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**Sport Psychology Consultants' Views on Working with Perfectionistic Elite  
Athletes**

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore the views and experiences of sport psychology consultants who have worked with perfectionistic elite athletes and, particularly, their views on the use of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four professional sport psychology consultants who identified themselves as having experience of working with athletes they consider to be perfectionistic. Two themes were generated: manifestations of perfectionism and management of perfectionism. The consultants found perfectionistic athletes to have rigid attitudes and strong negative emotional experiences, to use safety behaviors and to regularly underperform. CBT techniques such as mindfulness, cognitive restructuring, and psychological skills training were most commonly used and were largely viewed as effective against a backdrop of sporting environment that could often encourage athletes to be perfectionistic. The findings highlight the complexity of perfectionism from a consultancy perspective and the potential challenges associated with working with perfectionistic athletes.

*Keywords:* cognitive behavioral therapy, elite athletes, perfectionism, sport psychology consultants

## **Sport Psychology Consultants' Views on Working with Perfectionistic Elite Athletes**

To be successful in elite sport athletes are required to perform exceptionally and even, at times, perfectly (Hill et al., 2020). Sport psychology consultants can therefore expect to frequently encounter athletes who are perfectionistic. However, so far, research in sport psychology has focused exclusively on better understanding the consequences of being perfectionistic for athletes with little attention to the experiences of those who are tasked with supporting them. Given its complexity, perfectionism is likely to pose several challenges for sport psychology consultants and may require particular skills in order to safeguard athlete welfare while maximising their performance. With this in mind, the current study gathers the views of sport psychology consultants who identified themselves as having worked with perfectionistic athletes with the aim of sharing professional experiences and promoting effective practice in this area.

Research suggests that perfectionism includes two main features: perfectionistic strivings (PS) and perfectionistic concerns (PC). PS capture self-oriented striving for perfection and unrealistically high personal performance standards whereas PC capture concerns over making mistakes, fear of negative social evaluation, and negative reactions to imperfection (Gotwals et al., 2012). These dimensions are typically studied in a way that allows their separate effects to be examined (viz. an independent effect approach) or are combined to examine different combinations. When doing the later, combinations of variables or groups are created that include higher and lower levels of PS and PC and they are compared with each other in terms of different outcomes (e.g., high PS/high PC versus low PS/low PC in regards to athlete performance).

The majority of research in sport has focused on the separate effects of dimensions of perfectionism and indicates they are related to a wide range of motivation, performance, and wellbeing outcomes in sport. In the most recent review in this area (Hill et al., 2018), for example, PC was revealed to be associated with various undesirable attitudes (e.g., low self-esteem), emotions (e.g., high anxiety), and behaviors (e.g., avoidance coping). Notably, this included some particularly worrying outcomes such as burnout and depressive symptoms. By contrast, PS was more ambiguous and displayed a mixed pattern of associations depending on the outcome measured. For example, PS was positively related to worry, self-criticism, and anxiety, but also positively related to enjoyment, confidence, and athletic performance.

Examining combinations or subtypes of PS and PC has helped further understanding of perfectionistic athletes (Hill et al., 2020). Here, when using the term “perfectionistic athletes”, we are referring to athletes that display the qualities of perfectionism to some, typically higher, degree. There are two major ways of studying athletes in this way. The first is the tripartite model that compares three subtypes: maladaptive (high PS/high PC), adaptive (high PS/low PC), and non-perfectionism (low PS/high PC). The second is the  $2 \times 2$  model that compares four subtypes: pure PS (high PS/low PC), pure PC (low PS/high PC), mixed perfectionism (high PS/high PC), and non-perfectionism (low PS/low PC). Research suggests that the most problematic subtype is low PS/high PC, followed by high PS/high PC, and then high PS/low PC (Hill & Madigan, 2017). Of note, the combination of high PS/low PC may have some benefits that include better performance in comparison to the other subtypes. However, the benefits of this subtype relative to other non-perfectionistic subtypes remain unclear (see Gaudreau, 2019).

While these types of quantitative studies in sport have helped provide a picture of some of the effects of perfectionism, among the most revealing studies have been those that have described the experiences of athletes in a qualitative manner. These qualitative studies have

provided a rich account of the various ways perfectionism manifests in the lives of athletes and how perfectionistic athletes give meaning to their participation in a manner that reflect particular goals, values, and purposes (Mallinson-Howard et al., 2018). Being perfectionistic is reported as being highly energising and motivational but is also accompanied by accounts of difficulty refocusing after mistakes and being overly self-critical (Gotwals & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2014; Sellars et al., 2016). On the negative side, stress and anxiety are also common, as is an obsessional focus on performance to the detriment of other aspects of their lives (Hill et al., 2015). In these ways, it is evident that some perfectionistic athletes have experiences in sport that may be detrimental to their health and performance.

In reflecting on this research, it is evident that many of the issues raised lend themselves to the support of sport psychology consultants. However, to date, research has exclusively focused on the experiences of perfectionistic athletes and, as of yet, no research has sought to gain the perspectives of the practitioners working with perfectionistic athletes. Doing so is valuable in that it offers unique insight into the ways sports psychology consultants consider perfectionism to manifest in sport. Drawing on their personal experiences, it will also help identify some of the strategies that they found effective when working with perfectionistic athletes and the challenges that perfectionism or the setting poses when undertaking their practical work. Ultimately, this information will contribute to a better understanding of perfectionism in sport and help perfectionistic athletes who need support.

In the current study we are particularly interested in the use of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Perfectionism is notoriously difficult to work with in clinical settings (Egan et al., 2013). However, based on current evidence, CBT is among the most effective ways to address perfectionism (see Lloyd et al., 2015). When using CBT different techniques are used for cognitive restructuring, such as cognitive reappraisal, attention deployment, situation modification, and mindfulness (Hofmann et al., 2013). Recently, a strand of CBT termed

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 1996), that focuses on acceptance of emotions and thoughts rather than trying to change them, has also been found to be useful when addressing perfectionism (Ong et al., 2019a, b). These techniques are increasingly used by sport psychology consultants and are now a routine part of many consultants' practice. As such, we considered exploring the use of these techniques an appropriate starting point in order to begin to understand the experiences of those working with perfectionistic athletes.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the views and experiences of sport psychology consultants regarding working with perfectionistic elite athletes, particularly as it pertains to using a CBT approach. To this end, qualitative methods were used to gain detailed information on (a) how they considered perfectionism to manifest in athletes they worked with, and (b) how they used CBT techniques in their work with these athletes.

## **Method**

### **Recruitment and Participants**

Through purposive sampling, four professional sport psychology consultants were identified. The consultants, all based in Sweden, were contacted by the third author and informed about the aim of the study, procedures, and ethical considerations (e.g., voluntary participation, confidentiality, right to withdraw). Informed consent was provided by all participants before the interviews. For the current study we followed the Swedish national legislation and the study does not fall within the scope of The Act (2003:460) Concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans (SFS 2003:460) as it does not include any methods intended to physically or mentally influence the person participating in the research or pose obvious risk to the participants. We carefully followed the guidelines regarding *Good Research Practice* from the Swedish Research Council (2017) throughout the study.

1 In regards to recruitment, all participants were approached based on initial  
2 recommendations by sports federations and other sport psychology consultants.  
3 Recommendations were based on expertise using CBT, extensive experience (more than five  
4 years) of working with elite athletes and specifically experience working with perfectionistic  
5 athletes. The participants had at least an Undergraduate Diploma in Psychotherapy.  
6 Specifically, they all had basic training in sport psychology counselling, with specialization in  
7 elite sports. This includes a one-year education in psychotherapeutic methods, diagnostics and  
8 psychopathology, and supervised counselling and sport psychology with a focus on elite  
9 sports. Experience of working with athletes that the consultants considered “perfectionistic”  
10 was confirmed as part of recruitment to the study; all participants reported that they had  
11 worked with ten or more athletes with perfectionistic features. Names used here are  
12 pseudonyms.

13 At the time of the study, Lucas was completing his Ph.D. in Sport Psychology, working  
14 as a lecturer at a university, and providing sport psychology consultancy to junior and senior  
15 elite athletes, including an elite soccer team. He had a Master’s degree in Sport Psychology  
16 and a background as a professional coach in an individual sport. He had worked more than six  
17 years as a sport psychology consultant with various sports but mainly focusing on team sport  
18 athletes. Lucas had an Undergraduate Diploma in Cognitive Behavioral Psychotherapy, with  
19 specialization in elite sports as well as additional courses in ACT.

20 Elise was working at a university as a lecturer in Sport Psychology, and as a sport  
21 psychology consultant for both individual and team sports at junior, senior, elite and sub-elite  
22 level. She had been an accredited sport psychologist at world championships, senior level, and  
23 worked with several youth national teams. Elise had a Master’s degree in Sport Psychology  
24 and an Undergraduate Diploma in Cognitive Behavioral Psychotherapy, with specialization in



1 elite sports. She had a background in team sports and extensive experience as a consultant,  
2 working with both traditional sport psychology services and clinical issues.

3 Adam worked as a sport psychology consultant and counsellor at a sport academy, and  
4 was lecturing in Sport Psychology at a university. He had a Master's degree in Sport  
5 Psychology and an Undergraduate Diploma in Cognitive Behavioral Psychotherapy, with  
6 specialization in elite sports. Adam had worked more than five years as a sport psychology  
7 consultant with youth, junior and elite athletes from various team and individual sports,  
8 including participants in the Olympics and world championships. As he combined his job  
9 with both sport psychology services and counselling his experience included not only sport  
10 psychology services but also clinical issues.

11 Rafael worked at a sports medicine clinic as a sport psychology consultant, mainly with  
12 athletes from team sports. He had a Master's degree in Sport Pedagogy, a Bachelor's degree  
13 in Sport Psychology, and a Graduate Diploma in Cognitive Behavioral Psychotherapy. He had  
14 also completed additional courses in ACT. He had worked more than six years as a sport  
15 psychology consultant. Rafael was the main sport psychologist with an elite soccer team and  
16 had been an accredited sport psychologist at the Paralympics.

17 When seeking to examine the accounts of perfectionistic athletes directly, researchers  
18 have used a range of approaches to identify participants such as sub-scale scores (e.g., Sellars  
19 et al., 2016) or classifications (e.g., Mallinson-Howard et al., 2018). Some research has also  
20 used athletes who have self-identified as perfectionists (e.g., Hill et al., 2015). In the current  
21 study an approach akin to the latter was used, as the consultants identified athletes they had  
22 worked with as perfectionistic. The authors accepted these assertions as legitimate and valid  
23 based on the consultants' background of having worked with a multitude of athletes including  
24 ones that are more or less perfectionistic. We consider this a strength, as our aims are to  
25 capture their experiences. However, it also means that there would be possible differences in

what each consultant would consider perfectionistic and differences to consultants not included in the current study.

### **Interview**

Semi-structured interviews were used to enable the participants to freely explain and talk about their experiences in detail, in conjunction with addressing the research question. An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions (see Appendix). The questions focused on how perfectionism manifested among the athletes, the perceived contributing factors that increased perfectionistic behaviors and attitudes among the athletes, and which type of methods the consultants used when they had worked with the athletes and the results. The participants' general views on perfectionism in sport, from their experiences as consultants, were also brought up. A series of standard probes and prompts were also developed and used. The interviews were conducted by the third author over the telephone, at a convenient time for the participants. Interviews lasted between 25 and 35 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. Shorter follow-up conversations were also conducted with all participants by the third author to enable clarifications and confirmations.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and reflexive thematic analysis with its six recursive phases (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Terry et al., 2017) was undertaken by the first author. First, the transcripts were read and re-read so the analyst became familiarized with the data. Preliminary notes were taken throughout the familiarization stage. Second, initial codes of interesting features of the data ("meaning units") were generated (e.g., words and phrases that occurred throughout the transcripts or seemed especially pertinent to the research question). Third, the initial codes were sifted and sorted until a set of possible themes were developed in an inductive manner. Fourth, the possible themes were reviewed and refined with the codes and the entire data set. A thematic map of analysis was generated that reflected

the thematic structure. Fifth, themes were defined and named, as well as categories. Finally, in the sixth phase, representative and compelling data extracts were selected to accompany our account of the findings and the result section was written.

#### **Data Quality**

The third author, a sport psychology consultant with a background as a coach and athlete, conducted all interviews to facilitate rapport and in-depth responses by using the same vocabulary as the respondents as well as having good contextual knowledge of the sport environment (Eklund, 1993). This together with a narrow study aim and purposefully sampled participants with relevant experiences increased information power, and therefore a lower number of participants was deemed appropriate (Malterud et al., 2016). The qualitative approach in this study is not meant to generalize but to give the perspectives of the people involved, looking at the meaning the participants place on their experiences through open-ended questions and direct quotations (Yilmaz, 2013). Throughout the data analysis process, memoing was practiced where reflective thoughts and initial ideas were recorded (Birks et al., 2008). The analysis process was discussed between the first and third author who both have previous experience in conducting semi-structured interviews and using thematic analysis. Thereafter to enhance rigor, the second author acted as a critical friend (Smith & McGannon, 2018), giving feedback on the analysis, promoting reflexivity, and offering new interpretive possibilities.

## **Results**

### **Overview**

When the consultants described their experiences from working with athletes who demonstrated perfectionistic features two overarching themes were generated. The first theme consisted of the manifestations of perfectionism in their clients (athletes). In particular, athletes' attitudes, emotions, behaviors, and outcomes were described. The second theme

consisted of issues associated with the management of perfectionism in athletes. Here, consultants' approaches, methods, and challenges were described.

### **Manifestations of Perfectionism**

Four categories were developed when the consultants recounted how perfectionism manifested among athletes they had worked with: attitudes, emotions, behaviors, and outcomes.

#### ***Attitudes***

The consultants reported that the dominant attitude among perfectionistic athletes was that everything had to be perfect, not only their performances but also the surroundings at competitions as well as their personal lives. Rafael explained: "It's not that perfectionism is only in the sport, for many all other performances overall should be perfect, regardless of what it concerns. If it's about relationships, or if it's about the school, or if it's about some job." Concerning sport, the athletes were perceived to have particular difficulty with being satisfied and felt inadequate even when they performed well, as Adam described: "no matter the performance, they are never really satisfied. [Their attitude] is even if you achieve your goal, you could have done a little bit more." Adam also saw an extreme and irrational mindset in several athletes he had worked with exemplified by the sense that "I have to be perfect otherwise I'm nothing." Elise and Rafael similarly articulated that some athletes displayed performance-based self-worth which they believed to be part of their perfectionism.

Alongside this mindset, Adam, Rafael, and Lucas identified an "all or nothing" attitude. This attitude was illustrated by Rafael who recounted a soccer players' view on a game:

If he didn't perform perfectly directly when the game started, the whole day was ruined [...] he misses the first passing in the first minute and he says "then it's over, then I can't play" [...] "are you saying that it's 89 minutes of wasted time during the rest of the game?" He just "yes, basically yes" That was his view on it.

1 Dwelling on mistakes and poor performances was also described as common among  
2 perfectionistic athletes which in turn was considered to affect their ability to focus on the  
3 present, as recounted by Elise from working with a referee: “when he did something wrong he  
4 got stuck in that instead of [focusing on the present], and of course that interfered with his  
5 performance as a referee. Going around thinking about some decision that happened five  
6 minutes ago.”

7 Some athletes were described as displaying a pessimistic view of their sports and lives  
8 in general. Adam recalled: “Pre-season went great. He outclassed those he usually ran even  
9 with and then he said ‘wonder when it’ll go badly again?’” Elise and Adam articulated that  
10 some athletes focused on not failing instead of performing well, as Adam explained in the  
11 following: “because you want to do everything perfect you do not want to make a fool out of  
12 yourself, and then you want to make sure that you avoid failure which results in that you don’t  
13 perform your best either.” In the view of Lucas, Elise, and Adam, this approach was  
14 compounded by an especially strong attachment to the sport displayed by the athletes. Lucas’s  
15 description of working with one athlete, in particular, illustrated this:

16 [when we] talked about how the last year had looked and the last years had looked, this  
17 person did not remember anything other than working out, competing, sleeping and  
18 eating [...] somehow the whole journey was lost [...] this person [could] not say  
19 anything about family or friends or work.

## 20 *Emotions*

21 All consultants reported that they found unpleasant emotions linked to performance and  
22 sport to be common among perfectionistic athletes. In their experience, perfectionistic athletes  
23 described performance anxiety and doubt, as well as uneasiness regarding uncertainty at  
24 competitions and possible consequences of their performance. Adam recounted the following  
25 statement from an athlete when describing the basis for these emotions: “there’s a risk that

1 I'm not perfect, I could lose the ball or miss a pass if I play advanced.” Further, Lucas  
2 recalled an athlete expressing shame and guilt associated with the outcome of the sport  
3 performance, making excuses and not taking responsibility: ““If it’s going bad I easily blame  
4 it on other things [...] I can’t jump when it’s windy, or it has to be cloudy, or it’s sun [...] it’s  
5 embarrassing to fail.””

6 The consultants reported that athletes expressed fear of failure, often to the degree  
7 where the fear took over and was their main focus. Lucas, Elise, and Adam recounted that  
8 such fear of failure held back athletes in trying, as well as developing new approaches for  
9 their training as Lucas expressed: “You don’t dare to try because there’s a stronger fear in  
10 failing [...] you don’t really dare to expose yourself to, for example, a different diet, or a more  
11 laid-back attitude, or a different approach.” Further, some of the negative emotions were  
12 thought to reflect disrupted routines and re-planned activities which perfectionistic athletes  
13 were considered to have trouble coping with. Lucas described how a suggestion of a small  
14 change in the meal plan evoked anxiety and fear in the athlete:

15 [we were about to] have lunch, and this was two weeks before a championship, and I  
16 said “should we go and grab a burger?” and then this person flew up from his chair and  
17 told me that it was almost like threatening [him] with a gun. He experienced the same  
18 anxiety.

19 Adam also described how the athletes’ motivation could shift throughout the career, although  
20 extrinsic motivation was often dominant:

21 at the beginning of the sport career, it might be positive because it’s fun to be perfect  
22 because then I get attention and I receive praise and I’m mentioned in the papers [...]   
23 you always start out because it’s fun or because it’s socially, or the movement itself, is  
24 great fun [...] But unfortunately, more and more of the ones we see, it has become  
25 something negative, “I don’t want to fail, I don’t want to make a fool out of myself, I

1 want to be selected for the team, I have to qualify for the Olympics” [...] somewhere  
2 along the way it’s lost. And for some, it might be related to perfectionistic features.

### 3 ***Behaviors***

4 To avoid or reduce unpleasant emotions the consultants reported that the athletes used  
5 different safety behaviors. Avoidance coping strategies were used by some athletes where  
6 they avoided situations where the results were considered uncertain, as illustrated by Adam:  
7 “He’d rather compete internationally with great opponents than for example in the national  
8 championships where he usually wins, but where they could beat him. Those competitions are  
9 hard for him.” Rafael recounted athletes who demonstrated signs of conflict avoidance:

10 it plays a big role what type of performance demands the coach and the environment  
11 puts on the athlete. Because it’s easy to create these extremely result-oriented  
12 performance environments [...] and that can be a strong foundation for you [as an  
13 athlete to] create extreme performance demands that leads to a strong need for control in  
14 relation to that, and perhaps even a fear of conflict and bringing it up with coaches.

15 Rafael, Elise, and Adam were concerned that when athletes experienced fear of failure  
16 and not perfect results, poor decision-making often followed. Some athletes under-  
17 compensated and consciously sought to underperform and withdraw effort, as Adam said: “he  
18 doesn’t dare to exert himself because of the risk that he may not perform as well as he hopes.  
19 So then he doesn’t really make a full effort.” Other athletes overcompensated and adjusted  
20 agreed training plans in counterproductive ways as Rafael explained:

21 when you have days off you’re supposed to relax, but then they go to some gym or go  
22 out running, quite heavily and so. And then they come back and the test results “You  
23 don’t recover. What do you do?” Well, then it comes out that they’ve been working out  
24 by themselves when they were actually supposed to rest, because they think they will  
25 improve.

To reduce their doubts, the consultants stated that several athletes continually sought confirmation and experienced the urge to double-check training schedules and plans. The need for a sense of control was suggested to be common which often led to inflexible behaviors and fear of change. Some athletes were reported to return to old behaviors to avoid situations where they felt less in control.

### ***Outcomes***

Reported consequences of the perfectionistic athletes' behaviors were underperformance and underachievement. Adam described an athlete who knowingly underperformed due to fear of not performing perfectly: "with fear of not being perfect, [the athlete] may play excessively simple and pass the ball back and not go into close situations" Lucas, Elise, and Adam had observed that for many athletes the fear of failure was greater than the will to succeed which led to passivity within their sport. Adam told: "he's worried that he'll give it his all and then it's not as great as he hopes, so instead he doesn't bother exerting himself."

Lucas also talked about how the athletes' perfectionism affected not only the performance but also the athletes' psychological well-being and general health. All consultants had experience of working with some athletes who besides showing perfectionistic features also had different clinical disorders. Lucas further discussed how athletes with perfectionistic features and with a strong focus on mainly their sport, with no plan to fall back on, could leave the athletes with problems regarding career transitions:

all of a sudden you're 26, 30 years old with no education and without prospects, and in the same sport in Sweden we have all those where it's gone bad, really bad, where you're no longer somebody because you can't deliver results [...] so surely that can become a problem in the future. For me that is, well, almost a given.



Adam expressed how perfectionism affected some athletes leading them to dropout of sport, as the negative emotions related to performance became too much: “One girl who’s quit her sport because in the end everything became associated with anxiety, and was sitting crying when she was going to practice and so on. So I’m working with her right now”

## **Management of Perfectionism**

When the consultants described the processes and methods for management of perfectionism, three categories were generated: consultants’ approaches; methods; and challenges.

### ***Consultants’ Approaches***

The consultants explained how the results of perfectionistic features were individualistic – including to what degree the athletes were affected, and how they interpreted and reacted to perceived demands from society, their sport and themselves. Lucas highlighted that perfectionism could have both a positive and a negative side, something Elise also suggested with the idea that how it affects the athlete depends on the individual:

Would they’ve become this successful without being perfectionistic? Maybe not. Would they’ve felt better if they had not been so perfectionistic? Maybe. I think it has a lot to do with how you interpret the stress reactions, the anxiety as well. Whether or not you see it as something positive or negative. So that is also very individual. It’s very hard.

Throughout the interviews the individual and their particular behaviors determined the approaches that the consultants took. In particular, the consultants focused on how the perfectionistic features affected the athletes’ performances and well-being and in what situations the athletes experienced problems. Different strategies were then applied depending on the individual and the problems. An important aspect of the consultants’ work was that consultations were voluntary, and active participation from the athletes was vital. Adam and Elise specified that they do not use the word perfectionism when working with athletes as

they had not specifically investigated if the athletes were perfectionists. They associated perfectionism with personality traits and felt it to be unnecessary to put a label on the athletes.

### **Methods**

As the athletes' behaviors were the consultants' focus, Elise, Rafael, and Adam emphasized that the first step was a behavioral analysis. Then, all consultants used ACT where the aim was to help the athletes accept their thoughts and emotions as well as uncontrollable aspects of the surroundings. This was explained by Elise:

Teach the athletes to recognize and don't be afraid of these demands and these negative thoughts. Instead, "yes, right, here they come" Then we register them and "okay" [...] then you continue with what you were supposed to do instead of allowing it a lot of time and energy.

Mindfulness and the Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment approach (MAC) were also mentioned, which had yielded positive results as Elise continued: "mindfulness and acceptance, these two methods are very good [...] it has a greater chance of functioning I think, than starting to work with thought stopping and forbid certain thoughts." Although Adam recalled how one athlete had some difficulties at the beginning with ACT: "we were talking that thoughts are just thoughts and so. 'But then positive thoughts that I have now are also just thoughts.' Then he took that as something negative."

Another approach that was used was exposure and response prevention where the athletes practiced situations that might evoke anxiety. Adam explained: "exposure with response prevention, to expose yourself to these things that create a lot of doubt and anxiety, for example, at practice, running against someone who's just as good." Lucas also recalled positive results through exposure combined with shifting focus when working with a diver who struggled with the 10 meters. They went up to the diving platform together and spent some minutes there:

1 I went to the very edge, and it's a strange feeling so high up, and then he started  
2 laughing because I think it normalized it for him, he was the comfortable one up there  
3 [...] then he walked to the edge and jumped [...] afterwards I asked "what did you think  
4 about?" and he answered, "I was thinking about you standing here."

5 Cognitive restructuring and reframing was also reported by all consultants as frequently used  
6 methods to re-evaluate or provide a different perspective on situations through acceptance.

7 The consultants highlighted that the strategy helped the athletes to refocus even when the  
8 surroundings were experienced as distracting or difficult, as Rafael explained:

9 work on learning how to say that there are things that you don't like that will happen.

10 But you have to accept that it happens nevertheless. So you can still do what you want,  
11 which in this case is perform.

12 Other strategies included psychological skills training. Lucas, Elise, and Adam used goal  
13 setting where the athletes were given the task of setting process-based goals and not only  
14 outcome-based goals which was often the case. Attention control was frequently used as well  
15 as a focus on coping strategies.

16 All consultants reported that an important part of working with the athletes was  
17 educating them in the different methods being used. Through education, the consultants aimed  
18 to increase the athletes' own understanding of the techniques, and raise their awareness of the  
19 physiological and psychological effects of stress and negative thoughts. Through homework  
20 assignments, the athletes were also encouraged to reflect more on their thoughts and  
21 interpretations of events as well as practice reducing the need to control the environment.

## 22 ***Challenges***

23 The methods generally yielded good results according to the consultants, however, they  
24 identified various challenges. Elise and Lucas highlighted the risk of encouraging the athletes'  
25 perfectionism by promoting perfectionistic behaviors and replacing their safety behaviors

1 with new ones. Therefore, it was important to examine the athletes' approach to the work and  
2 be aware of one's own behaviors, as Elise expressed:

3       These people can be so nice to work with because they do exactly as you say [...] very  
4       confirming, for yourself, and they listen and they take it all in [...] you have to be very  
5       careful and get them to understand "but wait a minute, is it your perfectionistic side that  
6       is answering me now or?" [...] [get them to] reflect "what do you think happens if you  
7       don't do it [the assignment]?"

8 Speaking to this issue, behaviors and feelings of doubt were at times difficult to change for  
9 the athletes, as Adam explained: "he got as an assignment to not check [his training schedule],  
10 he checked his training schedule 100 times a day to feel that he was on track. He couldn't do  
11 that."

12       Another challenge raised by all consultants was the performance environment. All  
13 consultants expressed that the perfectionistic features that the athletes demonstrated had in  
14 some way contributed to their success in sport. Several athletes appeared to have had  
15 perfectionistic features since a young age, with society and the performance environment  
16 reinforcing the perfectionistic behaviors and attitudes. Elise and Rafael articulated that the  
17 messages the coaches gave at practice were at times contradictory to the help being provided.  
18 Specifically, the coaches' behaviors and attitudes often reinforced and encouraged the  
19 athletes' perfectionism, through praise, comments, and focusing on results. Adam even stated  
20 that many coaches seek perfectionistic behaviors in their athletes: "many coaches strive for  
21 these features, for people who do extra workouts and who stays after practice and comes early  
22 and follows their schedule" Although coaches may not always consciously reinforce  
23 perfectionism, their behaviors often do, as Elise expressed: "the coaches are often a bit  
24 clumsy, because of course it's really nice to have an athlete who only does what you're asking  
25 and does it to a 150 percent."

Lucas and Rafael also reported that other important persons in the athletes' lives, for example parents, friends and teammates, influenced the athletes through their opinions. Lucas described:

if you have a strong connection to the coach who constantly focuses on results, then that will probably [have an] affect. If you have a strong connection to mom and dad who always ask how it went, which place you got, then that will have the largest effect.

To be most effective, Lucas and Rafael stressed the importance of working together with coaches and other specialists that the athletes came in contact with, which sometimes involved education of the methods used.

Transitions from a sports club to a sports program, or from amateur to professional, was mentioned by all consultants as a challenging and influential factor, with higher demands and greater opponents which often required greater commitment and investment in the sport. For example, entering a sports program, the athletes were exposed to supporting staff such as physiologists and dieticians, all encouraging the athletes to focus on details to improve and optimize their performance. Rafael discussed how the help from supporting staff could indirectly fuel perfectionism in athletes and make it more difficult to address:

at this level there is supporting staff in practically every area, for nutrition, for physiology, for psychology, everything. And they're constantly informing us that we should try to refine my performance as much as possible. Constantly think about what we eat, how we sleep, and what we do. And of course, if you already from the beginning have tendencies for perfectionism, then you get unbelievable stimulation and can even use all these people around you as stimuli.

### Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the views and experiences of sport psychology consultants regarding working with perfectionistic elite athletes and their use of CBT.

1 Consultants highlighted the pervasive nature of perfectionism and how it was evident in  
2 attitudes, emotions, behaviors, and outcomes for athletes. The consultants found  
3 perfectionism in athletes to manifest in various ways many of which were problematic, and  
4 that this depended highly on the individual. They also reported using a range of CBT  
5 techniques and found them to be largely effective in supporting these athletes. However, some  
6 of the challenges they noted in working to reduce perfectionism included how perfectionistic  
7 features themselves interfered with their work as well as how aspects of the sport environment  
8 reinforced perfectionism.

9 In regards to the athletes themselves, consultants reported that perfectionistic athletes  
10 expressed extreme mindsets where they were never satisfied, and displayed an “all or  
11 nothing” attitude. Athletes often had a strong attachment to their sport, ruminated over  
12 mistakes, overgeneralized, and showed signs of pessimism. Anxiety, doubt and fear of failure  
13 were also reported to be common among perfectionistic athletes by the consultants. These  
14 accounts mirror some of those in other qualitative research that have emphasised the negative  
15 aspects of perfectionism (e.g., Hill et al., 2015). As such, there appears to be some confluence  
16 between experiences of the consultants and perfectionistic athletes themselves. We note,  
17 though, that here many of the athletes appear somewhat more extreme particularly in the  
18 manner in which their perfectionism impacted their lives broadly, as opposed to being  
19 domain-specific (e.g., Dunn et al., 2005).

20 Some of the more revealing findings in regards to perfectionistic athletes focused on  
21 issues that are underrepresented in previous research. The notion of perfectionistic  
22 vulnerability or reactivity has been touched upon elsewhere, including quantitative research  
23 that have sought to examine responses to achievement difficulties (e.g., Curran & Hill, 2018).  
24 However, the role of what might be considered relatively minor setbacks – disruptions to  
25 plans, changes in schedules or diet – is not well represented in existing research and, based on

accounts here, may play a significant role in regards to emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of perfectionistic athletes. Similarly, how perfectionism might influence stress, burnout and coping are among some of the most examined issues in research in this area (Gustafsson et al., 2017). However, the influence of perfectionism on career transitions and sport dropout, less so, and worthy of additional consideration and attention based on the current findings.

All consultants used different CBT techniques when working with perfectionistic athletes. Some of the traditional CBT techniques which were adopted included mindfulness, exposure, response prevention, cognitive restructuring, and psychological skills training techniques (e.g., goal setting). These approaches were largely viewed as effective by the consultants, as has been found to be the case in formal tests of the efficacy of CBT for perfectionism (Handley et al., 2015). More contemporary CBT techniques were also mentioned such as ACT and MAC. Although the evidence base for these techniques as they apply to perfectionism is less developed, indication here is that sport practitioners are using these techniques and they believe them to be effective when working with athletes. These novel findings suggest there is merit in exploring these techniques further as well as formally evaluating their effectiveness.

What is often missing in studies examining the effectiveness of these and other techniques is an account of the context and its role and impact on applied practice. There are previous accounts of how perfectionism can interfere with the process of addressing perfectionism (Egan et al., 2013). This was also evident here. However, for the first time, in the current study we heard accounts that addressing perfectionism in sport may be particularly difficult due to the context itself. The language used by coaches and support staff, how the sport environment is created to optimise performance, and the sharp focus on performance improvement of even the smallest kind were considered to provide a difficult backdrop by the consultants when they presented the challenging view that pursuing perfection may be

1 problematic. In doing so, the findings speak to the relevance of interpersonal sources of  
2 perfectionism in sport as exemplified within existing measures and associated empirical  
3 evidence (e.g., Gotwals & Dunn, 2009; Madigan et al., 2019). When working with  
4 perfectionistic athletes, sport psychology consultants will need to be aware of this unique  
5 challenge and adopt an approach that is sensitive to this context. The most successful and  
6 effective interventions will therefore be those that are able to work within this type of ethos  
7 and incorporate others (coaches and support staff).

8       One of the related challenges that consultants may face is the idea that attempting to  
9 reduce PC may reduce PS or, inadvertently, decrease the motivation of athletes. This is a  
10 complex issue. PC and PS are typically positively correlated and their overlap has been  
11 suggested to be important in understanding the energising effects of perfectionism – both  
12 reflecting a conditional sense of acceptance (Hill, 2014). In this regard, seeking for athletes to  
13 be less perfectionistic could possibly have implications for motivation and performance. We  
14 think there are important considerations, though. The effects of PS are best described as  
15 ambiguous (Hill et al., 2018). As such, it is not currently clear if athletes would necessarily be  
16 worse off forgoing this energising factor. Researchers would likely differ in their perspective  
17 on this issue but we believe not. This is because, in our view, there are important differences  
18 between pursuing perfection and pursuing high (or exceptionally high) standards. Take, for  
19 example, the notion of excellencism as an alternative to perfectionism (Gaudreau, 2019). Key  
20 to this approach is the notion that athletes may be able to pursue excellence without costs to  
21 motivation, performance, or wellbeing that can characterise the pursuit of perfection.  
22 Implementing this shift may pose a range of challenges for consultants, particularly in the  
23 context of elite sport. However, the idea of pursuing excellence does at least offer one viable  
24 alternative to perfectionism that may be practically useful for consultants.



One important issue to highlight is that the more positive accounts of the experiences of athletes found in other studies were less evident here, with fewer mentions of possible benefits of perfectionism (e.g., Gotwals & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2014). This may be due to the experiences of these particular consultants or the way in which their role means they are more likely to encounter perfectionistic athletes who are experiencing performance or other difficulties. Alternatively, it may reflect the way the consultants understood perfectionism as a more negative personal quality. The educational training in CBT among all consultants in the present study make this a strong possibility. CBT and psychotherapy, generally, are grounded in clinical and counselling psychology where perfectionism has historically been viewed as problematic (Lloyd et al., 2015). Moreover, when using these approaches there is a sharp focus on techniques and skills that address the problems associated with that perfectionism. As such, the consultants may be better versed in the notion of negative perfectionism. Additional accounts of perfectionism are required from other sport psychology consultants to fully understand the influence of perfectionism and may act as a counterpoint to the experiences of those interviewed here.

Based on the accounts in this study our sense is that the consultants are likely focusing on a certain subtype of perfectionism – mixed perfectionism (high PS/high PC). Their accounts of perfectionism align with previous qualitative research that has shown this subtype to be associated with heightened threat and anxiety, and lower unconditional self-acceptance (Hill et al., 2020), as well as experiencing low satisfaction from success and negative response to failure (Gotwals & Tamminen, 2020). Coupled with the idea that these consultants are more likely to encounter athletes who are experiencing difficulties and are seeking support, the accounts may be best viewed as a representation of the negative aspects of being perfectionistic in sport. Regardless, it is clear that to work effectively with perfectionistic athletes sport psychology consultants will need knowledge of the differences between PC and

- 1 PS, how they coexist, and their impact on athletes, so they can differentiate between athletes
- 2 and tailor the support they provide.

### 3 **Conclusion**

- 4 The accounts of sport psychology consultants who have worked with perfectionistic
- 5 athletes indicate that perfectionism manifests in important ways, many of which require
- 6 support. CBT techniques are being used and considered effective in this context. However,
- 7 practitioners should be aware of the complexities of perfectionism and the potential
- 8 difficulties of addressing it and its negative effects in the sporting environment.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

- Could you tell me about your experiences from working with perfectionistic athletes?
- How does perfectionism manifest among the athletes? (Consequences)
- In what situations does perfectionism show?
- Some researchers say that perfectionism is positive and others that it is negative. What is your experience from working with the athletes?
- From your experiences, what are the perceived contributing factors that increase perfectionistic behaviors and attitudes among the athletes?
- How do you work with athletes that have perfectionistic features? (Any specific techniques?)
- From your experience, how has the outcome been?
- What are your general views on perfectionism in sport, from your experiences as a consultant?

#### Suggestions for follow-up questions/probes:

- Since you started with CBT, how do you look at methods for management of perfectionism?
- If and how have you worked with e.g., ACT, mindfulness?
- Do I understand you correctly that you meant...?
- How do you handle this in an elite sport environment?
- Could you tell me a bit more about that athlete? (Background)
- Do you work with any of the athletes today?