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## Perfectionism and competitive anxiety in athletes: Differentiating striving for perfection and negative reactions to imperfection

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### Abstract

Whereas some researchers have argued that perfectionism in sports is maladaptive because it is related to dysfunctional characteristics such as higher competitive anxiety, the present article argues that striving for perfection is not maladaptive and is unrelated to competitive anxiety. Four samples of athletes (high school athletes, female soccer players, and two samples of university student athletes) completed measures of perfectionism during competitions and competitive anxiety. Across samples, results show that overall perfectionism was associated with higher cognitive and somatic competitive anxiety. However, when striving for perfection and negative reactions to imperfection were differentiated, only the latter were associated with higher anxiety, whereas striving for perfection was unrelated to anxiety. Moreover, once the influence of negative reactions to imperfection was partialled out, striving for perfection was associated with lower anxiety and higher self-confidence. The present findings suggest that striving for perfection in sports is not maladaptive. On the contrary, athletes who strive for perfection and successfully control their negative reactions to imperfection may even experience less anxiety and more self-confidence during competitions. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting excessively high standards for performance, accompanied by tendencies toward overly critical evaluations of one's behavior (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). In sports, some researchers see perfectionism as an adaptive trait that helps to achieve elite performance (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002). Other researchers, however, see perfectionism as a maladaptive trait that hinders, rather than helps athletic performance (Flett & Hewitt, 2005). Consequently, athletes may face what Hewitt and Flett call the “perfectionism paradox”. Although in many sports athletes are expected to deliver perfect performance outcomes, perfectionism in athletes has been shown to be related to characteristics that may undermine performance, particularly competitive anxiety. Consequently, perfectionism in athletes may prevent the very outcomes that it seeks to promote (Flett & Hewitt, 2005).

However, perfectionism is multidimensional and multifaceted, and only some dimensions and facets are clearly negative, harmful, and maladaptive, while others may be positive, benign, and adaptive (Chang, 2003; Enns & Cox, 2002). Moreover, research has suggested that two major dimensions of perfectionism be differentiated (Stoeber & Otto, 2006): a dimension which has been described as positive, healthy, or adaptive perfectionism and a dimension which has been described as neurotic, unhealthy, or maladaptive perfectionism (Rice & Preusser, 2002; Stumpf & Parker, 2000; Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995). The negative dimension of perfectionism subsumes those facets of perfectionism that relate to perfectionistic concerns such as concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, feelings of discrepancy between expectations and results, and negative reactions to mistakes. This dimension has been associated with negative characteristics such as anxiety (e.g., Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004; Hill et al., 2004; Suddarth & Slaney, 2001). In contrast, the positive dimension of perfectionism subsumes those facets of perfectionism that relate to perfectionistic strivings such as having high personal standards and a self-oriented striving for excellence. This dimension has been shown to be unrelated to negative characteristics such as anxiety, once overlap between positive and negative perfectionism was controlled for (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Consequently, the distinction between positive and negative facets of perfectionism may also prove crucial when investigating perfectionism and anxiety in competitive athletes.

For competitive athletes, sport is more than just a game (Jones, 1995). As a result, competitions—requiring the fruits of training and experience to be transformed into top performances under the critical evaluation of opponents, teammates, coaches, and spectators—may be associated with heightened competitive anxiety (Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990). In the experience of competitive anxiety, three main dimensions have been differentiated: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and self-confidence (Martens et al., 1990). Cognitive anxiety involves cognitions about possible failure, while somatic anxiety involves the perception of bodily symptoms and heightened negative arousal. Self-confidence, on the other hand, involves cognitions that one is up to the task and able to give one's best possible performance. Consequently, self-confidence prior to and

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