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Self-esteem and perfectionism in elite athletes: effects on competitive anxiety and self-confidence

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Abstract

The setting of high standards is an integral part of elite sports, and often beneficial for the athlete's performance. However, individuals who are characterized by frequent cognitions about the attainment of ideal, perfectionistic standards, have been shown to be likely to experience heightened levels of anxiety, due to discrepancies between ideal and current self/situation. This could of course be detrimental to their sport performance. The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between different patterns of perfectionistic dimensions and sport-related competitive anxiety and self-confidence, for elite athletes with different self-esteem strategies. The results revealed that the relation between self-esteem and perfectionism differs depending on which dimensions of self-esteem and perfectionism that are being considered. Athletes with a high self-esteem based on a respect and love for themselves had more positive patterns of perfectionism, whereas athletes who have a self-esteem that is dependent on competence aspects showed a more negative perfectionism. Further, negative patterns of perfectionism were in the present study related to higher levels of cognitive anxiety and lower levels of self-confidence. Hence, it seems that sport related anxiety is positively associated to certain patterns of perfectionism, patterns that are more common in individuals with specific self-esteem strategies. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Emotion related research in the sport domain has indicated that both cognitive and somatic anxiety may have differential effects on sport performance (Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990; Turner & Raglin, 1996). An important area of research therefore relates to factors that may influence precompetition anxiety. Previous empirical findings have for example shown that

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personal goals and standards, and interpersonal comparison and winning, are significant predictors of cognitive anxiety and self-confidence (Jones, Swain, & Cale, 1991; Lane, Terry, & Karageorghis, 1995). It has also been suggested that feelings of worry, anxiety, and depression, are likely to be experienced when there is a considerable discrepancy between desired goals or future plans, and the current self and situation (Borkovec, Metzger, & Pruzinsky, 1986; Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998). Based on the aforementioned, it seems plausible, as has also been suggested (e.g. Flett et al.), that especially individuals who are characterized by frequent cognitions about the attainment of ideal, perfectionistic standards, are more likely to experience negative emotions and heightened levels of anxiety and depression symptomatology, due to the existing discrepancy between ideal and current self/situation. This could of course be detrimental to sport performance, and findings indicate that anxious individuals are particularly likely to experience thoughts that interfere with goal-directed performances (e.g. Blankstein, Toner, & Flett, 1989).

A certain degree of perfectionistic thoughts among elite athletes are not uncommon; in fact, most elite athletes are probably striving towards perfection. They frequently attest to the idea that there must exist a perfect performance in their sport, whether it is a perfect hit, throw, run, or jump. The common coaching instruction that “practice makes perfect” conveys the widespread belief that given enough practice, athletes may eventually achieve the perfect performance. It has even been suggested that the desire for perfection is essential, and may in time lead to championship performance (Ellis, 1982). Hence, setting high standards is an integral part of elite sports, and thereby often beneficial for the athlete’s performance, but when nothing but the perfect performance is perceived to be good enough, these originally positive expectations may instead lead to the development of a negative self-concept, and a fear-of-failure syndrome (e.g. Williams & Leffingwell, 1996). Furthermore, it has been shown that individuals who are categorized as perfectionistic have a tendency to engage in excessive cognitive rumination about the need to attain perfection. They also tend to be overly concerned about mistakes, to have an exceedingly difficult time forgetting errors, and to have serious doubts about the quality of her/his actions (e.g. Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990).

The study of perfectionism and related constructs has resulted in the suggestion that perfectionism must be viewed as a multidimensional concept. It includes both negative dimensions (such as concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, and fear of failure) and positive dimensions (high personal standards, positive achievement strivings, followed by a sense of satisfaction and enhanced self-esteem); see, for example, Frost et al. (1990), Hamachek (1978), Stumpf and Parker (2000), and Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, and Dewey (1995). It seems plausible that the study of healthy, positive perfectionism, as well as neurotic, negative perfectionism, among elite athletes could increase our understanding of the psychological dimensions of sport performance and shed light on how different anxiety patterns develop.

One of the few studies on perfectionism performed so far in the context of sport revealed that athletes who scored high in concern over mistakes, also reported more anxiety and negative thinking before competition, less self-confidence in sports, greater difficulty in concentrating, as well as negative reactions to mistakes. Athletes with a higher level of doubts about actions exhibited lower self-confidence in athletic contexts, and reported more images of mistakes and worry about audience reactions (Frost & Henderson, 1991). In a study on perfectionism and performance anxiety among musicians, it was shown that a certain pattern of perfectionism (high

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