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"Elite Athlete Performance"



TOPIC ARTICLE

High performance youth sport focuses on talent development and identification (TID or TD systems), with many youth specializing in sport at an early age [6]. It is characterized by high pressure environments where the focus is on successful results often at the expense of holistic development. Individuals within high performance

sport environments are often faced with intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges that may not be conducive to their psychosocial development. These challenges can include a fear of failure, deselection, and pressures from coaches, parents and peers. Highly competitive sports environments have been linked with antisocial behaviors, low self-esteem, stress, burnout, injuries and dropout among youth participants.

TID systems tend to be situated, dynamic, and multidimensional. They aim toward optimizing performance potential while balancing risks with rewards. They also are considered to involve formal top-down learning methods and asymmetric power relations. TID systems have been found to be inherent of a performance-oriented nature (i.e., high expectations, early specialization, and social isolation). This often comes at an expense of personal development and well-being.

While some high performers have found ways to cope and thrive when faced with the high demands required to perform at the highest level, others struggle. The process of becoming an elite performer can be situated and complex and based within unique individual, situational, and contextual elements. Young performers are often introduced to a hierarchical system that is coach-led with system-driven activities. The performers tend to find this system to be natural thereby becoming supportive of its requirements. They tend to make the necessary adjustments to accommodate continued participation while striving to avoid altercations or provocations to leaders within the system.

The strength and quality of motivation in individuals appear to take cues from the learning environment of the talent development process. Young high performers tend to be proud and honored to be a part of the high-performance environment and attribute their participation to their own sense of self-confidence. They also tend to share in the aim of performance excellence with the environment and culture as they strive to reach goals. They tend to relish in their position of being among the best as the top group is perceived to be the most important social currency. They enjoy their status and the status they bring to their coaches and organization. Young performers may associate such precedence with social acceptance and being included in a higher or competitive social group.

Some performers develop a limited perception of success as they tend to focus mainly on winning or being a top performer as well as a sense of reaching an ideal identity or simply fulfilling their dreams. They attend to an identity that aligns with external definitions and expectations as opposed to an internal agency based on their true selves. Some young athletes adapt a performance-based sense of identity which correlates with high levels of perfectionism, fear of failure, and conditional self-worth. It can be difficult to reshape a performance identity established from early childhood through parental expectations and indoctrinations within performance culture.

As young performers in high-performance environments become more attuned to a performance-based culture, they tend to resist their power to formulate their own narrative which could lead to better ways of coping with person-environmental tensions.

High performers tend to lack a sense of purpose and ownership in their own developmental process. Such perceptions can lead to an identity crisis if injury or illness takes place. Feelings of failure, shame, and humiliation can often take root especially in consideration to the high-performance environment where deselection, rejection, or devaluation can occur as a result of performance initiatives. The process of basing their identity, motivation, positive emotions, and social status on contingencies of sustained success places these individuals at increased risk of perfectionistic tendencies, overtraining, and performance anxiety. It is best for high performers to have a multifaceted identity in contrast to a strong and exclusive performance identity which enables them to foster greater resilience, mental health, and wellbeing.

Early Specialization

Sports specialization in early to middle childhood has become increasingly common. Early sport specialization has not been shown to improve future adult athletic performance. High performance in early years in young athletes has been found to not be related to later success, whereas peak performance is achieved around the senior category, for both men and women. The transition to elite sport has been found to be the most difficult phase, and still many athletes tend to be unsuccessful as evidenced by only a third of these high performers progressing to adult level competition in the future. For most sports, the intense training and specialization before puberty can be detrimental both physically and emotionally. Early specialization leads to higher rates of injury, increased psychological stress, and early sport dropout as frequency of injury, stagnation in performance, educational requirements, and a lack of motivation can serve as important reasons for high dropout rates.

Specialization may increase risk of injury due to:

- year-round single-sport training
- participation in more competition
- decreased age-appropriate play involvement in individual sports that require the early development of technical skills
- To develop adult and young elite-level athletes, not only the acquisition of sport skills is necessary but also optimizing the health of athletes through continued participation in sports. Children who participate for more than 16 hours per week in intense training of specialized sports activities should be monitored for markers of burnout, overuse injury or decrements in performance due to overtraining. Intense training and specialization in most sports should be delayed until late adolescence to reduce the risk for injury and adverse psychological stress. Some sports (e.g., gymnastics, figure skating) require early entry into specialization, which may not be associated with negative outcomes when the child feels supported.

Early Diversification

Early diversification in sports is linked to a longer sport career and long-term sport involvement, and it does not hinder elite sport participation where greater performance is achieved after maturation. It is proposed that after the sampling years (engaging in a variety of sports during childhood), the children can continue to participate in recreational sport (recreational years, ages 13+) or in the sport performance (specializing years, ages 13 to 15; investment years, ages 16+) phase. For many high performers, this may present a healthier long-term model that enhances opportunity for future success in sport and life while reducing physical and psychological risks.

Motivational Conditions

Motivational conditions and learning environments may vary across contexts (e.g., cultures, domains, and traditions) and talent development stages (e.g., sampling, specialization, and investment years). A person that engages in sport (e.g., elite athlete and gymnastics) will likely encounter different and unique beliefs and traditions in accordance with their talent development pathway into adulthood.

High performers' motivation and well-being can be encompassed in different ways which display the innate complexity in developing excellence throughout talent development pathways. These motivations can range from predominantly self-determined, multi-dimensional, and predominantly controlled profiles or states. An elite performer may lack an original intrinsic state of motivation and yet be capable of attaching to higher versions of themselves throughout contextual experiences. It is the individual's motivational profile that matters as blends of motivational regulation can translate into a more or less robust and healthy talent development pathway. Successful high performers can be characterized by motivational characteristics such as intrinsic motivation, high standards, adaptive coping strategies, and the enabling of flow experiences.

Controlled States of Motivation. Controlling conditions vary across contextual domains of the sport or talent development parameter. Control can occur in indirect ways such as one-to-one relationships with teachers or coaches who monitor and judge self-practice from a top-down approach. Distinct traditions and belief systems within the sportculture may also indirectly encourage obedience, loyalty, and conformity to the pathway to excellence. Controlling teaching or coaching styles may socialize performers into less self-determined ways of being. This often results in a lack of autonomy for the performer as they are taught what to practice rather than how to practice.

In more controlled cultures, performers tend to assimilate themselves to the performance culture promoted by teachers/coaches, role models, media, and more skilled peers. Controlling conditions may hamper or reduce flow experiences, intrinsic motivation, and competence in certain domains. Young performers experiencing indirect control can feel trapped in ambivalent and conflicting relationships ending in outcomes of emotional distress and maladaptive behaviors. They can feel a need to navigate between a sense of loyalty and their own inner needs and well-being. When regulated by controlled motivation, performers may resort to self-diminishment which could encourage an over-striving to compensate for low self-worth or a perfect "ideal-self" while suppressing authenticity within oneself. Here, negative emotions (e.g., frustration, negative effects, and stress) cognitions (e.g., guilt, shame, and anxiety), and behaviors (e.g., rigidity, obsession, and eating disorders) become more prevalent. Even, ambitious performers operating within a positive cycle of development (e.g. mastery, success, flow, high self-esteem, competence) work well within these contexts until they are challenged by failure and adversity which can result in a dark side. This darker side of talent development appears evident in performers who lack autonomous motivation and autonomy-supportive environments.

Autonomous Motivation. Autonomy-supportive conditions are supportive of adaptive talent development processes. These conditions nurture autonomous motivation, optimal functioning, and well-being. Supportive, secure, and open learning environments with less judgement and more creative ways of being may enhance flow opportunities for the performer. Performers regulated by autonomous motivation and high self-esteem appear to engage in their performance development in more joyful and healthy ways while showing less dependence on the given conditions. These states give them the power to negotiate and influence their contextual conditions in a more self-determined direction, thus experiencing a wider range of thriving. While there are elements of controlled motivation that are needed throughout the talent development process, fostering autonomous motivation should be a fundamental goal of institutions and individuals working with high performers to achieve their goals.

Redefining Success

A performer's success can come at a high price of compromised well-being. Positive development within the talent development process encourages self-actualization, intrinsic motivation, and psychological comfort. The adversity, striving, imbalance, perfectionism, self-criticism, and emotional despair that accompanies high performance may have its place within high performance culture and yet afford individual performers the opportunity to redefine success. Success can be redefined within a larger depiction of the perception of self which can be identified through avenues of promoting autonomous motivation. Success could rather be perceived within a notion of sustained positive psychological functioning alongside reaching excellence within the talent development path. It is essential to be cognizant of the innate complexities and potential for controlling conditions to impact the high performer.

Enhancing autonomous motivation and flow, supportive relatedness, and allowing opportunities for more creativity can counter controlling conditions. Success as a foundational notion of contributing to the high performer's best self in all realms of life serves as a more positive contribution to the high performer's holistic well-being.

Dual Career and Managing Time

Another strain for both young and adult high performers is managing dual careers. The involvement of high-level athletes in academic or professional projects has been an obligation to be managed by sports organizations and federations. The pace of the high performer's life has accelerated tremendously since the early 2000s. Top adult athletes tend to participate in more and more competitions, training sessions, and camps. They tend to have a need to involve many specialists (physical trainers, mental trainers, nutritionists, and coaching specialists) in their preparation. They also must continue to meet social requirements such as seeing their family, meeting with friends, and enjoying a social life. These all have a strong impact on time availability. Being able to manage one's time becomes a key component to success.

For the high performer, there are different temporalities that make up the athletes' life such as sport, education, family, and friends. Athletes with the densest schedules are not necessarily those who are most uncomfortable with their pace of life and conversely those with the lightest schedules are not always in situations of well-being. To respond to their needs, performers tend to remove unnecessary items in order to prioritize a life organization consisting essentially of useful and efficient time. In order to be time masters, athletes implement arrangement or adjustment strategies (delaying/anticipating, superimposing, suppressing/reducing some items and replacing slow activities with fast activities) to respond to their time schedules. In order to carry out their many responsibilities, athletes and high performers may play with the system rules and set up arrangement strategies with the aim of producing an acceptable schedule. They may also use this opportunity as an adjustment variable that allows them to better manage difficult periods and intense time constraints. This applies to both young and adult athletes.

While time-consuming, the dual career can contribute to athletes' development and equilibrium by meeting internal motivations and by providing solutions to external pressures. Some individuals may believe that studying is a source of stress and tension for athletes or that they add an extra burden to an already saturated schedule. For many athletes, their education can be a source of balance and protection. Some athletes pursue a dual career which provides a way out should their career stop earlier than expected, while gradually preparing for a post-sports career.

Recommendations for assisting athletes in managing dual careers

Listen more carefully to high performers and trust them. Establish confidence and listening is a primary lesson learned as these individuals are actors in their trajectory and tend to learn to master their time. Since not all athletes are masters of time, it seems important to advocate for implementation of support and preparatory systems within sport organizations to assist them in building their autonomy.

Competitive Stressors impacting Performance

- Perceptions of preparedness: Perceptions of preparedness can be a source of stress at competitions.
- Injury: The risk of sustaining an injury has been a constant issue for many performers. Sustaining an injury increases personal pressure.
- Pressure: Pressure is an inherent aspect of competitive sport at any level and intensifies toward higher levels of competition. Personal goals and other expectations can be burdensome for some elite performers.
- Opponents: While opponents are a necessary part of the competitive experience, they are still a source of stress for performers.
- Appearance: The way athletes look when they perform and how others perceive them can be a significant stressor. The more visible the body is within the sport can affect concentration and performance.
- Competition: The competition event itself can be a central source of stress for the athlete. Some athletes stress the importance of having a good start in order to relax and be in a state of flow earlier.
- Irrational Beliefs: Irrational beliefs can impact performance and lead to pre-performance anxieties.

- **Personal Issues:** Personal issues such as nutrition, goals, and expectations can impact performance.
- **Coaching Relationship:** The relationship between any performer and his or her coach is critical for whether that athlete will ultimately fulfill his or her potential. In regard to connection, positive relationships with coaches and peers support self-esteem enhancement and the development of personal and social skills.
- **Coaching Styles:** Coaching styles are crucial in creating a training environment suitable for all performers. A transformational and cooperative style of coaching may be most fitting in high performance environments.
- **Team Atmosphere:** It is understandable that with the amount of time elite performers spend with each other, there will be some tensions. It is important to formulate a team atmosphere that is consistent with team goals but also conducive to individual expression and shared qualities.
- **Support Network:** The support network for elite performers is typically wide-ranging (e.g., athletes, family, and friends) and may not always be appropriate.

Organizational Stressors impacting Performance

- **Roles:** Team members, administration, and officials should all be cognizant of their functions and display competency in carrying them out.
- **Communication:** When communication breaks down, it can increase frustration for the performer.

Implementation of Holistic Structures to Promote Positive Development

- Promoting broad participation, sports sampling, late specialization, and healthy participation
- Balancing physical skills, mental skills, and attitudes through an individualized learning process
- Promoting identity development by adapting a purpose-based identity profile that encourages an establishment of a high sense of purpose, global self-worth and a positive view of the future. Seek to increase a sense of meaning and agency in the process of becoming.
- Seek to promote the performer's autonomy, independence, and responsibility necessary to acquire the self-discipline, self-regulation and sense of self-agency that allows them to navigate high-performance environments.

Factors to Consider within Holistic Models of Athlete Development

- **Continual Adaptations in Psychological Skills**
 - Psychological skills in the form of an ability to change, resilience, self-discipline, and mental toughness, superior self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, effective coping strategies, and positive mindset are essential.
- **Interpersonal Relationships**
 - Having people to support them such as family members, friends, coaches (ability to relate personally) and allied medical/health staff.
 - Having someone in their life to make them laugh and the importance of family members.
- **Performance Factors**
 - These include mental preparation, recovery strategies, sleep and allied health services.
- **Lifestyle Practices**
 - These include activities to help performers relax outside of training or competing (e.g., nutrition/hydration, having time-out, lifestyle balance).

Continual Evolvement in Player and Personal Development Literacies

Player Development Literacies (the ability, skills, and confidence to promote):

- **Nutritional Component:** decision-making on quantity and quality of foods consumed.
- **Physical Component:** skills and abilities related to overall athleticism.
- **Fitness Component:** maintenance of optimal physical fitness for sport.
- **Technical and Tactical Component:** promotion of technical and tactical skills needed for sport.
- **Health Component:** application of basic health and safety information.
- **Mental Component:** use of psychological techniques to maximize performance.
- **Behavior Component:** optimal response to overall sporting demands.

Personal Development Literacies:

- Fiscal Component: making effective decisions regarding money.
- Media Component: managing responses to mass, social and personal media.
- Transition Component: adapting to a rapidly changing and challenging sport environment.
- Career Component: making informed decisions regarding career choice and preparation.
- Mental and Emotional Component: awareness of potential mental and emotional issues.
- Professionalism Component: ability to make value-based decisions regarding life beyond sport.
- Character Component: adherence to character values as to moral and ethical responses to situations starting as young athletes and continuing into adulthood.

EMERGENCY

In a crisis call "911" immediately

● If considering self-harm, call "988"

The National Suicide Intervention Lifeline

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

To speak to a counselor,

Call (800) 656-4673

RAINN

**BULLYING/HAZING, VIOLENCE,
ADDICTIONS & SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

For helpful resources,

thebmsproject.org/Safety

CHILD ABUSE

To report suspected child abuse,

Call (800) 422-4453

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline

It is recommended that incident(s) of serious misconduct be reported to law enforcement.
Minors should report incidents of misconduct to their parent(s) or guardian(s).