

AASP Presidential Address 2007



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Last year, when Jean Williams called to ask if I would be interested in being a candidate for President-Elect, I asked, “Why me?” She politely avoided telling me that they couldn’t get anyone else, and she said, “For your perspective and wisdom.” It worked. I can tell you about my perspective, but I’ll leave it to others to decide about wisdom. In thinking about this Presidential Address, I asked myself, “What’s the purpose of it?” My answer was: to give each president an opportunity to discuss what he or she sees as important: for those we serve, for sport psychology, or for AASP itself. For this address, I chose to focus on our own organization; and the challenge this presented for me was how to do it.

About 12 years ago, Ken Ravizza invited me to speak to his students at Cal State Fullerton. At that time, I had been working for a few months on the draft of my AASP Keynote Address “How People Change.” So I decided to test it out with them. When I was about half-way through the presentation, Ken interrupted me and said, “Burt, it’s not you. We can read that stuff in any sport psychology text. We want to hear about your experience.” That’s my buddy Ken. You recognize him? After recovering from being crushed, I spent the next few months rewriting it, making it more personal. In the end, he was right because it turned out just fine. Over the years, Ken’s advice to me has always worked out well. From that experience, I decided to use the same personal approach for this Presidential Address, and discuss some issues that are especially important to me. My older daughter, who is a psychologist, also gave me some advice. In responding to my concern that the address would not be long enough, she said, “Dad, what you often say in one sentence is worth a paragraph; so use paragraphs for your presentation.” This is the paragraph version.

My very first involvement in sport psychology was 50 years ago, during my psychiatric residency. I was team physician to a high school football program, and I learned a lot about coach stress, sport injury, and parent involvement. My first connection to AASP didn’t come until over 30 years later. It was a very meaningful and personal experience. At the age of 65, I had begun to wind down my activities, with somewhat mixed feelings. AASP and sport psychology created a wonderful opportunity for a new beginning. And in the past 18 years, AASP and I have grown up together. During these years, I’ve worked with athletes, coaches, and others who, although not primarily athletes, were seriously involved in sport participation and competition. More than a dozen different sports were involved, including some less common ones, such as fencing, badminton, luge, and straight pool. I learned a lot more about sport, about consulting, and about myself. One surprising lesson for me was that the sports I knew best were not my most effective consultations.

AASP, too, has grown both in size and complexity. We have some 15 Committees and 15 Special Interest Groups. We now have members from over 30 different countries, representing almost 15% of our membership. We also have an International Relations Committee, and a Distinguished International Scholar Award. There have been qualitative changes as well as quantitative, with the addition of the Rees Management Group, Centennial Conferences, a public relations firm, and a professional web designer.

I want to tell you about where I am with AASP today. At the outset, I want to acknowledge and emphasize that the scope of AASP is much more than my connection, interests, and initiatives. The specifics I will focus on today are only a small part of the breadth and depth of AASP’s mission and commitment to a science-based and ethical approach to research and practice. Jack Lesyk captured

both the essence and scope of AASP by identifying our goal as the “improvement of physical and mental health and well-being through sport and exercise.” Our new website is an excellent description of the complexity of our organization. What is important to me is that we become the strongest organization we can be; and I think that the strength of an organization comes from the strength of its members. But when you think about it, what does strength mean for members? I think it means being the best we can be in how we are members; and if we do that, then AASP will be the best it can be.

So, how can we achieve this goal? Well, one way is to have our process become our goal; that is, to improve how we go about doing what we do. There is a Sufi story about a Golden-Haired Lion, in which the Disciple says to the Master, “Master, when lions seize upon an opponent, be it rabbit or elephant, they make exhaustive use of their power. Where does this power come from?” The Master nods and replies, “It comes from putting forth one’s whole being, in which nothing is kept in reserve, nothing goes to waste. When you perform in this way, you too can be a golden-haired lion.” Can we use any part of that teaching as members of AASP? George Bernard Shaw once wrote, “By the time I die, I want to be all used up.” When I first read this, it didn’t sound like such a good idea. As I reflected more on it, I came to realize that what he was saying was that he wanted to have given all his ability and energy to the way he lived his life.

Among Zen teachings, there is one that says, “When walking, just walk; when sitting, just sit.” In other words, whatever you do, do fully, in the present, with your whole being. To supplement that profound message, there’s a wise and whimsical story of a Korean Zen Master, who repeatedly admonished his students, “When eating, just eat! When reading, just read!” One day, his attendant walked in on him while he was eating breakfast, and there he was reading a newspaper at the very same time. “Master,” he exclaimed, “You always teach us ‘When eating, just eat! When reading, just read!’ What is the meaning of this?” To which the Master replied, “Yes. It is true that I always teach you ‘When eating, just eat! When reading, just read!’ And now I am teaching you ‘When eating and reading, just eat and read!’”

Can we apply that to ourselves as members? When being a member, just be a member. What would be involved? It would certainly include awareness, dedication, commitment, and energy. As members, what would that actually look like? It would mean caring how AASP goes about doing what it does, and then contributing to its improvement. That might include any of the following actions:

- becoming a member of a committee; (15)
- joining a special interest group (SIG); (15)
- nominating candidates for the Executive Board;
- voting when it’s time to vote (less than 20% of members vote);
- finding out how you could run for office;
- suggesting or creating something that AASP needs and doesn’t have;
- working toward changing something AASP does to make it better;
- adding new ideas to this list, and getting involved in initiating them

Another element that could increase the strength of our Association is member connectedness – something like what cohesion is for a team. This means we would:

- pull together toward common goals;
- support each other by listening with an open mind;
- communicate in ways that accept our differences even when we disagree; and
- work toward resolving whatever problems interfere with our performance.

In my Position Statement as candidate for President-Elect last year, I mentioned some specific issues that are important to me, and it is my hope that we can work on these together. AASP is now 21 years old, and if we extend Erik Erikson’s ideas on development to apply to our association, then one of our tasks as we enter early adulthood is to master the challenges of intimacy. So the first issue

I want to address is the relationship between psychologists and sport scientists. Over the past 18 years, this relationship has shown continuing evidence of strain. We are surviving, but perhaps not thriving. Many members know about it, and talk about the differences in perspective and practice; but little attention has been given to the relationship between the professions. How to heal the rift has not been directly addressed. It is a challenging task to know even how to begin. Where and when could we do it? Who would initially be involved? Given the time constraints, differences in our training, and separateness of our lives, what would be a first step?

Because our Annual Conference is the one time we are all together, a beginning could be Invited Symposiums at our AASP conferences. Dialogue between the professions could focus on this question, "Can we heal our relationship if we still disagree?" The structure and participants in this effort need to be worked out; therefore, a Committee on Professional Relations will be established to address this challenge. Its mission will be to address the problem, plan the symposiums, and make specific recommendations about how to continue the dialogue. The Committee will include members of both professions, and will be chaired by Past-President Len Zaichkowsky.

The second issue I mentioned was increasing the connection between students and professionals. Students are the future of our organization. Adapting Erickson's teachings again, one of our tasks is to guide the next generation. To enrich the experience of our student members would serve both student and professional members of AASP. It will increase learning opportunities for both groups; provide more involvement of students in AASP activities; increase students' exposure to mentoring; and give them a close-up view of different types of applied work. One important way to accomplish this enrichment is to organize structured opportunities for greater contact between students and experienced professionals. One such opportunity is the "Think Tank" weekend. Bob McGowan organized them on the East Coast, and I attended two of them in 1994 and 1996. Ten years later, Ken Ravizza organized one on the West Coast. My co-candidate for President-Elect, Artur Poczwadowski, wrote about the West Coast experience in *The Sport Psychologist* last year. Other such meetings could be scheduled at the AASP Annual Conference, and at the Student Regional Conferences throughout the year. A Committee on Student Development will, therefore, be created to organize and develop this program. The Committee would include professional and student members of AASP, and Artur Poczwadowski will serve as its Chair.

Because students represent about 40% of our membership, with only one student representing them on the Executive Board, I have proposed that an additional student representative be added to the Board. The functions of the Executive Board Student Representative have grown in number and complexity, including supervision of the regional student representatives from seven regions. These regional representatives have recently been much more involved in developing new programs to improve the operation of AASP. An increase to two student representatives on the Executive Board would be consistent with encouraging members to become more involved in AASP functions. Two student representatives on the Board will also provide increased opportunities for mentoring future members of the leadership pool. This change would involve a Constitutional amendment, and it is my hope that you will approve it when it is presented at the business meeting.

In addition, with the help of the Executive Board Student Representative, we are planning to improve communication with the Regional Student Representatives, and increase their involvement in AASP by keeping them better informed about our committees and Special Interest Groups. We hope this will improve their ability to help students and other members of AASP understand the purpose and function of these groups, and create the possibility of greater participation in them.

My next idea focuses on direct services to coaches by interested members of AASP. Although much has been written in the sport psychology literature about helping coaches in their work with individual athletes and teams, there is very little about helping coaches with their own needs.

Coaches face similar challenges to those experienced by athletes, such as performance, time management, transition, health, family, and personal issues. However, the needs of coaches before burnout occurs have not received the attention they deserve. AASP has an excellent opportunity to provide leadership in this area. To address this need, I am proposing that our members offer workshops to coaches around the country. These workshops would differ from most coaching education programs in that they would focus on the coaches themselves. The workshops could be free-standing or through existing coaching organizations. There are many such organizations at all levels of sport participation, including high school, college, national, regional, and local groups. In addition, various sport coaching associations, as well as youth services groups, such as Little League and Pop Warner could be contacted. If coaches benefit from these workshops, their interest in providing similar services to their athletes could increase. A Committee on Services for Coaches will, therefore, be established to develop this program, and monitor its effectiveness on an ongoing basis. Many AASP members have considerable experience in coaching, and the Committee will tap into this expertise, by including those who are or have been coaches, consultants who have worked with coaches, and others with a special interest in this area. Gloria Balague, with extensive experience with coaches, will be the Chair.

There is one other change I would like to make. I have proposed that the name of the Performance Enhancement/Intervention Focus Area be changed to Performance Psychology. Although initially intended as a description of professional help, the term Performance Enhancement has changed. Our culture has pre-empted the term, and in the media and in the minds of many, “performance enhancement” has taken on the meaning of using artificial or chemical means to improve performance. The other half of the term PE/I, interventions can be for purposes other than enhancement; and is not only applicable to performance. Health and Exercise Psychology, and Social Psychology are also involved with interventions. The new name would clarify that there are more issues in performance than just enhancement. Performance Psychology would identify an area of research and practice, similar to Health Psychology, Exercise Psychology, and Social Psychology. The newer term is widely accepted, and courses in “Performance Psychology” are now being taught in many universities in the U. S., Australia, and the United Kingdom.

Some concern has been expressed about how coaches and athletes will see and understand this change, in view of studies exploring coach and athlete attitudes about sport psychology, and why services aren't used more often. Because of misperceptions of the word psychology, many practitioners describe their work with coaches and athletes emphasizing mental skills training and/or performance enhancement, not psychology. This need not change. The proposed name change is to identify and clarify an area of our work, in the same way we use the terms Social Psychology, Health Psychology, and Exercise Psychology. It is not necessary to use this term to describe what we actually do with teams, athletes and coaches. For example, when we are involved with team cohesion and communication, we don't usually bring in the term Social Psychology. Similarly, when we are working with athletic injury and rehabilitation, we don't usually talk about Health Psychology. So, when we do performance work and mental skills training, we do not need to use the term Performance Psychology. It is primarily to describe the body of knowledge from which we draw our applied techniques and interventions. This proposed change will require a Constitutional amendment, and will also be presented at the business meeting for a vote by the membership. Again, I hope that you will vote in favor of it.

One final issue that will require a membership vote for a Constitutional amendment involves the position of Science and Education Division Head. This position was assigned many responsibilities when the Executive Board was restructured in 2001. To improve the effectiveness of this Division, the Board is now proposing that the position of Division Head be divided into two: one responsible for the development of Conference program, and a separate one for oversight of Focus Area Committees and Special Interest Groups. The Board considers this change an essential

element in the plan to increase the importance of these committees and SIGS, and to improve their functioning.

I began this address on a personal note, and I want to end on another one. As you will hear in a moment, “note” is the appropriate word. I mentioned earlier that my first reaction to being asked if I would run for President-Elect was to ask, “Why me?” At the same time, I asked myself a very different kind of question, “Why am I taking on such responsibility at this time in my life?” My response was very similar to my first contact with AASP. I was again being offered a new beginning. Beginning is good, especially at the age of 82, when so many things are ending. So you will see why the article I am about to read is so inspiring to me. Written six years ago by a reporter for the Houston Chronicle, I think it captures the essence of what it means to be all that you can be.

“On Nov. 18, 1995, Itzhak Perlman, the renowned violinist, came on stage to give a concert at Lincoln Center in New York City. If you have ever been to a Perlman concert, you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child, has braces on both legs, and walks with the aid of two crutches. To see him walk across the stage one step at a time is quite something. He walks slowly, sometimes painfully, yet majestically, until he reaches his chair. He sits down, slowly puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back, and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down, picks up his violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor to begin, and proceeds to play

By now, the audience is quite used to this ritual. They sit quietly while he makes his way across the stage to his chair. They remain reverently silent while he undoes the clasps on his legs. They wait patiently until he is ready to play. On this particular occasion, just after he began playing the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin snapped. It went off like gunfire, and you could hear it across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. There was no mistaking what he might have to do. Some people who were there that night thought to themselves: “He might have to get up, put the clasps on again, pick up his crutches, and limp his way off stage. Then he has to find another violin, or find another string for this one, or wait for someone to bring him one.”

He didn’t do any of those things. Instead, he closed his eyes, waited a moment, and then signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began, and he picked up just where he had left off. Of course, anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three violin strings. I know that, you know that, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, recomposing, and changing the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was re-tuning the strings, to get sounds from them they had never made before. And he played with more passion, power, and purity than many who were there had ever heard before.

When he finished, there was a moment of awesome silence in the room. Then people rose to their feet and cheered. There was an extraordinary outburst of applause from every corner of the auditorium. We were all cheering and screaming, doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done. Here was a man who has prepared all his life to make music on a violin with four strings, who all of a sudden, in the middle of a concert, found himself with three. And the music he made that night with three strings was more beautiful, more sacred, and more memorable than any that he made with four strings.

He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and said in a pensive, reverent tone, “You know, sometimes our task is to find out how much music we can still make with what we have left.” What a powerful lesson that can be! It can, in fact, be a way of life, not just for an artist with a disability, but for us all at any age. Perhaps our task, in this fast-changing, bewildering world, is to make music, at first with all that we have; and then, when that is no longer possible, to make music with what we have left.”