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Self-handicapping in competitive sport: influence of the motivational climate, self-efficacy, and perceived importance

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Abstract

Objectives: To examine the influence of perceptions of the motivational climate, self-efficacy, and perceived importance on athletes' claimed situational self-handicaps in a competitive sport setting. Perceptions of a task involving climate and self-efficacy were expected to be negatively related and perceptions of an ego-involving climate to be positively related to situational self-handicapping.

Design: Given the centrality of perceived ability in the self-handicapping literature, basic tenets derived from achievement goal theory provided the rationale for the present cross-sectional field study.

Methods: Male 70 and 70 female elite collegiate golfers completed a questionnaire prior to participating in a prestigious national golf tournament (M age = 20.61; SD = 1.52) assessing claimed situational self-handicaps in the week prior to the tournament, perceptions of the team motivational climate, perceived event importance, and self-efficacy.

Results: Preliminary analyses revealed no significant gender differences in regard to the perceived importance of the event or situational claimed self-handicaps. Participants who perceived the event to be of low personal importance reported significantly more claimed self-handicaps during the week prior to the tournament than high importance individuals. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed perceptions of a task-involving motivational climate, self-efficacy, and perceived event importance to be negatively related to claimed self-handicaps.

Conclusions: The findings of the present study suggest that in addition to enhancing self-efficacy, coaches should increase the salience of task-involving cues in the athletic context to attenuate the situational claimed self-handicaps of elite collegiate athletes.

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Keywords: Self-handicapping; Achievement goals

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Coining the term self-handicapping, [Berglas and Jones \(1978\)](#) proposed that some people proactively reduce effort and create performance excuses to protect themselves from potential negative feedback in socially evaluative environments such as competitive sport. Although increasing the likelihood of failure, self-handicapping does afford the individual an opportunity to externalize a poor performance and protect self-esteem. Indeed, it has been hypothesized that self-handicapping is most likely to happen when an individual feels uncertain about his/her ability ([Berglas & Jones, 1978](#)), or perceives a threat to his/her self-esteem ([Prapavessis & Grove, 1994, 1998](#)). [Jones and Berglas \(1978\)](#) claimed that self-handicappers are “legion in the sports world, from the tennis player who externalizes a bad shot by adjusting his racket strings to the avid golfer who systematically avoids taking lessons or even practicing on the driving range” (p. 201). However, limited research has been conducted investigating self-handicapping in sport, particularly among more elite level performers. Findings from studies that have been conducted have suggested that self-handicapping is uncommon in sport settings ([Carron, Prapavessis, & Grove, 1994](#); [Hausenblas & Carron, 1996](#); [Rhodewalt, 1994](#)). It is interesting to note, however, that athletes are able to readily list several different types of disruptions that occurred prior to a competitive event when self-handicapping is defined as claims that disrupt training or event preparation ([Carron et al. 1994](#); [Hausenblas & Carron 1996](#)).

Self-handicapping has traditionally been hypothesized to have a negative impact on performance. However, in a field study of university swimmers and wrestlers, [Bailis \(2001\)](#) reported that among a small subset of participants a positive relationship emerged between a pre-season assessment of dispositional self-handicapping and performance over the first two months of the study. It is significant to note that the results from the same study found dispositional self-handicapping to be associated with poorer practice and nutrition before important events over four months of the regular competitive season in both sports. The negative relationships between self-handicapping and preparatory factors are consistent with a study conducted by [Zuckerman, Kieffer, and Knee \(1998\)](#) that examined the long-term consequences of dispositional self-handicapping, performance, and affect in an achievement setting. Specifically, [Zuckerman and colleagues](#) found self-handicapping to be linked to poor adjustment and academic underachievement in two independent samples of undergraduates over the course of two months. In both samples dispositional self-handicapping prospectively predicted academic underachievement, although this effect was partially mediated by poor study habits.

Although the [Bailis \(2001\)](#) findings suggest that dispositional self-handicapping may benefit athletic performance for some individuals in the short-term, [Rhodewalt and Tragakis \(2002\)](#) contend that there are definite long-term costs of self-handicapping that should not be discounted. Consistent with this contention, a recent study by [Prapavessis, Grove, Maddison, and Zillman \(2003\)](#) found that athletes with strong self-handicapping tendencies are prone to emotion-oriented coping strategies that involved disengagement, passivity, and/or fantasy when faced with a prolonged period of poor performance. Consistent with the findings of [Prapavessis and colleagues](#), therefore, we believe that self-handicapping should be conceptualized as a maladaptive coping strategy as the repeated use of self-handicaps places the athlete at-risk for motivational difficulties that will likely have a negative effect on long-term development and performance.

It is also important to differentiate between claimed and behavioral self-handicaps ([Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991](#); [Leary & Shepperd, 1986](#); [Rhodewalt & Tragakis, 2002](#)). A claimed self-handicap is an excuse that is verbalized prior to performance, even though the impediment may not have actually occurred. It is hypothesized that an individual may claim a self-handicap to reduce his/her accountability for potential failure and reduce others' expectations of his/her subsequent performance. In this instance,

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