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Passion and performance attainment in sport

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Abstract

Objectives: To test a performance-attainment model derived from the Dualistic Model of Passion [Vallerand et al. (2003). Les passions de l'âme: On obsessive and harmonious passion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 756–767] that posits that both harmonious and obsessive passions are positive predictors of deliberate practice that, in turn, is a positive predictor of performance.

Design: A prospective design was used in the present study.

Methods and results: The basic model was tested in two studies using structural equation modeling. Results from Study 1 with 184 high school basketball players indicated that both harmonious and obsessive passions were positive predictors of deliberate practice, which, in turn, was a positive predictor of objective performance. The results of Study 2, conducted with 67 synchronized swimming and water-polo athletes conceptually replicated those from Study 1. Furthermore, results differentially linked the two passions to achievement goals and subjective well-being (SWB). Specifically, harmonious passion was a positive predictor of mastery goal pursuit and SWB, whereas obsessive passion was a positive predictor of mastery, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goal pursuit and was unrelated to SWB. Mastery goals were positive predictors of deliberate practice, which was a direct positive predictor of performance, whereas performance-avoidance goals were direct negative predictors of performance.

Conclusions: It appears that there are two paths to high-level performance attainment in sport, depending if harmonious or obsessive passion underlies sport engagement. While the path from harmonious passion is

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conducive to high levels of performance and living a happy life, that from obsessive passion is less reliably related to performance attainment and is unrelated to happiness.

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Keywords: Passion; Positive psychology; Performance; Deliberate practice; Subjective well-being

Introduction

Nothing great in the world has ever been accomplished without passion
(Hegel, 1770–1831)

Michael Jordan, the great basketball player of the National Basketball Association (NBA) Washington Wizards (and the Chicago Bulls prior to that), retired for good at the end of the 2002–2003 season. Jordan left the NBA after an outstanding 15 season career in which, among other achievements, he won the NBA Most Valuable Player (MVP) award 5 times, the NBA Finals MVP award 6 times, and was the only player to be named the NBA MVP and the defensive player of the year in the same season. In the face of such achievements, most people assume that Jordan's exploits were almost exclusively the result of remarkable natural talent. However, scientists conducting expert performance research (e.g., [Ericsson & Charness, 1994](#); [Starkes & Ericsson, 2003](#)) suggest that individuals such as Jordan have achieved high levels of performance because they have engaged for many years in highly structured practice aimed at improvement and skill refinement. Indeed, it is often forgotten that Jordan failed to make his varsity high school basketball team the first time he tried and that he credits his regimen of intense, focused, goal-oriented practice for the success he attained in his subsequent basketball career ([Jordan, 2005](#)). However, what psychological factors enabled Jordan to maintain a sustained level of intense practice over the years? [Ericsson and Charness \(1994\)](#) have noted that the nature of the motivational forces that lead individuals to engage in such sustained deliberate practice is currently unclear.

In line with the above quote from Hegel, we propose that the concept of passion represents an important source of motivational energy underlying such persistent involvement that may be conducive to performance attainment. Indeed, being passionate for one's sport leads individuals to dedicate themselves fully to their sport, thereby allowing them to persist, even in the face of obstacles, and to eventually reach excellence. The purpose of the present research was to test the Dualistic Model of Passion ([Vallerand et al., 2003](#)) as applied to performance attainment in sport in two studies.

The dualistic model of passion

[Vallerand et al. \(2003, 2006\)](#), [Vallerand and Houliort \(2003\)](#), and [Vallerand and Miquelon \(2007\)](#) have recently offered a conceptual analysis of passion toward activities. They define passion as a strong inclination toward an activity that individuals like (or even love), that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy. Another important characteristic of passion is that the activity has been internalized into one's identity. In the process of activity

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