The team was led by the late renowned psychologist Nathan Azrin, one of the first students in B.F. Skinner’s laboratory at Harvard to apply principles of reinforcement to enhance mental health in humans. “He was considered one of the pioneers of behavioral analysis,” Donohue says, adding that he considers himself fortunate to have worked with Azrin. Their research resulted in the development of FBT, which uses community-based reinforcement to help people enhance their relationships and personal conduct, avoid substance misuse, and improve employment and school performance. “FBT involves a holistic ‘family,’ or team approach, to goal achievement,” says Donohue, who has applied FBT in a variety of contexts, conducting research on its effectiveness and helping clients along the way. “We teach individuals how to set and reach goals using rewards as a catalyst for...
It also helps to have several members of the TOPPS team who have a background in athletics. Two post-doctoral students on the project, Marsha Marralli and Craig Choue, were college athletes, and TOPPS team coordinator Yulia Gardeva was a competitive swimmer in Russia. Donohue himself was a national amateur boxing champion in 1986, and he has served on several athletic commissions and as a consultant to several teams at UNLV.

Donohue is very committed to the research component of his program. “These trials shift our focus to a population for which there is no evidence-based interventions have been developed,” Donohue says. “In athletics, the norm is to involve a support team. Utilizing this model, performance programming at TOPPS incorporates coaches, teachers, and any significant others who are considered part of the ‘family’ unit.”

Donohue is optimistic about the future use of the TOPPS approach in the context of sports. If his research demonstrates the effectiveness of performance programming in the context of sports, if his research demonstrates the effectiveness of performance programming in the context of sports, then student athletes could be used as the model to improve performance among sports teams across the country.

Once his current study has been completed, Donohue hopes to explore whether TOPPS is effective with high school and/or professional athletes. “The horror stories of burgeoning opportunities for advancing knowledge in this area,” says Dono- hue, “and very positive potential outcomes for student athletes.”

“we teach individuals how to set and reach goals using rewards as a catalyst for achievement. these are goal-oriented therapies.” — Brad Donohue

“With our field he is a luminary,” says Mark Ashcraft, the chair of the UNLV psychology department. “He significantly influenced treatment of substance abuse with the development of Family Behavior Therapy.”

Donohue has authored more than 120 peer-reviewed journal articles and numerous academic textbook chapters. He is also the co-author of two textbooks, Treating Adolescent Substance Abuse Using Family Behavior Therapy and Treating Adult Substance Abuse Using Family Behavior Therapy.

Donohue’s work has also earned the attention of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other major federal agencies; he has been awarded more than $1.7 million in research funding since he joined the university in 1986.

Additionally, he now leads the elite group of recipients of the Harry Reid Silver State Research Award, an honor well suited to a researcher who focuses on the needs of Nevadans. “Much of my research has focused on pressing social needs in the state during this time while the same time advancing mental health and economic prosperity among disadvantaged populations,” he says.

Through his research, Donohue is also training clinical psychology students both on and off campus to work with clients, he has mentored literally hundreds of graduate and undergraduate students throughout his career. He currently works with his team on a campus called Family Research and Services.

One of his recent major research projects involved collaboration with Clark County’s Department of Family Services. Donohue led a study that involved mothers who had been reported for child neglect and drug use. The study was funded by a $1.5 million grant from the National Institute for Drug Abuse, which provided money to help Clark County social caseworkers learn and use FBT over the course of nearly five years.

During this time, Donohue and his team of students worked together with the caseworkers to examine the efficacy of a home-based FBT Compared with the usual forms of treatment, FBT showed very promising outcomes, resulting in an increase in employment and a reduction of child maltreatment potential, as well as a diminished hard drug use. However, Donohue believes additional research in this area should be conducted to determine which mothers respond best to FBT.

Donohue led another project working with Clark County’s Business Development Division, as well as the City of Las Vegas, to facilitate higher-order employment among economically low-income and/or ethnicity youth.

Called the Summer Business Institute, the program provided extensive training and mentoring to participants. With a team of UNLV students and faculty advice staff, Donohue helped young people deal with real-world employment experiences and gave them firsthand management training. His study on the effectiveness of this program was the first to evaluate such programs using controlled methodology in an ethnic minority youth population.

“The outcomes were again very positive, with many of the participants improving their knowledge of financial management and employment-related efforts,” Donohue says. Today, Donohue is taking his passion for FBT to a new group – college athletes. In 2012, he received a four-year, $4 million grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse to increase the efficacy of a performance-based FBT among collegiate athletes.

“This was the first grant award of its kind by the National Institute of Health, and UNLV was chosen as the trial site,” Donohue says. He adds that NIH is interested in understanding how traditional, individual-based campus counseling (which is offered through UNLV’s Counseling and Psychological Services) and family-based performance programming (using FBT) affect or enhance goal achievement in student athletes.

Donohue identifies five primary areas in his current study: management of or abstinence from substance use; avoidance of alcohol as a factor in negative performance. He noted that college athletes face unique stressors that put them at increased risk of using or missing substances. According to Donohue, nationwide data suggests greater than 25 percent of students on college, including student athletes, participate in dangerous alcohol and drug use patterns, such as binge drinking. Donohue cited increased social anxieties in providing an athlete-friendly environment. He displays photos of UNLV athletes, UNLV sport insignia, and UNLV team schedules on the walls of the Family Research and Services offices, where he and his team work. Interac-