



## **Perfectionistic athletes: Burning brightly or burning out? This summary describes the findings of a study that examined the relationship between perfectionism and burnout in junior football players.**

### **Introduction**

While sport can be enjoyable, it can also be stressful. This is particularly the case for junior athletes who find themselves in more structured sport environments such as football academies. Understanding the consequences of stress for junior athletes and identifying the factors which contribute to stress is therefore important for coaches who must develop better athletes while also safeguarding athlete wellbeing.

### **Stress and athlete burnout**

When participation becomes too stressful junior athletes might begin to experience symptoms of burnout. These symptoms include feelings of exhaustion, a reduced sense of achievement, and eventual loss of interest in participation. Not only will burnout negatively impact athlete performance and development, it will also contribute to lower wellbeing. Research has found that some athletes might be more susceptible to burnout than others. Athletes who are perfectionistic, for example, may be more likely to develop burnout. This is because while perfectionistic athletes can display lots of desirable behaviours in sport such as setting very high goals and working hard, they also tend to worry more, experience more anxiety, and find it difficult to deal with setbacks.

### **What is perfectionism exactly?**

Perfectionism is a personality characteristic that is thought to be learned from parents and other important people in their lives during adolescence. It includes a range of features. These features include setting high standards, a need to be organised, concerns about mistakes, and doubts about one's own actions. It can also include beliefs about what other people expect (e.g., "my coach expects me to be perfect") or the tendency to have high expectations of others (e.g., "I expect my teammates to be perfect"). The more positive features of perfectionism are collectively called "perfectionistic strivings" and the more negative features are collectively called "perfectionistic concerns."

## The study

When studying perfectionism in athletes, four different types of perfectionism can be examined. These are athletes who report high levels of both perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns, low levels of both perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns, and those who exhibit a mix of both (i.e., high perfectionistic strivings but low perfectionistic concerns, and the opposite).

The purpose of the study was to examine if the four different types of perfectionism were associated with different levels of burnout. To address this purpose, 170 male junior footballers from academies of professional football clubs in the UK (age ranged from 13 to 19) completed a questionnaire to measure perfectionism and burnout.

## The results

The study revealed that:

Junior footballers who had high perfectionistic strivings and low perfectionistic concerns reported the lowest level of burnout.

Junior footballers who had low perfectionistic strivings and high perfectionistic concerns reported the highest level of burnout.

Junior footballers who had high perfectionistic strivings and high perfectionistic concerns reported levels of burnout in between the other two types.

## Practical implications

Coaches need to be aware of the potential for junior athletes to burnout. To help reduce this risk of burnout, coaches should consider the following:

- Promote challenging personal goals (but not unrealistic goals) as meeting goals may protect athletes from burnout.
- Discourage concerns about performance by focusing on self-improvement and rewarding effort regardless of ability or success.
- Create an environment where setbacks and failure are viewed as an important (and positive) part of development in sport.

## This summary is based on the article below:

Hill, A. P. (2013). Perfectionism and athlete burnout: A test of the 2 × 2 model of dispositional perfectionism. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 35, 18-29.

## Other useful readings on the topics discussed are:

Cresswell, S.L. & Eklund, R.C. (2006). Athlete burnout: conceptual confusion, current research and future research Directions. In S. Hanton and S.D. Mellalieu (Eds.). *Literature Reviews in Sport Psychology* (pp. 91-126). USA: Nova Science Publishers Inc.

Hill, A. P. (2016). Conceptualizing Perfectionism: An Overview and Unresolved Issues. In A. P. Hill (Ed.), *The Psychology of Perfectionism in Sport, Dance, and Exercise* (pp. 3-30). London: Routledge.

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