

10 Burning Questions with Dr. John M. Silva

Interviewed by Heather R. Deaner, Ph.D., California State University Stanislaus

Question #1: What sparked your interest in sport psychology?

Dr. Silva: I was an undergraduate at the University of Connecticut and I started out as a psychology major. I was taking classes in the exercise science department on my own in exercise physiology; nutrition because I thought it might help make me with my own athletic endeavors. My sophomore year a professor joined the faculty at UConn in Exercise Science named Dr. Posters were put up advertising that he had joined the faculty and he was going to be teaching a class in sport psychology. So I took the class with a few of my buddies from some different teams and he ended up being a tremendous stimulant. I knew about two weeks into the class that this class was a perfect marriage of my interests in psychology and in sport. Dr. Sheehan was a very intellectually challenging teacher, had a very creative mind, and was a very forward thinking guy. So I went up and asked 'what do you need to do to become a sport psychologist?' he told me to double major in exercise science and psychology and that I would have to go on to a graduate school that fit my interests. So he was a big spark for me and in the second semester of my sophomore year the light bulb came on and my interest in merging psychology and sports and athletics was born.

Question #2: What is your fondest AA(A)SP memory?

Dr.Silva: It would have to be the first conference at Jekyll Island, GA in 1986. We had been putting so much work and so much effort into just the idea of AAASP coming forward. There was quite a bit of resistance to the formation of AAASP by some established sport psychology colleagues – there was a feeling that we were going to fractionate the field and we were going to take membership away from NASPSPA. So there was quite a bit of press against forming AAASP. Probably the smartest thing I did was at the first organizational meeting at Gulfport, MS when quite a large number of people showed up at that organizational meeting who were trying to stop the association – I had already made my mind up that I wasn't going to get into that debate. I said 'I'm not here to argue the merits of forming AAASP...we're going to move forward with it and if you'd like to join us we would like to have you, but if you're not interested in AAASP that will not stop us from moving forward. So having gone through everything that we went through for a couple of years - forming the idea and getting the organization from a concept to a reality and seeing that first conference attended by almost 200 colleagues and then the quality of the speakers – Bonnie Strickland, Jim Blumenthal, Rainer Martens, Donald Meichenbaum – we had some iconic speakers at our first conference. Everything went off, almost flawlessly, at the first conference and it was all volunteer work, we didn't have any management team. It was basically our group at Carolina and our first executive board that did everything and attended to every detail of that conference. So, that was definitely a tremendous high note, seeing the first conference come to fruition and knowing that AAASP is going to take off and there is a certain kind of spirit to AAASP that's going to carry us and we've got the ship sailing! The first conference would be my fondest memory.

Question #3: Since forming AAASP in 1985-86, have your expectations for the organization been met?

Dr. Silva: No, actually. I feel like the organization has done a lot of great things and has developed in many positive ways but I feel that it has grossly underachieved in some of the more significant areas that the organization was founded to address. Twenty-five years is a really, really long time – plenty of time to “advance”. I don’t agree with the analogy of an organization and a human being in terms of you’re an infant, you’re a child, you’re an adolescent, you’re an adult. This organization accomplished a significant amount in sensitive areas in its first 5 years, which would be its “infancy”. I think those accomplishments had to do with the people who were involved, their skill sets, and their willingness to take reasonable risk and invest the time and energy into tackling difficult issues. There were nine founding goals that I had and we have achieved four of those founding goals. The five that we have not accomplished are some of the most central goals of the organization. These goals have to do with the education and training of students, the credentials needed to practice and how you achieve those credentials, and the ability to have our students and young professionals who go through years of training to become a sport psychologist have a viable opportunity to work with the phenomenal client base that’s out there and we have yet to tap. These goals are not going to be accomplished by individuals making cold calls - that’s not how the system of professional sports, for example, works. You need a very strong organization that’s promoting the people who are properly trained and making contact with these organizations so that you create a conduit from your organization to these professional teams, Olympic teams, collegiate teams. For the past 25 years it has been hap-hazard how people get hired with professional teams. And, now that I’m doing consulting full time, it’s just reinforced something that I already knew, there are a lot of people working with professional organizations that we don’t know and who didn’t get hired in that organization because of their background and training or expertise in sport psychology. I see that process as taking jobs away from people who are being properly trained in sport psychology and people who are getting the certifications and the training experiences that they need – these are the people who should be in those job positions. I think we have a lot of people who keep saying “we can’t do it” and “it can’t be done”. That is not the AAASP spirit. The AAASP spirit was “we’ll find a way to get it done, “we’ll think it through, we’ll create it, we’ll revise it- fine tune it but this is an important issue that needs to be addressed”. Not only was the founding of the organization controversial, but certification - one of the first major things we did was controversial. A lot of people didn’t want certification because they thought “I can practice sport psychology right now but if they do this credentialing thing, I might not get certified and someone is going to tell me I can’t practice?? So I don’t want it to happen because it might interfere with what I’m doing now”. So, anything that moves an organization or an institution forward, usually has some element of controversy and challenge and you’ve got to be willing to tackle those issues. In summary, I am very proud of what the association has done, I know in my heart and in my mind that some of the greatest accomplishments, that this association was founded to do, remain to be done.

Questions #4: Well related to those issues then, what do you believe is the greatest challenge or obstacle facing AASP today?

Dr. Silva: I think it's in the leadership and the ability of the leadership to work together and to address the significant, important issues not the cosmetic or superficial issues. One of the founding goals was to be member driven and to pay attention to the needs of the membership. In the 1980's there was little attention to the fact that the practice of sport psychology was evolving - developing. And, that's why AAASP took off so fast - we were filling a need that existed in the field. So, we had an instant membership that was very interested and we listened to our membership and we were attending to the needs of our membership. You can go and look at things that were being discussed in 1984, 1985, 1986 and it's very troubling to see those same questions coming up in the 90s, those same questions coming up at the turn of the century, and those same questions coming up last week on the internet which they did! When students are still asking where should I go to school, what experiences should I have, what kind of degree should I get, where are the best programs in sport psychology – you know we remain unstructured in those areas. The leadership has not been able to address these issues, tackle these tough issues. We need a series of emergent leaders – not cultivated leaders - who can address these issues and find a way to get the board to work together - move forward and tackle them. This can't be a one year effort, this has to be a multi-year sustained effort. We can't have a new president coming in and dropping what a president or two before him or her started.

Question #5 What three pieces of advice would you give a student interested in pursuing sport psychology today?

Dr. Silva: The first thing I would say is double major as an undergrad. Develop an appreciation of the exercise and sport sciences, develop an appreciation of psychology and the different facets and specializations within psychology. By double majoring I think you will have a good base and a good appreciation for both fields. I think the more students we get that double major, there will be fewer turf protection battles because the students at the undergraduate level will develop an appreciation of sport and of psychology and the concept that the field IS interdisciplinary. We don't need people coming out who are exercise science majors and may think that they don't need certain aspects of psychology and we don't need people who are psychology majors who don't think there is any value in taking the exercise sciences. So the first thing would be to double major. The next thing would be that somewhere along the course of that double major, try to be able to develop at least an initial feel for what is it that you would like to do in sport psychology; because while some people like to dump all the sub-disciplines of sport psychology into the same bucket they are really different. Exercise psychology is not sport psychology and health psychology is not sport psychology and exercise psychology is not health psychology. So, we have different tracks within sport psychology that need to be more fully developed at the graduate level and a student needs to figure out 'what do I want'; because, if you want exercise psychology and you go to a program that's more applied or performance enhancement oriented, you're not going to get the experiences you need. If you are performance enhancement oriented and you go to a research oriented program or a straight exercise science program, you're not going to get the experiences that you need. So the second step is knowing what you want to do in sport psychology. The third step is choosing a graduate program – even at the Master's level – that is going to interface with

your interests. That Master's is going to be a testing out – an opportunity to see if this is really what I want, is this where I want to do my research, are these the questions that I want to address and pursue maybe at the next level – the doctoral level – do I really want to consult, I thought I wanted to but now I'm finding that it's intimidating or I'm not as effective as I thought I was going to be - can I improve that, can I develop those skills? A student needs to find some of that out in the Master's program. Then the next step is to go to the doctoral level in something that is going to fit exactly what you want to do. In my talk on Saturday, I put a model forth and I challenge the leadership to either adopt this model or come up with a better one that's going provide a structure for students to move through for the practice of sport psychology. Now, if exercise psychology wants to do something similar to this, I argue don't use that as a reason why we shouldn't do the model that I'm putting forward for the practice of sport psychology. Let us put this model forward for the practice of sport psychology...get it in place, fine tune it, get it up and running...so there's clarity for students who want to go in that track and then if the other sub-disciplines within sport psychology are interested in something similar, we'll have a template in place that they can borrow from and develop within their area if they wish to have a practice in exercise psychology. I don't think you should just take the same educational and certification criteria and no matter what track you're in within sport psychology use that to certify people. I think a person getting certified in exercise psychology and the application of it should have an education that looks similar yet distinct from somebody who's getting certified in performance enhancement for the practice of sport psychology.

Question #6 You were just talking about the training of students, what have you learned from the students and athletes you've worked with?

Dr. Silva: A tremendous amount. I think working with students and athletes is very much a didactic experience – you interact with them, they interact with you, you learn from them, they learn from you. So its constant growth and I think no matter how much experience you have you are always looking for ways to improve yourself - and, by improving yourself, you improve the quality of the education you provide to the student and the service you provide to the athlete. So, it's always a pleasure to work with and nurture a student or work with an athlete who has very high personal goals. I think one of the things that I've learned is that – and I think this applies to my life too – if something is important enough to you, no matter what obstacles may present themselves, you find a way to overcome those obstacles and still achieve that goal. I've seen that in a number of my former students and what they've been able to do and I've seen that in athletes that I've worked with. I've worked with several professional athletes who were bubble athletes and I've worked with some who were several time All-Pros. They all have challenges. Spending two or three years of your life on the bubble, getting cut from four or five different NFL teams before you actually make it...to see them continue to pursue, in a healthy way, this lifelong goal and to be so close to it...to see them continue to try to grow and stay focused on that goal and not give up on it. I think too many people have great ideas and have good goals, but when they meet some obstacles, particularly if they happen early on, they let go, they give up on those things, and they don't pursue them. If it's really important to you and really of value to you then you should try to find a way to achieve that goal.

Question #7 If you weren't a sport psychologist, what profession would you be in?

Dr. Silva: I would be working for the National Forestry Service. I love the outdoors. I'm totally an outdoor person, I love nature, I love to plant things, I love to see things grow, I love to be on the water. I enjoy walking, hiking, kayaking. I like outdoor things and I like nature. I have a very healthy respect for nature and I think we need to nurture nature rather than harm nature. We've done a pretty good job of harming nature and there's so much beauty in nature...nature is the most powerful thing in our world and I love it.

Question #8 What is your favorite sport team?

Dr. Silva: That's tough. Favorite team? I love the Red Sox and the Celtics and it's kind of unfair to make me pick between those two. As a spectator or a fan, I have to say the Celtics. I grew up five miles from Boston. When I was a little kid I dribbled a basketball on my living room floor every time the Celtics came on TV. I played in the Boston Garden, our Catholic youth organization (CYO) team won a championship and we got to play an exhibition against another team during halftime of a Boston Celtics game. I have enjoyed watching great players through the Celtics dynasty from the Cousy, Russell, Heinsohn, Havlicek era to the Larry Bird era to the Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce era. There have been some great models of hard-working, high achieving athletes. And then the Red Sox, again growing up close to Boston and going into Fenway Park all the time as a kid on the T (subway) and being a baseball player myself...we went through my whole childhood, my whole adolescence, and my whole early adulthood without winning a World Series - seeing the Sox win their first World Series was a very rewarding experience for all of the Red Sox Nation - I have to stay loyal to the Red Sox!

Question #8 What are your hobbies and interests outside of sport psychology?

Dr. Silva: I ran a lot. I ran 5 marathons during the 80's, so I developed an affinity for middle distance and distance running. That was my hour out of the office and I was very faithful through the 70s, 80s, and the 90s making sure I had that hour block of time to run. I love walking on nature trails and walking in the woods. Kayaking, I love to kayak, and I love to garden. Probably the thing I love the most is when Chris and I play with our dogs. You know we just love our dogs to death, so that would be number one!

Question # 9 What is your greatest accomplishment in the field of sport psychology?

Dr. Silva: Obviously, AAASP...just the energy and the endeavor and the follow up. Before I started consulting full time, I went to 20 AA(A)SP's in a row, presented multiple times at each conference so I was very invested in the organization - every facet of it. Founding AAASP would have to be the greatest accomplishment. But right up there with founding AAASP is the graduate program that we had at Carolina. It may not have received the public visibility that AAASP did but I think we put together a landmark program and we did things that are still not being done in a lot of programs in sport psychology. Yet, I don't think we were doing anything special, I think we were doing what we were supposed to do. We've had a lot of really good students, like yourself, that have come through our program, that have remained active in the field and whose contributions I feel are yet to be realized in our field. So, I would say the graduate program and the quality of students and just the totality of that experience was very

meaningful to me. Believe it or not, I had a lot of fun with you guys...teaching and supervising the sport psychology clinics.

Question #10 How do you envision the state of AASP 25 years from now?

Dr. Silva: A lot different than it is today. I think we are going to have a model in place that is going to help students understand what they need to do if they want to practice sport psychology, whether it's in the intervention and performance enhancement area or the exercise psychology area. I think that's going to be a big step forward. Look at other fields that are professionally oriented... if they looked at what we do to prepare practicing professionals they would literally laugh out loud because we have no bar, we have no standards for preparation. Sport psychology should not be every person for themselves 25 years from the founding of AAASP. I think 25 years from now professional preparation is going to be more than taken care of. I think there is going to be a lot of clarity in the preparation for practice. I think we are going to finally penetrate professional and collegiate organizations, much like athletic training has done. It should not be that general manager knows you or the coach knows you or the owner knows your wife or your husband. Right now it's almost 100% on personal contact or word of mouth rather than organizations realizing that there's a pool of viable candidates and properly trained candidates available to work in the structure of their professional organization. The model athletic training has in place has saturated all the way down to the high school level. Certified athletic trainers are required - they even have licensure in athletic training. So I think eventually, we are going to get over that hump and you are going to see sport psychology in more professional sports and sports academies. These academies are being born right now all over the country and some of them are being started by former professional players. There are two in the Piedmont of NC, both started by former professional athletes. You're going to see sport science services being offered to include nutrition, exercise physiology and sport psychology. AASP can play such an important role - the organization carries a lot more weight than a single voice and we want to be able to have our organization get in on the ground level, which we have not done with professional sports, but get in on the ground level as these new sports academies start to develop - to have AASP certified professionals taking these positions - great job opportunities. So, I think we are going to see that happen. As far as what Dr. Ewing said about AASP having 50,000 members, I'm not sure if the association is going to grow to be that large. What my greatest concern would be in the future is not how many people we have in the association, but the quality of the people that we have and the quality of the people that we're certifying. We shouldn't rush to certify people just so we can say that we have certified individuals. I think we have to keep our standards at a relatively high level and make sure that we are always putting quality over quantity in our field.