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The Perils of Perfectionism in Sports and Exercise

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ABSTRACT—*Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality construct that has been linked with various forms of maladjustment. In this article, we discuss the role of perfectionism as a maladaptive factor in sports and exercise, and we describe a phenomenon we identify as the perfectionism paradox. We note that even though certain sports require athletes to achieve perfect performance outcomes, the tendency to be characterized by perfectionistic personality traits and to be cognitively preoccupied with the attainment of perfection often undermines performance and fosters a sense of dissatisfaction with performance. We review existing findings in the literature on sports and exercise and demonstrate that the extreme orientation that accompanies perfectionism is antithetical to attaining positive outcomes. Finally, future research directions are outlined.*

KEYWORDS—*perfectionism; anxiety; sports; exercise; self-presentation*

Research on perfectionism has increased exponentially over the past two decades. This increased attention has led to an enhanced understanding of the perfectionism construct. For instance, it is now accepted generally that perfectionism is multidimensional, and it is important, both conceptually and empirically, to distinguish the various dimensions of the construct. This multidimensional approach began with the initial work in our laboratory (see Hewitt & Flett, 1991) and in the laboratory of Frost and his associates (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Our Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) assesses three dimensions of the construct—self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., excessive striving and demanding absolute perfection from the self), other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., demanding perfection from other people), and socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., the per-

ception that other people demand perfection from oneself). The Frost et al. (1990) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) assesses six dimensions, including personal standards, organization (i.e., needing to maintain a sense of order), concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations, and parental criticism.

Although much has been learned about the perfectionism construct, the field has not been without controversy. The most controversial issue thus far has been whether certain perfectionism dimensions are adaptive rather than maladaptive. Some authors have concluded that some perfectionism dimensions contribute to positive rather than negative outcomes, and that it is important to distinguish between adaptive perfectionism and maladaptive perfectionism (see Slaney, Rice, & Ashby, 2002). That is, although dimensions such as socially prescribed perfectionism and excessive concern over mistakes have been associated with maladjustment, it has been suggested that other dimensions, such as self-oriented perfectionism and high personal standards, may, in fact, be positive factors (Slaney et al., 2002).

In the current article, we examine the adaptiveness versus maladaptiveness of perfectionism by reviewing findings on the role of perfectionism in sports and exercise. Research and theory on the role of perfectionism in sports and exercise is important in its own right, but it is also evident that research in this area has important implications for the adaptiveness-maladaptiveness issue. We adopt the view, consistent with our previous conceptualizations of perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), that perfectionism is primarily a negative factor that contributes to maladaptive outcomes among athletes and exercisers. However, it is clear that this issue is complex because it cannot be denied that many sports require error-free performance in order for athletes to be successful. Nevertheless, we argue that a perfectionism paradox exists—that is, despite the fact there are many sports in which absolute perfection is required, negative, self-defeating outcomes and unhealthy patterns of behavior are evident among those athletes who are characterized by an extreme, perfectionistic personality and who are focused cognitively on attaining perfection.

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We present an overview of the literature on perfectionism in sports and exercise and relate existing studies back to our central theme that perfectionism is primarily maladaptive. Several questions are addressed: (a) What motivational orientations underlie perfectionism in athletes? (b) What is the link between perfectionism and self-esteem in athletes? (c) What role do perfectionistic self-presentational concerns play in sports and exercise? We conclude by discussing factors that may protect the perfectionistic athlete from experiencing negative outcomes and by outlining some fundamental themes that need to be explored in the literature on sports and exercise behavior.

PERFECTIONISM, ANXIETY, AND FAILURE ORIENTATION

The initial investigation of dimensions of perfectionism in sports was conducted by Frost and Henderson (1991). A sample of 40 women in varsity athletics completed the FMPS, along with measures assessing sports self-confidence, sports competition anxiety, thoughts before competitions, specific reactions to mistakes during competition, and the presence of a sports success orientation (e.g., "I feel a sense of pride when I play a good game") versus a failure orientation (e.g., "My mistakes usually interfere with my play"). Frost and Henderson found that concern over mistakes, as measured on the FMPS, was associated with several negative outcomes, including anxiety, low confidence, a failure orientation, and negative reactions to mistakes during competition. High personal standards were not associated significantly with the anxiety or self-confidence measures; however, athletes high in personal-standards perfectionism reported difficulty concentrating while performing, and they experienced worries about the reactions of the audience. In addition, high personal standards were associated significantly with both a success orientation and a failure orientation. Thus, it seems that individuals striving for high personal standards have strong reactions to both positive and negative responses from other people.

PERFECTIONISM AND GOAL ORIENTATION IN SPORTS

Unfortunately, there has not been extensive research on perfectionism and motivation in sports; however, important insights were provided in research by Hall, Kerr, and Matthews (1998). They assessed the associations among perfectionism, achievement goals, and competitive anxiety in 119 high school athletes. Participants completed the FMPS and provided ratings of their perceived ability. Anxiety in competitive situations was also assessed. Participants also completed a measure of task orientation (i.e., an emphasis on mastery that is believed to facilitate success) versus ego orientation (i.e., a self-focused, competitive stance that reflects a need to protect vulnerable self-esteem) in sports. Once again, it was found that several perfectionism dimensions, including concern over mistakes,

were associated with anxiety. The presence of an ego orientation was associated with high scores on all FMPS subscales, including the personal-standards subscale, although scores on this subscale also had a weaker but significant association with task orientation. Thus, athletes who are extreme perfectionists have a pervasive ego orientation, and this should have debilitating effects if they also harbor doubts about their level of ability.

PERFECTIONISM AND SELF-ESTEEM

Gotwals, Dunn, and Wayment (2003) provided further evidence of the negative aspects of an excessive concern over mistakes. A sample of 87 intercollegiate athletes completed the FMPS, along with measures of general self-esteem, perceived athletic competence, and satisfaction with sports performance. Athletes who had low self-esteem, were dissatisfied with their performance, and gave comparatively low ratings to their competence (relative to the self-ratings of other athletes) tended to be concerned about their mistakes, doubted their actions, and perceived their parents as being critical of them.

Another recent investigation showed that the association between dimensions of perfectionism and self-esteem is quite complex (Koivula, Hassmén, & Fallby, 2002). Nevertheless, among their sample of Swedish elite athletes, Koivula et al. identified a subset of perfectionistic athletes with low self-esteem and a high sense that their self-esteem was contingent on meeting standards, and these athletes had high scores not only on the FMPS subscales assessing concern over mistakes and doubts about actions, but also on the personal-standards subscale. The authors concluded that a lack of success is a severe threat to such athletes, who already are vulnerable and are relatively low in self-esteem.

PERFECTIONISM AND PERFORMANCE SUCCESS VERSUS FAILURE

Empirical research in our laboratory has demonstrated the importance of distinguishing between perfectionistic athletes who experience success and those who experience failure. Perfectionists will be particularly at risk (e.g., susceptible to psychological distress and motivational deficits; see Hewitt & Flett, 2002) to the extent that they are experiencing failure as determined by objective measures or they have developed the perception that they are failing; moreover, a repeated series of failures in ego-involving life domains will have a strong, negative impact. Recent research with a sample of golfers indicates that self-oriented perfectionism is not maladaptive for relatively successful golfers who are performing at a relatively high level, but it is associated with negative thoughts and reactions to mistakes among less successful golfers (Wieczorek, Flett, & Hewitt, 2003). The deleterious effects of performance failure for self-oriented perfectionists were also illustrated by the results

of another recent experiment (see Besser, Flett, & Hewitt, 2004). A related issue is whether the perfectionist has a set of skills that make striving for perfection a somewhat realistic goal or an unrealistic goal because he or she is not capable of attaining this absolute goal.

PERFECTIONISM AND SELF-PRESENTATIONAL CONCERNS

Another key consideration when evaluating perfectionism among athletes is the extent to which they are focused excessively on self-presentational issues. Some individuals have a high concern for the impression they make on others, and when they are in social situations, they seek to portray themselves as positively as possible. Excessive self-presentational concerns can contribute to health problems, including eating disorders and a quest for bodily perfection. Although the link between perfectionism and self-presentational concerns in sports and exercise has not been investigated empirically thus far, we have identified an extreme form of perfectionistic self-presentation that may be quite relevant. Certain perfectionists are highly concerned with presenting an image of perfection to other people. Athletes with this tendency should be susceptible to a variety of negative outcomes.

With several of our colleagues, we developed the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale (Hewitt et al., 2003) as a supplement to existing measures of perfectionism. Perfectionistic self-presentation involves striving to create a public image of flawlessness, either by highlighting one's success (i.e., perfectionistic self-promotion) or by minimizing one's mistakes (i.e., nondisplay or nondisclosure of imperfections). Initial research indicates that perfectionistic self-presentation is elevated in patients with eating disorders, and perfectionistic self-presentation accounts for a significant degree of various forms of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and negative feelings about physical appearance (see Hewitt et al., 2003).

The discovery that some individuals engage in extreme forms of perfectionistic self-presentation has a number of implications for research on sports and exercise behavior. For instance, athletes who are overly focused on perfectionistic self-presentation should be extremely self-conscious, anxious individuals who are preoccupied with public appearance and body image. Similarly, various maladaptive patterns are likely in exercisers. Some individuals may attempt to satisfy their needs for perfectionistic self-promotion by engaging in excessive, compulsive exercise. Indeed, our initial study of regular exercisers confirmed that the various dimensions of perfectionistic self-presentation are associated with compulsive exercise (Flett, Pole-Langdon, & Hewitt, 2003). These new data qualify earlier findings linking excessive exercise with dimensions of perfectionism such as self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism in patients with anorexia nervosa, competitive male bodybuilders, and university women (see Davis & Scott-Robertson, 2000; McLaren, Gauvin, & White, 2001) by suggesting that

individual differences in perfectionistic self-presentation play a more deleterious role in exercise behavior and excessive striving than do general dimensions of perfectionism.

THE PERILS OF PERFECTIONISM: THE ROLE OF INTERVENING FACTORS

As we noted earlier, a central tenet that has guided our work on perfectionism and maladjustment is that perfectionism renders individuals vulnerable to negative outcomes such as depression if they experience personal failure (see Hewitt & Flett, 2002). By extension, perfectionists who experience success are less likely to experience distress. Additional research has investigated factors that influence the link between perfectionism and maladjustment. Key factors that have been identified include coping styles and perceived problem-solving ability (see Hewitt & Flett, 2002). Perfectionists are at greater risk if their perfectionism is accompanied by maladaptive forms of coping (i.e., avoidance-focused coping and emotion-focused coping involving rumination and self-blame) and negative appraisals of problem-solving ability. Perceptions of self-efficacy and perceptions of self-control are also potentially important influences on the link between reactions to performance outcomes and both self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism. At present, research on how perfectionism combines with stress and maladaptive coping to produce negative outcomes such as psychological distress has focused on general samples of psychiatric patients and university students, and little empirical research has evaluated intervening factors in athletes.

Perfectionistic athletes will be protected, to some degree, from the "perils of perfectionism" if they experience success and if they have developed a proactive, task-oriented approach to coping with difficulties and setbacks. A key aspect of the coping process for these athletes is to develop a sense of flexibility, so that they adjust their goals in accordance with situational demands and current levels of personal functioning. Moreover, the research we have summarized indicates that perfectionistic athletes with low levels of ego orientation, a sense of self-efficacy, and relatively low sensitivity to failure should be relatively resilient. In contrast, the inherent risks are higher for perfectionistic athletes who are defensively focused on mistakes and characterized by excessive fears of failure and self-doubts.

As we have noted, another key factor that needs to be considered when evaluating the perils associated with perfectionism is the individual's actual level of skill. Demands for perfection that emanate from the self or other people seem particularly irrational when they are imposed on an athlete who simply lacks the ability to approximate perfectionistic standards. Insufficient ability should magnify feelings of dissatisfaction. Athletes who overstrive to overcompensate for deficits in ability should feel particularly dissatisfied and should be especially prone to the negative effects of perfectionism.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The potential intervening factors that we have outlined have not been evaluated in the context of perfectionism in sports, and research in this area is needed. In this section, we outline four other important issues that merit investigation. Most notably, there are virtually no data available on how perfectionistic athletes cope with injuries or with diminished capabilities as they age. Presumably, the all-or-none approach that characterizes perfectionism should be a deleterious factor when an athlete is seeking to cope with such challenges, and this could lead to burnout and overtraining. Another important issue that deserves attention is the impact of perfectionistic demands on children and adolescents in sports programs. How do they cope with unrealistic pressures to be perfect? A third issue concerns how athletes respond to coaches with exceptionally high levels of other-oriented perfectionism. At what point do the perfectionistic demands of these coaches contribute to a loss of motivation in the athletes? Finally, the recent creation of sports-specific measures of perfectionism (e.g., Dunn, Causgrove Dunn, & Syrotuik, 2002) leads inevitably to questions about the predictive usefulness of general versus specific measures of perfectionism in sports and exercise contexts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, we have summarized contemporary research on perfectionism in athletes and exercisers, and concluded that perfectionism is primarily maladaptive. Moreover, the deleterious aspects of perfectionism in this context extend to dimensions (e.g., self-oriented perfectionism) that have been identified as potentially adaptive by other researchers in other contexts. We have also outlined several factors that may mitigate the association between perfectionism and maladaptive outcomes in athletes.

We conclude by noting the possibility that scholars who disagree with our position may point to several world-class elite athletes who have a demonstrated history of extreme perfectionism (e.g., Bobby Jones, John McEnroe, and Serena Williams); perfectionism seems to have worked for these individuals. However, often such athletes have documented forms of distress that can be attributed directly to their perfectionistic ways, and success emerges only following the development of emotional self-control. This observation underscores the value of a complex research strategy that examines perfectionism in conjunction with other factors of potential significance.

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