLACES ATHLETES COME FROM. LISTEN TO ATHLETES AND COMMUNITIES RATHER THAN ASSUMING WHAT THEY NEED, AND AVOID ASKING ATHLETES TO OVERCOME BARRIERS WE HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE.

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CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Place is part of culture

Geography can shape identity, relationships, privacy, opportunity, help-seeking, and what sport itself means.

Rural does not mean deficient

2

Rural communities hold substantial strengths and knowledge while also navigating real structural inequities. Good practice requires us to understand both.

3

Adapt the system, not just the athlete

Culturally responsive practice means making interventions work within athletes' actual environments and recognizing when advocacy or systems-level change is more useful than another individual coping strategy.

RESOURCES

Rural Health Information Hub (RHIhub): A free national resource covering rural healthcare access, workforce issues, community health, funding opportunities, and models for improving rural health services.

National Rural Health Association (NRHA): Provides education, advocacy, policy information, and other resources focused on rural health and healthcare access.

North American Indigenous Games (NAIG): An Indigenous-led international multisport movement celebrating Indigenous youth, sport, culture, community, and identity. NAIG offers an important strengths-based perspective on Indigenous participation in sport.

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