



## Passion and burnout in elite junior soccer players: The mediating role of self-determined motivation

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between forms of passion (harmonious and obsessive; Vallerand et al., 2003) and athlete burnout, and whether these relationships are mediated by self-determined motivation. The proposed model posited that because harmonious passion originates from an authentic self, it will be positively associated with self-determined regulation. Conversely, because obsessive passion originates from ego-invested structures within the self, it will be negatively associated with self-determined regulation. In turn, consistent with research examining the relationship between motivation regulation and athlete burnout, self-determined regulation was expected to be negatively associated with athlete burnout.

**Design:** Cross-sectional survey.

**Method:** This model was tested in 149 ( $M$  age = 16.2,  $s$  = 2.0, range = 12–21) male junior athletes who attended soccer academies in the UK. Participants completed the Passion Scale (Vallerand et al., 2003), the Sport Motivation Scale (Pelletier et al., 1995), and the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Raedeke & Smith, 2001).

**Results:** Harmonious passion was negatively related to a latent athlete burnout factor, whereas obsessive passion was unrelated to a latent athlete burnout factor. The relationship between harmonious passion and burnout was fully mediated by self-determined regulation.

**Conclusions:** The results suggest that harmonious passion may offer some protection from burnout for athletes due to higher levels of self-determined motivation.

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Burnout is a colloquial term that is frequently used in sport and by representatives of the media in their reporting (e.g. Dall, 2009). Burnout is typically understood as the result of physical over-exertion and fatigue (see Brenner, 2007). However, contemporary perspectives within the scientific community suggest the antecedents of athlete burnout may be predominantly psychological (Gould, Udry, Tuffey, & Loehr, 1996; Raedeke & Smith, 2001). Owing to the intense psychological demands placed upon developing athletes, a number of researchers have proposed that elite junior athletes may be especially susceptible to the development of burnout (e.g., Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2009; Gustafsson, Kentta, Hassmen, & Johansson, 2008; Hill, Hall, Appleton, & Kozub, 2008). In spite of this, relatively little is known about the development of the syndrome in this group. This is because empirical research has

only recently begun to examine the psychological mechanisms associated with athlete burnout. Consequently, research is required that examines the processes associated with burnout in elite junior athletes.

One of the reasons why athlete burnout has received little systematic attention is that early research lacked a precise definition of the syndrome (e.g. Gould et al., 1996; Harlick & McKenzie, 2000). Raedeke and Smith (2001, 2004) addressed this ambiguity by providing a definition and measure based on Maslach and Jackson's (1986) research in an occupational context. Raedeke and Smith (2001) consider athlete burnout to be an experiential syndrome consisting of three central symptoms; perceived physical and emotional exhaustion, a reduced sense of athletic accomplishment and sport devaluation. One important characteristic of these symptoms is a lack of motivational quantity and quality (see Eklund & Cresswell, 2007). In line with the predictions of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), athlete burnout has been suggested to develop when motivation becomes increasingly non-self-determined (lack of motivational quality) and amotivated

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(lack of motivational quantity) (Eklund & Cresswell, 2007; Lemyre, Treasure, & Roberts, 2006). One important motivational antecedent of this process may be the form of passion that energises participation (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008; Vallerand, Paquet, Philippe, & Charest, 2010).

### Passion as an antecedent to athlete burnout

Passion is defined as a strong inclination towards an activity that one enjoys, finds important and in which individuals invest time and energy (Vallerand et al., 2003). Although passion ensures willing participation, it has the potential to underpin both positive and negative outcomes depending on the type of passion exhibited. Vallerand et al. (2003) propose that individuals internalise activities in two ways and the type of internalisation determines the passion that develops. Solely autonomous internalisation of an activity is thought to result in harmonious passion. In contrast, partial or controlled internalisation leads to the development of obsessive passion (Vallerand, 2008). While harmonious passion leads to positive outcomes such as eagerness, flow and post-participation replenishment (Hodgins & Knee, 2002), obsessive passion is thought to lead to ego-investment, heightened self-awareness, and rigid task engagement (see Vallerand, 2008). Differences between these forms of passion have also emerged in terms of their relationship with burnout. Specifically, obsessive passion has been found to be positively related to burnout and harmonious passion negatively related to burnout in occupational settings (Carbonneau et al., 2008; Vallerand et al., 2010).

Research has yet to examine the relationship between passion and athlete burnout. However, research in sport has supported the contention that harmonious and obsessive passions are likely to have distinct motivational consequences (Vallerand et al., 2003; Vallerand, Rousseau, Grouzet, Dumais, & Grenier, 2006; Vallerand et al., 2008). It is especially noteworthy that obsessive passion is associated with a number of psychological costs that are unrelated to harmonious passion. Obsessive passion, for example, has been found to be positively related to rigid persistence (Vallerand et al., 2003), life conflict (Seguin-Lévesque, Laliberté, Pelletier, Blanchard, & Vallerand, 2003), rumination in the absence of the activity (Ratelle, Vallerand, Mageau, Rousseau, & Provencher, 2004), chronic injury (Rip, Fortin, & Vallerand, 2006), negative affect (Vallerand et al., 2003) and avoidance goals (Vallerand et al., 2008). In contrast, harmonious passion is inversely related to negative affect and cognition and positively related to life satisfaction, positive affect and vitality (see Vallerand, 2008). Based on these findings, one might expect types of passion to predict athlete burnout in a similar manner to that which has been observed outside of sport.

### The mediating role of self-determined motivation

According to Eklund and Cresswell (2007), burnout can be characterised by a distinct pattern of motivational regulation described within self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-determination theory conceptualises motivational regulation along a continuum from self-determined (intrinsic) to non-self-determined (extrinsic) to amotivation (Vallerand, 1997). This continuum is often represented by a self-determination index that considers the relative contribution of the discrete motivational regulations within the theory (e.g. Gillet, Vallerand, Amoura, & Baldes, 2010; Lonsdale, Hodge, & Rose, 2009; Taylor, Ntoumanis, & Standage, 2008). Intrinsic motivation is behavioural regulation that is fully self-determined. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, consists of several forms of behavioural regulation, which differ in the degree of self-determination. Integrated and identified regulations are autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation because, though engagement is

for external reasons, behaviour is regulated out of choice. Introjected and external regulations are controlled forms of extrinsic motivation because behaviour is fuelled by pressures that emanate from internal (i.e. ego enhancement) or external (i.e. rewards) contingencies. The final motivation on the self-determination continuum is amotivation, which is an absence of motivational quantity. Within this framework, the defining motivational features of athlete burnout are thought to be lower levels of intrinsic motivation and higher levels of controlled and amotivation (Eklund & Cresswell, 2007). In accord, research has found that higher athlete burnout is associated with less self-determined regulation and lower scores on the self-determination index (Lemyre et al., 2006; Lonsdale et al., 2009).

As behavioural regulation does not internalise into identity, it resides at a more immediate level of engagement than passion (Vallerand, 2008). As a consequence, passion may influence the contextual-motivational processes that are central to understanding athlete burnout (see Vallerand et al., 2006). Harmonious passion emerges from the same autonomous internalisation as intrinsic motivation and is indicative of a pattern of more self-determined regulation (c.f. Vallerand, 2008). In contrast, obsessive passion emerges from more controlled internalisation and features the ego-investment and introjected affect indicative of less self-determined regulation (Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Niemiec, Ryan, & Brown, 2008). Clearly, the pattern of motivational regulation associated with harmonious passion is reflective of a motivational resiliency against burnout symptoms, whereas the pattern of motivational regulation associated with obsessive passion is more consistent with the nature of athlete burnout. Consequently, the degree to which obsessive and harmonious passion encapsulate self-determined motivation may explain the relationship between passion and athlete burnout.

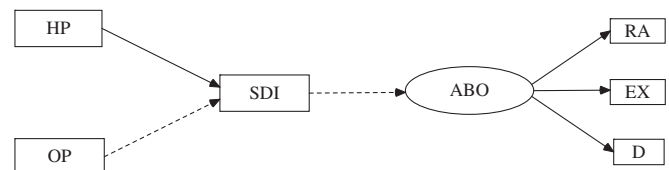
### The present study

To date, no research has examined the relationships between forms of passion and burnout in sport. Therefore, the first purpose of the current study was to examine the relationships between harmonious and obsessive passion and athlete burnout. Consistent with research in the occupational domain (Carbonneau et al., 2008; Vallerand et al., 2010), it was hypothesised that harmonious passion would be negatively associated with athlete burnout and obsessive passion would be positively associated with athlete burnout. The second purpose was to test whether the relationships between different forms of passion and athlete burnout would be mediated by self-determined motivation. The hypothesised relationships within the model are displayed in Fig. 1.

### Method

#### Participants and procedure

One hundred and forty-nine ( $M$  age = 16.2,  $s$  = 2.0, range = 12–21) young male elite soccer players, playing for an average of



**Fig. 1.** Hypothesised path model of passion, self-determined motivation and athlete burnout. Note: dashed lines indicate a hypothesised negative relationship; un-dashed lines indicate a positive relationship; HP = harmonious passion, OP = obsessive passion, SDI = self-determination index, ABO = athlete burnout, RA = reduced accomplishment, EX = exhaustion, D = devaluation.

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