

Perfectionism and burnout in junior elite soccer players: The mediating influence of unconditional self-acceptance

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Abstract

Objectives: It has been argued that elite junior athletes may be especially vulnerable to the development of burnout [Coakley, D. (1992). Burnout among adolescent athletes: A personal failure or social problem. *Sociology*, 9, 271–285; Feigley, D. A. (1984). Psychological burnout in high-level athletes. *The Physician and Sports Medicine*, 12, 108–119; Raedeke, T. D. (1997). Is athlete burnout more than just stress? A sport commitment perspective. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 19, 396–418]. Few studies to date have examined the psychological mechanisms that may underpin this vulnerability. One exception was a study by Gould, Tuffrey, Udry, and Loehr [(1996). Burnout in competitive junior tennis players: I. A quantitative psychological assessment. *The Sport Psychologist*, 10, 332–340], which found that a form of perfectionism reflecting a preoccupation with avoiding mistakes differentiated between burnout and non-burnout tennis players. The first purpose of the present investigation was to extend this research and examine the influence of self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism on burnout in elite junior soccer players. A second purpose was to examine whether the association between perfectionism and burnout was mediated by unconditional self-acceptance.

Design: A correlational design was employed.

Method: One hundred and fifty-one soccer players (M age = 14.4 years, SD = 2.4 years) completed an inventory that included Flett and Hewitt's (1991) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, Chamberlain and Haaga's (2003) Unconditional Self-acceptance Scale, and Raedeke and Smith's [(2001). Development and preliminary validation of an athlete burnout measure. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 23, 281–306] Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ).

Results: Structural equation modeling indicated that unconditional self-acceptance partially mediated the relationship between the two dimensions of perfectionism and athlete burnout. Contrary to the hypotheses, self-oriented perfectionism demonstrated both a positive indirect association with symptoms of burnout, as well as a direct inverse relationship.

Conclusion: The findings provide support for the contention that a contingent sense of self-worth is central to both socially prescribed and self-oriented perfectionism [Flett, Besser, Davis, & Hewitt (2003). Dimensions of perfectionism, unconditional self-acceptance, and depression. *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, 21, 119–138; Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & MacDonald (2002). Perfectionism in children and their parents: A developmental analysis. In G. L. Flett & P. Hewitt (Eds.), *Perfectionism: Theory, research and treatment* (pp. 89–132). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association], and that this association may underpin maladaptive achievement striving and increase vulnerability to athlete burnout.

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Introduction

With increasing funding from television revenue and the Football Association's commitment to talent development, soccer academies have proliferated in the UK. The principal aim of these establishments is the development of professional players from cohorts of young athletes recruited on the basis of early promise. However, because few ever obtain professional status, and those who fall short are systematically moved on, academy athletes are under substantial pressure to achieve. Rather than creating an environment in which athletic development is nurtured, it is likely that achievement striving in such pressured conditions contributes to the development of burnout in some athletes (see Jackson, 2007; Roderick, 2006). Examination of burnout in this context is warranted not only because of the financial costs associated with sporting attrition, but also because burnout has important consequences for athletes' psychological well-being (Raedeke, 1997; Smith, 1986). Although it has been argued that young athletes who are striving to achieve at an elite level may be particularly susceptible to the physical and psychological consequences of burnout (Coakley, 1992; Feigley, 1984; Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996; Raedeke, 1997), to date there has been little empirical research to test this contention (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006a, b).

The paucity of research on burnout within sport settings has been the result of early conceptual and psychometric shortcomings (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006a, b). However, recent work by Raedeke and Smith (2001) has not only resolved the definitional problems which impeded research progress, but it has also provided researchers with an established instrument that can be employed to advance our understanding of the burnout process. Based on the work of Maslach and Jackson (1981), Raedeke (1997) proposed that burnout should be considered a syndrome of physical and emotional exhaustion, reduced sense of athletic accomplishment and sport devaluation. Utilising a valid and reliable measure of these symptoms, and informed by contemporary psychological theory (e.g. Coakley, 1992; Cresswell & Eklund, 2006a, b; Gould, 1996; Raedeke, 1997; Raedeke & Smith, 2004; Smith, 1986), research has begun to identify some of the critical antecedents of the syndrome. Much of this work has been guided by Smith's (1986) cognitive–affective model, which has received considerable empirical support in the context of sport (e.g. Gould, 1996; Kelley, Eklund, & Ritter-Taylor, 1999; Raedeke & Smith, 2004; Vealey, Armstrong, Comar, & Greenleaf, 1998).

According to Smith (1986), athlete burnout develops as a result of chronic stress brought about by regularly appraising one's resources as insufficient to meet achievement demands. Within elite sport contexts, the process of striving to achieve ever increasing demands may become a contributory mechanism in the development of burnout when athletes perceive that performance is consistently falling short of acceptable standards (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006a, b). Under these circumstances the demands of the sporting context may pose more than a challenge, and thus, individuals begin to appraise achievement striving as a threat to self-worth. This process leads to considerable disaffection as investment in both practice and competition becomes psychologically aversive (Smith, 1986). If this process goes unabated, it precipitates a gradual shift from an intense desire to succeed, and a behavioural commitment to sporting excellence, to a pattern of physical, cognitive and emotional disengagement reflective of burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006a, b).

Perfectionism as an antecedent of athlete burnout

Research based on Smith's (1986) model has emphasised the importance of personality factors that impact central appraisal processes and render individuals vulnerable to the experience of threat and anxiety (e.g. Kelley, 1994; Kelley & Gill, 1993; Kelley et al., 1999). One personality factor found to impact the appraisal process (Hall, Kerr, & Matthews, 1998), and implicated in the development of burnout, is perfectionism (Flett & Hewitt, 2005; Gould et al., 1996; Hall, 2006; Lemyre, Hall, & Roberts, 2007). While there is no agreed definition of perfectionism, it is broadly considered to be an achievement related personality characteristic that reflects the compulsive pursuit of excessively high standards and a tendency to engage in harsh, overly critical self-evaluation (Burns, 1980; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Pacht, 1984).

Although some researchers argue that perfectionism is ultimately a debilitating characteristic (Flett and Hewitt, 2002; Greenspon, 2000), others contend that in the absence of negative criticism, perfectionism has beneficial motivational qualities that give rise to adaptive achievement striving and a healthy pursuit of excellence (Haase & Prapavessis, 2004; Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995).

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