Symposia

Sport and Exercise Psychology

Coping and wellbeing in sport: How athletes navigate adversity in their athletic careers

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Introduction to symposium

Patti C. Parker, Thompson Rivers University

Athletes at all levels of sport face adversity at some point in their athletic careers—adversity such as performance setbacks, injury, competition demands, and even political and systemic burdens. Today, athletes are reporting concerning levels of anxiety and depression, psychological distress, and burnout. Unfortunately, these challenges are associated with increased injury risk, poorer rehabilitation adherence, and less effective coping. With four presentations, our symposium offers novel research that generates theoretical and applied insights for athletes navigating adversity. Presentation 1 draws on attribution theory to investigate how athletes' attributions for sport setbacks can promote adaptive coping. Their study unveils that certain attribution qualities promote setback adaptability and affective wellbeing five weeks later, but not for athletes with high perfectionistic striving levels. Presentation 2 uses a narrative constructionist lens to understand how Olympic and Paralympic athletes engage in advocacy efforts as part of coping and wellbeing in elite sport. The findings highlight the significance of advocacy engagement for athlete wellbeing, but also the importance for socially privileged individuals to share in this work. Presentation 3 examines the experiences of elite Ukrainian athletes training, competing, and succeeding during wartime using a strength-based qualitative approach. Findings highlight how athletes adapt to war-related disruptions, sustain high-level performance, and use sport as a key resource for coping and wellbeing under extreme adversity. Finally, Presentation 4 involves club sport athletes and examines their mental health help-seeking—with a focus on athletic trainers. Notably, only 20% of athletes reported they would seek help from athletic trainers; however, comfort and other-efficacy in the athletic trainer predicted help-seeking intentions. Altogether, these presentations contribute to, and extend, what we know about how athletes cope and support their well-being when facing adversity. The studies range in methodological scope and consider athletes participating at various levels in sport. This symposium advances our understanding of how setback attributions, advocacy engagement, resilience under extreme adversity, and mental health help-seeking are integral to athlete wellbeing and coping in sport. Finally, these outputs have applied implications, such as sharing responsibility in advocacy engagement, developing interventions to support adaptive coping and strengthening athlete-trainer relationships.

Attributions for sport setbacks and coping: The moderating role of perfectionistic striving

Patti C. Parker, Thompson Rivers University; Amber D. Mosewich, University of Alberta

Setbacks are common occurrences in high-performance sport that are unique, contextually rich, and influenced by individual differences and cognitive processes. Attributions, or how setbacks are explained, can influence how athletes psychologically adapt to those experiences. According to attribution theory, explaining setbacks in internal, unstable, and controllable ways (e.g., poor strategy) can be more adaptive for dealing with negative outcomes since it can produce hope, expectancies for success, and responsibility. In addition, athletes varying in perfectionistic striving—having heightened personal standards and a pursuit of excellence—may endorse attributional tendencies that can help or harm setback coping. Thus, we test three research questions in the present study: (a) Does perfectionistic striving predict athletes' attributional qualities of setbacks? (b) Do attributional qualities influence subsequent setback adaptability? (c) Does perfectionistic striving moderate the influence of attributional qualities on setback adaptability? 130 Canadian and U.S. competitive athletes (M_{age} = 26.87 years; 60 women, 67 men, 2 non-binary, 2 did not report) completed an initial survey measuring attribution qualities and perfectionistic striving, and a second survey 5-weeks later measuring positive and negative affect and adaptability. We employed multiple and moderation regression analysis controlling for Time 1 levels of outcomes. Our findings revealed that perfectionistic striving was not related to attributional qualities (locus, stability, controllability; $ps > .05$). In the moderation analysis, setback attributions viewed as internal, unstable, and personally controllable each significantly predicted cognitive adaptability ($\beta s = .23, .24, .24$, respectively). Attributions seen as personally controllable also predicted higher positive affect and lower negative affect ($\beta s = .08, -.28$). Finally, perfectionistic striving moderated the relationship between some attribution qualities and cognitive adaptability, where attributions perceived as internal, as well as personally controllable, predicted better adaptability for those with low or average perfectionistic striving ($\beta int. = -.20, -.23$). Perfectionistic striving also moderated the relationship between attributions seen as personally controllable and positive affect ($\beta int. = -.04$), and between attributions seen as unstable and negative affect ($\beta_{int.} = -.29$; all $ps < .05$). Our findings imply that for athletes with lower perfectionistic striving, the way setbacks are explained (e.g., in controllable ways) can foster setback adaptability and affective well-being.

"By giving, I get so much back": Advocacy as a wellbeing strategy in Canadian elite sport

Regan S. I. Thompson, University of British Columbia; Erica V. Bennett, University of British Columbia; Lisa R. Trainor, Swansea University; Peter R. E. Crocker, University of British Columbia; Andrea Bundon, University of British Columbia

Elite athletes navigate highly pressurized and public environments, resulting in unique performance and organizational stressors that can significantly impact psychological wellbeing. At the same time, entrenched injustices related to gender, (dis)ability, and related axes of oppression and power hierarchies within broader sport culture, create conditions where advocacy becomes an expected response to inequity rather than a deliberate strategy for improved and sustained psychological wellbeing. We examined how Canadian Olympic and Paralympic athletes diverse in gender and (dis)ability engaged in advocacy during their athletic careers, and how these efforts interwove with coping and wellbeing strategies while navigating the elite sport system. Adopting a narrative constructionist lens, we conducted life-history interviews with 14 elite athletes (8 Paralympic; 6 Olympic; 8 women, 6 men; M_{age} = 32 years) at three time-points (42 interviews). We generated two themes through a narrative thematic analysis illustrating the nuanced relationship between elite athlete

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advocacy and psychological wellbeing. The first theme, Taking Action/Taking Care, explored how athletes intentionally chose to engage in advocacy within and beyond their sport context, knowing that such efforts would positively impact their psychological wellbeing. Athletes told stories of fulfillment, greater purpose, and collective healing through advocacy, which helped them navigate and assign meaning to sport-related stressors and injustices. However, in the second theme, Assigned to Advocate, it is highlighted that those who shared stories of advocacy were predominantly athletes who identified as women and/or disabled; notably, individuals positioned outside privileged norms, bodies, and identities in sport. While advocacy generated influence and visibility, this was emotionally laborious and reflected broader societal narratives that position (and expect) women and marginalized groups to engage in care-oriented, collective work. These findings highlight how athletes can actively choose to engage in advocacy work as a pathway for wellbeing. However, our findings also suggest that gendered and ableist expectations continue to unevenly distribute the labour of advocacy, placing disproportionate emotional demands on marginalized athletes. Perhaps, then, the sustainability of advocacy-as-wellbeing is strengthened when athletes with greater social privilege also share this work, amplifying both social justice efforts in the elite sport context as well as collective wellbeing.

Sustaining training and competitive success during war: Experiences of elite Ukrainian athletes

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Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, elite Ukrainian athletes have faced unprecedented disruptions to their training environments, competition schedules, and personal lives. Daily air raid alarms, relocation, facility closures, travel barriers, and ongoing threats to personal and family safety have fundamentally altered the conditions under which these athletes train and compete. Despite these challenges, many Ukrainian athletes have continued to perform and succeed at national and international levels. However, limited research has examined how elite athletes sustain performance, including training and competition, under conditions of prolonged armed conflict. Guided by strength-based frameworks, this study explored how elite Ukrainian athletes navigated war-related disruptions while continuing to pursue high-level sport. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five elite Ukrainian athletes – two men and three women – representing biathlon, kickboxing, and judo, who were selected based on their sport status as national team members, national champions, World Cup and World Championship medalists, and/or prospective 2028 Olympians. Interviews explored athletes' training conditions, emotional responses to wartime disruptions, coping strategies, sources of resilience, perceived losses and gains, and the role of sport during the war. Interviews were conducted via Zoom in Ukrainian by a Ukrainian-speaking researcher. Recordings were transcribed in Ukrainian, verified for accuracy, translated into English by a bilingual researcher, and carefully reviewed. Data were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis and a descriptive phenomenological approach. Findings revealed significant disruptions to training and competition, including interruptions caused by air raids, logistical challenges, and displacement. Athletes reported elevated stress, anxiety, and grief related to personal and collective losses. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated strong athletic identities and adaptive resilience. Sport emerged as a powerful source of emotional refuge, structure, and national representation, helping athletes maintain motivation and a sense of purpose. Participants also identified unexpected opportunities, including international training partnerships and increased global visibility. This study contributes novel insights into athlete transitions under extreme adversity, highlighting sport as a critical anchor for coping – identity, resilience, and purpose – during wartime and proposing ways for sport psychologists to support athletes during periods of extreme adversity and traumatic life events.

Mental health help-seeking in club sports: A focus on athletic trainers

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The National Athletic Trainers Association has identified athletic trainers as a primary source of mental health help for athletes. Yet, little is known about the perceived role of athletic trainers by athletes and why athletes may or may not seek help from them. While NCAA athletes have generally received more research attention on mental health and help-seeking, it is estimated that more than two million university students participate in club sport each year. The aim of this study was to examine (1) who club sport athletes seek help from with a focus on athletic trainers and (2) the extent to which club sport athlete self-efficacy, other-efficacy in the athletic trainer, and comfort with the athletic trainer predicts intentions to seek help from the athletic trainer. Club sport athletes ($N = 363$; 49.9% female) from 24 teams at the same university in the United States participated in a survey, which included measures of likelihood to seek help from 14 individuals for mental health support, mental health referral self-efficacy, mental health referral other-efficacy in the athletic trainer, and comfort with the athletic trainer. Results indicated athletic trainers were the third least likely individual a club athlete would go to for mental health support. Only 20.11% of participants were likely to seek help from their athletic trainer compared to up to 47% of NCAA athletes reported from other studies. Multiple regression results indicated that comfort with the athletic trainer ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$) and mental health referral other-efficacy in the athletic trainer ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$) were unique predictors of seeking help from the athletic trainer, while mental health referral self-efficacy was not. In other words, the more confident and comfortable the athlete was with their athletic trainer, the more likely they were to go to their athletic trainer for help with a mental health concern. Club sport athletes are under-utilizing athletic trainers but those with more positive perceptions of their trainers will lean on this relationship as a mental health resource. How training environments influence relationships with athletic trainers are discussed alongside suggestions for helping athletes navigate adversity.



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