

The Effects of Perfectionism, Passion, and Coping on Athlete Burnout

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Sports has developed into a complex, fast-paced culture emphasizing achievements, early specialization, and a drive towards collegiate, semi- and professional athletic careers (Dubuc-Charbonneau & Durand-Bush, 2014; Gould & Whitley, 2009; Holmberg & Sheridan, 2013). Today, all athletes must do more than just manage themselves in order to meet increasing demands (e.g. school, work, mass media). Athletes are encouraged early to adopt a "professional mindset" in preparation for elite levels of sports—requiring "expertise" of approximately 10,000 hours of deliberate practice or 10 years (Gould & Whitley, 2009). Approximately 1-9% of competitive junior and elite athletes have experienced burnout which has significant biopsychosocial impact (Gustafsson, Davis, Skoog, Kenttä, & Haberl, 2015). The purpose of this review is to summarize: burnout; the effects of perfectionism, passion, and coping on burnout; and measures to prevent burnout.

#### **What is Burnout?**

Researchers generally accept Maslach and Jackson's (1984) conceptualization of burnout as a syndrome comprised of: emotional exhaustion; depersonalization (cynicism, indifference); and reduced personal accomplishment (declining feelings of competence, achievement, professional efficacy) (Goodger, Gorely, Lavalley, & Harwood, 2007; Goodger, Lavalley, Gorely, & Harwood, 2010). Raedeke (1997) refined the working definition in a sports context as: physical and emotional exhaustion; reduced sense of accomplishment; and sport devaluation. Shaufeli and Buunk (as cited in Goodger et al., 2007, p. 128) organized the common symptoms of burnout into five categories: affective, cognitive, physical, behavioral, and motivational.

Most researchers acknowledge that burnout is related to stress and coping resources; models either support burnout as a resultant of [chronic] stress or relate stress more indirectly

(Raedeke & Smith, 2004). Studies of burnout correlates tend to lean towards one of three major theories: Smith's cognitive-affective stress-based theory; self-determination theory (SDT); and achievement-goal theory (Gould & Whitley, 2009; Harris & Watson II, 2011).

### **Correlates of Burnout: Perfectionism, Passion, and Coping**

Gotwals (2011) investigated the perfectionism-burnout relationship in a group of Canadian intercollegiate varsity athletes (N=117, age 18-27, 48 females, 69 males) using a person-oriented approach through cluster analysis of the Sport Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale-2, the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ), and a demographic questionnaire (age, sport, degree of education, intercollegiate athletic experience). The student-athletes averaged 2.30 years of experience in either individual or team sports. The purpose of the study was to examine the utility of distinguishing between healthy (HP) and unhealthy (UP) perfectionism (independent variable or IV) in relation to burnout (dependent variable or DV) (Gotwals, 2011). Both HP and UP perfectionism exhibited high levels of perfectionistic strivings or PS (striving for extremely high-level and flawless performance) (Gotwals, 2011). UP was coupled with levels of perfectionistic concern (PC) that outweighed PS (Gotwals, 2011). PC involved an exaggerated sense of failure, harsh self-criticism, feelings of imposed lofty performance standards by others, chronic dissatisfaction, and uncertainty about one's efforts (Gotwals, 2011).

Gotwals' (2011) results indicated that four distinct subtypes of perfectionism were relevant to burnout: parent-oriented PC (athletes sensitive to criticism/expectations from parents); doubt-oriented PC (athletes dissatisfied/uncertain about their own performance); nonperfectionists (NP); and HP. HP experienced lower levels of all three burnout dimensions as compared to doubt-oriented UP and NP; HP reported lower levels of emotional/physical exhaustion when compared to parent-oriented UP (Gotwals, 2011). Limitations of the study

included: small sample size; interactions between variables/mediators were unaccounted for; and the brief length of intervention. Gotwals (2011) established that perfectionism subtypes were relevant to burnout.

Adopting the formalized 2x2 model of dispositional perfectionism, Hill (2013) conducted a cross-sectional study on the relationship between dispositional perfectionism (IV) and burnout (DV) amongst junior male soccer players (N=167, 13-19 years old) from soccer academies and professional clubs in England. The soccer players were club members for 4.35 years and trained/competed on average of 12.27 hours per week (Hill, 2013). The 2x2 model subtypes of perfectionism were: NP (low personal standards perfectionism or PSP, low evaluative concerns perfectionism or ECP); pure personal standards perfectionism or PPS (high PSP, low ECP); pure evaluative concerns or PEC (low PSP, high ECP); and mixed perfectionism or MP (high PSP, high ECP) (Hill, 2013). PSP involved high commitment and personal-standards (self-oriented perfectionism); ECP involved tendencies towards harsh/unrealistic self-evaluation and beliefs that perfectionism originated from others' high standards (Hill, 2013). The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) and ABQ questionnaires were used to determine levels of perfectionism and burnout respectively (Hill, 2013).

Hill's (2013) results indicated that PEC perfectionism was associated with higher levels of burnout as compared to both mixed perfectionism and NP; MP was associated with higher levels of burnout as compared to PPS; and ECP was more significantly related to burnout as compared to PSP. Limitations in Hill's (2013) study were: varying value-ranges of perfectionism subtypes may be expected; interactions from the components of burnout untested; interactions between subtypes of perfectionism and the dimensions of burnout untested; and sampling an

instance of time may not be as adequate as a longitudinal study. However, Hill (2013) refined the relationship between perfectionism subtypes and overall burnout.

Madigan, Stoeber, and Passfield (2015) conducted a 3-month, full cross-lagged, two-wave longitudinal study examining PSP-ECP (IV) and burnout (DV) in junior athletes (N=101, 80 male, 21 female, 16-19 years old) representing various sports (47 in soccer, 26 in rugby, 13 in basketball, 8 in athletics, 9 miscellaneous) recruited from two sports academies in the United Kingdom. The athletes averaged 10.6 hours of training per week in addition to their academic studies and competitive schedule (Madigan et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was to examine the predictability of both ECP and PSP on burnout by administering questionnaires (Sport Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, Multidimensional Inventory of Perfectionism in Sport, ABQ) at the beginning (January 2014) and end (April 2014) of the athletes' active training/competitive season (Madigan et al., 2015).

Madigan et al. (2015) found that while ECP predicted increases in burnout over time, PSP predicted decreases. Additionally, the study did not support the predictability of burnout on changes in ECP/PSP over time (Madigan et al., 2015). Madigan et al. (2015) noted that ECP seemed to be a contributing factor to burnout instead of merely a correlate. Limitations of this study were: small sample size; short-term 3-months; potential mediators (e.g. coping) untested; and difficulty isolating component-effects of both perfectionism and burnout. Future studies may extend Madigan's et al. (2015) work by increasing the study time, adding a 3-4 wave, and/or examining possible mediators/moderators (e.g. coping) of both perfectionism and burnout.

Coping is a cognitive-behavioral effort to manage internal and external psychological stress (Hill, Hall, & Appleton, 2010). Problem-focused coping strategies involve overcoming stress via analysis, problem-solving, and taking action (active coping attenuates burnout);

avoidant-coping entails denial/disengagement from stressors typically leading to increased anxiety (antecedent of burnout) and perceived stress. Hill, Hall, and Appleton (2010) studied coping (IV) as a possible mediator between self-oriented (e.g. HP, PSP) and socially-prescribed (UP, ECP) perfectionism in relation to burnout (DV). Junior competitive elite athletes (N=206, 97 males, 109 females, 11-22 years old) from various sports were recruited to participate in the MPS, modified COPE (MCOPE for coping tendencies), and ABQ questionnaires (Hill et al., 2010). Hill et al. (2010) found that problem-focused coping strategies combined with self-oriented perfectionism had burnout-protective effects; avoidant-coping combined with self-oriented perfectionism had deleterious effects; and avoidant-coping had no burnout-protective effects when combined with socially-prescribed perfectionism. Encouraging critical problem-solving/management skills among athletes may attenuate burnout. Limitations Hill et al. (2010) study were: limited number of coping strategies assessed; short duration of study; and complex interactions between coping-stress-perfectionism-burnout were untested.

Individuals with perfectionistic tendencies often exhibit high degrees of passion in their endeavors. Passion has been defined as a strong motivational force/inclination towards an activity perceived as enjoyable/important; passionate individuals invest significant time and energy into their valued activity (Gustafsson, Hassmén, & Hassmén, 2011). Individuals with harmonious passion (HPas) engage in activities willingly and autonomously (positive effect/well-being/self-regulation, negatively associated with burnout); obsessive passion (OPas) is controlling and associated with negative effects on social relationships, self-identity, self-regulation, and well-being (positively associated with burnout) (Gustafsson et al., 2011; Schellenberg, Gaudreau, & Crocker, 2013). Gustafsson et al. (2011) examined the relationship between passion (IV) and burnout (DV) by surveying 94 female and 164 male Swedish athletes

(N=258, age 16-20 years old) from 21 different sports academic programs using the ABQ, Perceived Stress Scale, Positive-Negative Affect Scale, and Passion Scale questionnaires. The results of Gustafsson's et al. (2011) study were: OPas was associated with negative affect, perceived stress, and higher ABQ scores as compared to HPas (negatively associated with negative affect, perceived stress, and burnout); and HPas was positively associated with positive affect and well-being. Limitations of this study included the short duration of study, limited study size, and the untested interactions between OPas, HPas, coping skills, and burnout. However, a valid connection between OPas and burnout was established.

Schellenberg et al. (2013) examined coping as a mediator between passion (IV) and burnout (DV), and whether subtypes of passion predicted burnout/goal-attainment changes. Collegiate volleyball players (N=421) from 35 teams completed the Passion Scale, Coping Inventory for Competitive Sport, ABQ, and Attainment of Sport Achievement Goals Scale questionnaires (Schellenberg et al., 2013). Schellenberg et al. (2013) found that problem-focused coping was beneficial to the relation between HPas and goal attainment by positively enabling athletes to confront challenges and meet their goals. Avoidant-coping was positively associated to burnout and negatively associated with goal attainment (Schellenberg et al., 2013). Limitations of this study were: short duration; correlational study design did not imply causation; and a more in-depth examination between the interplay of stress and perfectionistic traits was needed. However, the study did introduce the concept of coping as a valid mediator between passion and burnout.

### **Practical Applications**

In order to increase athlete durability and attenuate burnout, the previous studies indicate that coaches need to pay attention not only to the physical nature of sports, but also to that mind-body-spiritual-emotional connection. Coaches should encourage high standards, but moderate unrealistic goals/expectations. Feedback should encourage skill development instead of augmenting failure. Coaches and sports organizations need to "train" the athlete's mental/emotional health and maturity in order to withstand the pressures of early "professionalism". Athletes would benefit from regular workshops to increase their skills in problem-focused coping strategies, problem-identification, problem-solving, interpersonal communication, stress management, resource management (e.g. time, finances), and mindfulness (Gustafsson et al., 2015). In summary, socially-prescribed perfectionism, avoidant-coping strategies, and obsessive passion seem to promote athlete burnout. It is important to establish a nurturing athletic climate to counteract those factors.



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