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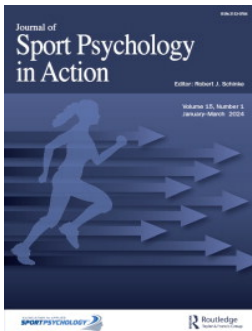
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## Insights and Challenges of Working With Perfectionism in Sport

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## Insights and Challenges of Working With Perfectionism in Sport

Dean Richard Watson

### ABSTRACT

Perfectionism is complex and ambiguous. However, there is little known about the experiences of sport psychology practitioners when working with perfectionistic athletes. This article presents a commentary on my personal insights when working with perfectionism and the challenges that I have faced. Here, I also draw on the literature from my work and from others to help illustrate these challenges. Recommendations for sport psychology practitioners in conducting these specific challenges are then presented. The article ends by outlining a personal reflection of working with perfectionistic athletes, followed by recommendations for good practice.

### KEYWORDS

Sport Psychology;  
considerations; guidance

### *The practitioner*

I am a Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registered Practitioner Psychologist and Chartered Psychologist with the British Psychological Society (CPsychol). I have been working as a Sport Psychology Practitioner (SPP) for 10 years and have been fortunate enough to have worked with a range of athletes (e.g., individual and team), participation levels (e.g., Olympic, professional, academy, and recreational), and sports (e.g., climbing, cricket, squash, orienteering, and rugby) during this time. These experiences have provided me with valuable insights into the psychological aspects of sports performance, and how I can help develop the person and the athlete. Over the last five years I have focused my applied work on supporting perfectionistic athletes. This was because I started a PhD examining different interventions to reduce and manage athlete perfectionism.

My professional philosophy toward Sport and Exercise Psychology is based on supporting the person, not just the athlete, unconditionally, in the belief that performance and well-being are linked (Brady & Maynard, 2010). My professional philosophy is underpinned by three values (ABC). (1) Authenticity. I aim to be myself. That is, someone who is calm,

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empathic, and understanding. (2) Belief. I aim to support the person in becoming a better version of themselves. Belief does not just mean overcoming issues that they may have previously experienced. It also means growing as a person and becoming a better human, inside and outside of sport. (3) Collaboration. I aim to establish strong working relationships with the people I support, working toward their goals and putting them first in the process. I believe that the person I am working with is an expert of themselves and that I am an expert in sport psychology. I aim to bring these two things together to support them.

### **Perfectionism**

Perfectionism is a multidimensional trait that is focused on setting and exceeding high personal standards which are accompanied by overly critical evaluations of behavior (Frost et al., 1990). Perfectionism is multifaceted and involves personal (i.e., personal standards) and interpersonal (i.e., “other people expect me to be perfect”) traits (see Hewitt et al., 2003). In addition, perfectionism involves various aspects and dimensions (e.g., Concerns Over Mistakes) that can affect everyone across different contexts or situations. Flett and Hewitt (2020) believe that it evolves over time, through different interactions (e.g., coaches and parents). As such, perfectionism can affect any domain, including sport. Due to the number of dimensions, perfectionism is best discussed using the two higher order dimensions—perfectionistic strivings (PS) and perfectionistic concerns (PC) (see Gotwals et al., 2012, for a detailed description).

The research on perfectionism in sport has been recently reviewed. Hill et al. (2018) found that PS was ambiguous in relation to motivation and emotions, but positively related to performance. In contrast, PC was related to maladaptive motivation and emotions, and unrelated to performance. The prevailing assessment is that perfectionism is something to needs to be reduced and managed, particularly dimensions related to PC. This assessment highlights the important role SPPs have in helping athletes reduce and manage their perfectionism.

There are several ways to assess perfectionism. Firstly, perfectionistic athletes may disclose to the SPP that they are a perfectionist and that they are struggling to cope because of their perfectionism. Secondly, the SPP may note perfectionistic tendencies from observations and discussions with the athlete. However, where possible, perfectionism should be assessed using self-report measures (see Madigan, 2023), especially with athletes who are not as open about their perfectionism. Watson et al. (2022) used the Concerns Over Mistakes subscale from the Sport Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale-2 (SMPS-2; Gotwals & Dunn, 2009) as a measure of an athlete’s PC. If this score is  $\geq 29$ , SPPs will need to support and

intervene. SPPs can also use this score to evaluate and monitor the intervention's effectiveness. If SPPs want to gain a fuller understanding of an athlete's perfectionism, it is recommended that they also measure dimensions of PS, too (see Madigan, 2023 for a detailed explanation).

### ***Insights and challenges***

I have personally seen perfectionism, or athletes experiencing issues because of their perfectionism, increase. My personal experiences are echoed in the research, too. For example, socially-prescribed perfectionism (a dimension tied to PC) has increased by 32% since 1989 (see Curran & Hill, 2019). Although there is a worrying increase in this trend, some athletes believe that striving for perfection can be beneficial and can support them getting to the top of their sport. For example, Gould et al. (2002) found perfectionism was a psychological characteristic associated with being an Olympic champion. This belief is commonly held by athletes and is often shared by their coaches and parents, too. It represents one of the many typical challenges SPPs are likely to encounter or address, especially if both PS and PC are high.

In drawing on the most common of these challenges, I pay specific attention to my personal applied experiences as a SPP. In addition, I draw on some of the research that I have conducted, as well as the research of others in the field of perfectionism. After discussing my professional insights and challenges when working with perfectionism, I provide recommendations for SPPs as to how to overcome these challenges. These recommendations are firmly based within the research and will provide SPPs with support and guidance. This support will be especially useful for those SPPs that have previously worked with perfectionistic athletes and experienced some of these challenges firsthand.

### ***Athletes may not want to reduce their perfectionism***

The first challenge summarizes the complex nature of perfectionism. Some perfectionistic athletes place a high value on their perfectionism (see Hill et al., 2015). Hill and colleagues found that athletes perceived their perfectionism as something that brings greater capacity for success. From my personal applied experiences as a SPP, I have worked with an athlete recently who was experiencing the negative consequences of perfectionism (e.g., harsh self-criticism), but was reluctant to change. This athlete struggled on as they felt that their perfectionism was allowing them to train harder and perform better. They believed that being overly self-critical pushed them to achieve their goals. However, it was actually having an adverse effect on how they performed and trained.

We know that perfectionism brings about various difficulties for an athlete's well-being and performance (Hill et al., 2018). But through both the research and anecdotal evidence, athletes seemingly value their perfectionism despite the psychological and personal costs that it brings (Hill et al., 2015). I have had athletes describe how they obsess over every detail to a point where they are unable to sleep. Despite this, they have been reluctant to engage with me out of fear of losing some of the perceived benefits that being obsessive brings to them. Rigid attitudes toward sport psychology and negative emotional experiences are, in part, to blame for these beliefs (Klockare et al., 2022). This perception about the benefits of perfectionism can create an immediate challenge for SPPs, as any support that is offered may get rejected. Particularly if athletes display higher levels of PC.

There are several suggestions and recommendations that I offer for SPPs. Firstly, perfectionistic athletes need to be informed of the dangers of perfectionism. Perceiving that their perfectionism is a good thing is ill-advised due to the potential risks toward their well-being and performance levels, particularly following failure (see Lizmore et al., 2019). Secondly, SPPs must treat perfectionism as multidimensional. Here, SPPs should consider focusing on and reducing specific dimensions of an athlete's perfectionism (e.g., Concerns Over Mistakes; Gotwals & Dunn, 2009). This may be more appealing for an athlete, especially if it is highlighted that the reduction in dimensions related to PC will not have adverse effects on their broader perfectionism and performance levels.

### ***Athletes may hold negative attitudes toward help-seeking***

The second challenge outlines how attitudes may negatively affect whether perfectionistic athletes ask for help or not for their performance related needs. Previous research has highlighted how some perfectionistic athletes have more stigma toward receiving sport psychology support (see Watson et al., 2024). Perfectionistic athletes are typically concerned with what others (e.g., teammates and coaches) think of them. In addition, perfectionistic athletes want to be seen as perfect (Flett & Hewitt, 2014). So, receiving help from a SPP, or even asking for help from a professional, weakens this ideal image. To a perfectionistic athlete, not receiving help from a SPP allows them to hide their imperfections.

From my applied experiences, perfectionistic athletes tend to try and keep you at arm's length. This may depend on the context (e.g., if I am working for an organization versus an independent client). But typically, their pre-conceptions about who I am, what I intend to do, and how I intend to do it, impact on whether they engage with me or not. I have found it harder to build relationships with perfectionistic athletes, because

of their negative attitudes toward sport psychology. Previously, I have tried to provide more sessions on how they may benefit from sport psychology. However, I have noticed that some perfectionistic athletes, after agreeing to be supported, can revert back to older behaviors more quickly following an intervention. Therefore, further caution is needed for SPPs working with perfectionistic athletes.

This challenge creates several smaller issues for SPPs to consider. Firstly, depending on the context, I recommend that SPPs include an extended period of psychoeducation and rapport building prior to the delivery of any intervention. This extended period is essential in the sport psychology service provision (Woolway & Harwood, 2020), but it is especially relevant for perfectionistic athletes. This suggestion may support the athlete's engagement toward the sport psychology support that is offered, the SPP, and the wider intervention effectiveness. Secondly, there is some initial research that indicates online interventions are effective with perfectionistic athletes (e.g., Watson et al., 2024). Some perfectionistic athletes may be more open to learning if the interventions are delivered through anonymous modalities (e.g., online), as this can keep their identity unknown to others (Price et al., 2020). Keeping them anonymous holds significance because the desire to be perceived as a perfect athlete might create hesitancy in seeking help. Therefore, SPPs may want to consider using more online modalities when delivering interventions.

### ***Athletes may become more perfectionistic following an intervention***

This next challenge may seem unusual. After all, following the delivery of an intervention, most athletes and SPPs would hope to see some benefit or improvement (Barker et al., 2020). However, as identified through the previous challenges, working with perfectionistic athletes is not straightforward. For some perfectionistic athletes, they may have an increase in the frequency of perfectionistic thoughts because of the intervention. This may be more likely for interventions that require athletes to practice certain techniques. For example, if an athlete is asked to use imagery to overcome mistakes or to help re-focus, certain athletes may feel like they need to perfect the images before they can start using them as requested by the SPP (see Watson et al., 2022). The frustration of not being able to perfect the imagery, means they become more perfectionistic.

Over the years I have supported numerous perfectionistic athletes (often without realizing). Until recently, I have not considered whether perfectionism would impact an intervention's effectiveness or not. Looking back, there are several athletes that did not improve or that 'drifted away' during the intervention process. I have had some athletes become more perfectionistic (e.g., more frequent and intense self-critical thoughts) following an

intervention. Providing a perfectionistic athlete with an intervention that fuels their perfectionism can be very dangerous. As such, this point further highlights the possible dangers of working with perfectionistic athletes.

The first suggestion here would be to utilize interventions that are grounded in research. Whenever possible, interventions should be evidenced-based and follow rigorous procedures (Ely & Munroe-Chandler, 2021), but this is particularly important when working with perfectionism. Clearly, not all interventions work, and, in some cases, they can make things worse. Therefore, SPPs need to be aware of the right (e.g., Acceptance and Commitment Therapy; ACT) and wrong (e.g., Psychological Skills Training; PST) interventions when supporting perfectionistic athletes. Secondly, I suggest that SPPs update their practice and approach so that they can deliver interventions that have been shown to be effective in the research (e.g., ACT; Watson et al., 2024, please refer to Table 1 for an

**Table 1.** Overview of an ACT intervention to reduce perfectionism.

| Session number | Area of ACT   | Aspect or dimension perfectionism   | Session overview  |
|----------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1              | Introduction  | Stigma                              | Introduces what perfectionism is, what ACT is, and how ACT can support perfectionism. Highlight the different dimensions of perfectionism, the negative aspects of perfectionism, as well as the difficulty in reducing perfectionism.  |
| 2              | Being present | Concerns over mistakes              | How to be present and emphasizing the importance of actively connecting with the present moment to overcome concerns of making mistakes. Providing practical approaches to achieve presence by utilizing the senses, such as "dropping anchor" to ground oneself in the current experience. |
| 3              | Mindfulness   | Fear of failure                     | What is mindfulness and the use of different breathing techniques. The term "pink elephant" is often used in the context of mindfulness to illustrate the challenge of emptying the mind. How using mindfulness can help with fear of failure.  |
| 4              | Acceptance    | Self-criticism                      | Learning to accept mistakes and self-criticism. Acknowledging and embracing one's thoughts, emotions, and circumstances without judgment or resistance. Contrast between struggling and opening-up.   |
| 5              | Defusion      | Doubt about actions                 | Introduce the concept of being unhooked from thoughts, such as "I am not good enough." Learn different techniques to unhook from doubt about their ability. Introduce a compassionate mindset, which includes affirmation statements.   |
| 6              | Values        | Managing expectations               | Introduce to values vs goals. Acknowledge how values provide direction and to make meaningful choices. Learn about overcoming expectations and managing internal and external pressure. Encouraging values over unrealistic demands.  |
| 7              | Self          | Negative reactions to imperfections | Learn and acknowledge self-perception and the importance of considering how one wishes to be perceived by others. Embracing and learning from imperfections and understand the implications of reacting negatively toward oneself.  |
| 8              | Commitment    | Healthy striving                    | Understanding how to maintain the healthy choices toward striving. Acknowledging the commitment needed to maintain progress, as well as exploring strategies for overcoming or managing fear in the pursuit of goals.   |



overview of this intervention). ACT might be the most effective approach to reduce and manage perfectionism as it allows athletes to take a step back and for their thoughts to pass by. In addition, ACT allows athletes to be in the present rather than ruminating over past mistakes (Watson et al., 2024).

### ***Athletes may be more receptive toward a 'hands off' approach***

The final challenge that is discussed outlines the benefits of providing self-guided interventions. Recent research has provided strong indication that self-guided interventions can be effective in reducing perfectionism (Donachie & Hill, 2022; Watson et al., 2024). As outlined earlier, some perfectionistic athletes may feel stigma toward receiving help from a SPP. As such, interventions that are self-guided may help reduce their pre-conceptions toward sport psychology support. In addition, athletes can remain anonymous if they are being supported through a self-guided intervention (Price et al., 2020).

My experience of delivering support to athletes through self-guided interventions has been positive. I have provided resources and prerecorded PowerPoint slides to a SharePoint. Here, the athletes can access the support, free from anyone that may judge them (e.g., a teammate). It is important to highlight the need to tailor the resources for each athlete, rather than using the same resources each time. I also recommend checking in with the athlete, either *via* email or phone, to make sure that they are ok. This provides an opportunity for the SPP to determine if the athlete requires any additional resources.

Self-guided interventions have advantages for SPPs when supporting perfectionistic athletes, but they also contain several challenges that SPPs must be aware of. Firstly, for example, retention and adherence could be problematic (Shafran et al., 2017). SPPs must be aware of the issue of adherence and possibly provide more hands-on guidance during the pre- and post-intervention phases to monitor progress. Secondly, self-guided interventions may mean that athletes are left unchecked, meaning that they may be vulnerable to further issues. This is important as perfectionism is a vulnerability factor for depression (Smith et al., 2021), so SPPs must be sensitive to this and be able to respond and make referrals if needed. Finally, self-guided interventions may negatively affect the relationship between the athlete and the SPP. So, SPPs may want to consider additional support following a self-guided intervention.

### **Final reflection**

I would like to now share a recent reflection that summarizes both persistent and emerging challenges of working with perfectionism during my

journey as a SPP. This honest reflection aims to contribute to the collective understanding of how to reduce and manage perfectionism. Despite the recommendations that I have provided, I continue to experience challenges when working with perfectionistic athletes. I believe that openly discussing these challenges can provide valuable insights for SPPs as they reflect on and refine their skills in supporting perfectionistic athletes. Thus, this unfiltered reflection serves to emphasize the complexities of reducing perfectionism.

Perfectionism is a multifaceted construct with multiple dimensions, and it effects athletes differently. Recognizing the distinctiveness is a significant step in understanding and effectively working with athletes who exhibit perfectionistic tendencies. Perfectionism can vary significantly from athlete to athlete, and interventions may not produce the same effectiveness for each individual. Despite my enhanced understanding of perfectionism, I still feel overwhelmed when working with an athlete who displays perfectionistic tendencies. This often makes me feel very frustrated as a SPP. Occasionally my frustration, to some extent, hinders my ability to work effectively as a SPP. Instead of feeling equipped to address their needs, I occasionally find myself at a loss as to how to help them navigate their perfectionistic tendencies. There are some interventions that are more effective than others, and the research is helping demonstrate this. However, there have been some athletes that I have worked with recently that really highlight the complex nature of perfectionism. SPPs and other support staff (e.g., coaches and parents) must take the time to understand each athlete's unique perfectionism profile and tailor their coaching and support accordingly. For example, one athlete may hold unrealistically high personal standards for themselves, but may not feel external pressure from others to be perfect. SPPs would need to understand the impact of these unrealistically high personal standards as it may be impacting on their well-being. In contrast, a different athlete may not set the same unrealistically high personal standards for themselves but might have frequent thoughts

**Table 2.** Summary of challenges and recommendations for SPPs.

| Challenges   | Recommendations for SPPs  |
|--|---|
| 1. Athletes may not want to reduce their perfectionism.                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Educate athletes on the dangers of perfectionism.</li><li>• Treat perfectionism as multidimensional and reduce specific perfectionism dimensions.</li></ul>                 |
| 2. Athletes may hold negative attitudes toward help-seeking.           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Extended period of psychoeducation to build rapport and engagement.</li><li>• Deliver online interventions to reduce their fears of being seen as imperfect.</li></ul>      |
| 3. Athletes may become more perfectionistic following an intervention. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use evidence-based interventions that have been shown to reduce perfectionism.</li><li>• SPPs must upskill in effective approaches (e.g., ACT).</li></ul>                   |
| 4. Athletes may be more receptive toward a 'hands off' approach.       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• SPPs must be sensitive to the athlete's needs and make referrals if needed.</li><li>• Tailor the resources and check in with the athlete during the intervention.</li></ul> |

about needing to be perfect. SPPs may consider using ACT to help reduce the frequency of these thoughts. Going forward, I am going to continue to treat each athlete independent from one another. This also means treating their perfectionism individually and discreetly. In addition, I am going to continue to deliver interventions that are evidence-based and upskill in approaches that have been found to be effective in reducing perfectionism.

## Conclusion

The present article has provided an overview of the main challenges that SPPs may experience when working with a perfectionistic athlete, along with recommendations for SPPs to consider (see [Table 2](#) for a summary). Some of the challenges have similarities with athletes who do not suffer from perfectionism. However, as the reader may now be aware, the challenges of working with perfectionism are often intensified. These challenges include athletes not wanting to reduce or manage their perfectionism, holding negative attitudes toward help-seeking, becoming more perfectionistic following an intervention, and being more receptive to self-guided interventions. Following the recommendations provided, SPPs may be able to support perfectionistic athletes more effectively.

## Recommendations for good practice

- SPPs should undertake formal training in ACT. The research using this approach is encouraging.
- Educate athletes on the benefits of sport psychology. I appreciate this this is not always possible, but I recommend it as a way of helping perfectionistic athletes overcome any stigma.
- Build strong working alliances. To reduce their pre-conceptions and stigma, perfectionistic athletes may require strong relationships with those that are offering support (e.g., SPPs).
- Provide robust psychoeducation programmes. Delivering psychoeducation interventions may serve perfectionistic athletes particularly well given their negative attitudes toward help-seeking.
- Think about delivering self-guided interventions. Some of the early research using this type of intervention is promising and may offset some of the stigma of receiving help.
- Work with the coaches and parents, too. The research is beginning to demonstrate the challenges that the environment can bring for athletes and their perfectionism.

- Limit how much technical practice is involved in the interventions. Research has found that certain techniques may require more practice, and in turn may increase their perfectionism.

## Disclosure statement

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