



Relations between multidimensional perfectionism and burnout in junior-elite male athletes

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of the present investigation was to examine the moderating influence of perceptions of goal progress and achievement goal orientations on the relationship between multidimensional perfectionism and athlete burnout.

Methods: 201 junior-elite male athletes, ranging from 11 to 21 years of age ($M = 15.64$, $SD = 1.92$), were recruited from professional sport clubs in the UK and completed a multi-section inventory assessing self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism [Hewitt, P. L., & Flett, G. L. (1991). Perfectionism in the self and social contexts: conceptualization, assessment, and association with psychopathology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 456–470], achievement goal orientations [Roberts, G. C., Treasure, D. C., & Balague, G. (1998). Achievement goals in sport: the development and validation of the perception of success questionnaire. *Journal of Sport Sciences*, 16, 337–347], perceived goal progress [Hill, A. P., Hall, H. K., Appleton, P. R., & Kozub, S. A. (2008). Perfectionism and burnout in junior-elite soccer players: the mediating influence of unconditional self-acceptance. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 9, 630–644] and multidimensional athlete burnout [Raedeke, T. D., & Smith, A. L. (2001). Development and preliminary validation of an athlete burnout measure. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 23, 281–306].

Results: Regression analyses revealed that socially prescribed perfectionism demonstrated a significant positive association, and self-oriented perfectionism a significant negative association with burnout dimensions. However, the hypotheses for moderation of the perfectionism–burnout relationship were not supported.

Conclusions: Overall, while there was no evidence to support the hypothesised moderation of the perfectionism–burnout relationship, the results provide support for a growing body of literature which indicates that maladaptive forms of perfectionism may contribute to burnout in elite junior athletes [Chen, L. H., Kee, Y. H., Chen, M., & Tsaim, Y. (2008). Relation of perfectionism with athletes' burnout: further examination. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 106, 811–820; Gould, D., Tuffey, S., Udrey, E., & Loehr, J. (1996). Burnout in competitive junior tennis players: II. Qualitative analysis. *The Sport Psychologist*, 10, 341–366; Gould, D., Udry, E., Tuffey, S., & Loehr, J. (1996). Burnout in competitive junior tennis players: I. A quantitative psychological assessment. *The Sport Psychologist*, 10, 332–340; Hall, H. K. (2006). Perfectionism: a hallmark quality of world class performers, or a psychological impediment to athletic development? In D. Hackfort, & G. Tenenbaum (Eds.), *Perspectives in sport and exercise psychology: Essential processes for attaining peak performance* (Vol. 1, pp. 178–211). Oxford, UK: Meyer & Meyer Publishers; Hill et al., 2008; Lemyre, P. N., Hall, H. K., & Roberts, G. C. (2008). A social cognitive approach to burnout in elite athletes. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 18, 221–224].

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It has been claimed that a small, yet significant number of elite athletes experience burnout at some point during their careers (Gould

& Dieffenbach, 2002; Gustafsson, Kentta, Hassmén, & Lundqvist, 2007). While little research has been conducted to establish the veracity of these claims, a rudimentary analysis based on a limited number of studies indicates that between 1% and 7% of elite athletes may suffer from high levels of the condition, while a further 15% may experience moderate symptoms (Gould & Dieffenbach, 2002). Although the overall incidence of burnout in elite athletes appears to

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be relatively low, it may be a cause for concern because its effects are both physically and psychologically corrosive (Cresswell & Eklund, 2005; Gould, Udry, Tuffey, & Loehr, 1996; Raedeke & Smith, 2001).

At the junior-elite level, the risk of experiencing burnout may be especially pronounced due to a combination of intense physical demands and excessive psychological pressures that athletes perceive as they strive to achieve what is a highly improbable outcome; elite status. A number of researchers have reported that burnout in junior-elite athletes becomes more likely when athletes' identities are narrowly defined (Coakley, 1992) and self-worth is contingent on athletic achievement (Gould & Dieffenbach, 2002; Hall, 2006). Others have suggested that while these characteristics may be important, the risk of burnout is elevated when young athletes begin to experience sustained periods of difficulty in environments which are perceived to be controlling (Lemyre, Treasure, & Roberts, 2006). These difficulties give rise to feelings of helplessness, amotivation (Cresswell & Eklund, 2005) and a sense of entrapment (Schmidt & Stein, 1991) and burnout symptoms become pronounced as athletes perceive that they are unable to extricate themselves from sporting environments that present a recurring threat to self-worth (Lemyre, Hall, & Roberts, 2008).

Currently, little is known about the psychological antecedents of athlete burnout. This is because a clear understanding of the burnout process in sport has, until recently, been impeded by disagreements over a precise definition of the construct and the absence of a valid and reliable measurement technology (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006a; Gould, 1996). However, research by Raedeke (1997) and colleagues (Raedeke & Smith, 2001, 2004), which has defined athlete burnout as a multidimensional syndrome reflecting emotional and physical exhaustion, a reduced sense of accomplishment, and an uncaring and cynical attitude towards sport participation, has provided much needed clarity on the nature of the construct. Moreover, the creation and validation of the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ; Raedeke & Smith, 2001) has enabled research on the aetiology of athlete burnout to progress (Lemyre et al., 2008; Raedeke & Smith, 2004).

Much of this research (e.g., Cresswell & Eklund, 2005; Hill, Hall, Appleton, & Kozub, 2008; Raedeke & Smith, 2004) has been grounded in a conceptual framework proposed by Smith (1986), which considers burnout to be the result of chronic stress in contexts where individuals expect to derive a sense of significance from their investment (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Smith's (1986) approach was based on the work of Lazarus (1999) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), who argued that aspects of an individual's personality help to create a perceptual lens, which shapes the appraisal process and determines whether athletes will be susceptible to existential threat and the experience of stress. Smith (1986) suggested that when athletes appraise achievement striving as threatening to self-worth, acute stress is an inevitable outcome. When continued sporting investment brings about recurring threat appraisals it may induce chronic stress, and this precipitates a gradual shift in the quality of motivation, from the enthusiastic pursuit of success and a behavioural commitment to sporting excellence, to a pattern of physical, cognitive and emotional disengagement reflective of burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). While Smith's model highlights the importance of both personality and motivation, few studies, to date, have examined which personality characteristics may be critical antecedents of athlete burnout despite the suggestion by Raedeke and Smith (2004) that research of this type will advance current understanding of the burnout process.

Perfectionism and athlete burnout

One personality characteristic that has been found to elevate the risk of burnout in athletes is perfectionism (Chen, Kee, Chen, &

Tsaim, 2008; Gould, Udry, et al., 1996; Hill et al., 2008; Lemyre et al., 2008). Perfectionism is broadly considered to be a personality characteristic that reflects the compulsive pursuit of exceedingly high standards and a tendency to engage in overly critical appraisal of accomplishments (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Various authors have identified that perfectionism is a multidimensional construct whose core elements not only regulate different forms of achievement striving but give rise to specific psychological processes that may lead to both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995).

There is little dispute that perfectionism has an energising effect on achievement striving and that this action may subsequently lead to successful outcomes (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost et al., 1990; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). This is because evidence suggests that when individuals strive for perfection, and avoid engaging in negative, self-focused reactions to imperfection, they are able to maintain adaptive patterns of cognition, affect and behaviour which are conducive to sustained investment (Stoeber, Otto, Pesheck, Becker, & Stoll, 2007; Stoeber, Stoll, Pesheck, & Otto, 2008; Stoll, Lau, & Stoeber, 2008). However, it is not the act of striving for perfection that causes motivation to go awry, but the implications of perceiving that one is falling short of desired standards. Because perfectionism induces a rigid adherence to excessively high goals and an irrational belief in the importance of their attainment, it frequently leads to the employment of harsh and excessive self-criticism, rumination, and a focus on personal and interpersonal inadequacies when performance in a valued domain is perceived to be discrepant from desired goals (Flett & Hewitt, 2006). It is this process, which not only contributes to elevated stress levels in athletes (Hall, Kerr, & Matthews, 1998), but, over time, renders them increasingly vulnerable to the experience of burnout because achievement needs remain unmet and performance expectations go unfulfilled (Gold & Roth, 1993; Lemyre et al., 2008).

The earliest evidence of a positive association between perfectionism and athlete burnout confirmed that dimensions of perfectionism reflecting maladaptive self-appraisals were more prominent in burned out athletes than in active tennis players. Specifically, Gould, Udry, et al. (1996) found that parental expectations, perceived parental criticism and excessive concern about making mistakes were all elevated in those experiencing burnout. More recently, Lemyre et al. (2008) suggested that athletic burnout may be the inevitable consequence of endorsing a maladaptive motivational framework, in which the pursuit of exceedingly high standards occurs in conjunction with a concern about the consequences of failure, and a pervasive sense of self-doubt. They argued that this pattern becomes compounded when achievement is defined in predominantly comparative or normative terms, over which one has little control. Lemyre et al. (2008) confirmed that athletes experiencing the highest levels of burnout scored higher on all perfectionism dimensions of the Frost's Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et al., 1990), endorsed ego goals and perceived the achievement climate to be performance focused.

To examine why perfectionism may underpin athlete burnout when it takes a critical, self-evaluative form, Hill et al. (2008) built upon ideas put forth by Campbell and Di Paula (2002). It was argued that when the achievement of one's own or others' perfectionistic standards is deemed necessary in order to experience feelings of self-worth, deleterious consequences such as burnout may result. Hill et al. (2008) assessed two forms of perfectionism considered by Flett and Hewitt (2002) to have maladaptive consequences. The first, self-oriented perfectionism, reflects the pursuit of exceedingly high standards in conjunction with the employment of harsh self-critical appraisal. The second, socially prescribed perfectionism, reflects the pursuit of extreme standards

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