

# Psychological Characteristics of Elite Athletes

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An elite athlete is a rare combination of talent, hard work and the right psychological profile. In sports today, everyone knows the best training methods, has access to the best facilities and most nutritional foods. Often the difference between the good and the elite is the mental qualities of the athletes. The focus of this paper is on three psychological characteristics athletes: confidence, anxiety, and motivation. More specifically, I wanted to look at what distinguishes an elite athlete from a sub-elite athlete in regards to these topics, and the relationship between these three characteristics.

## **Confidence:**

Confidence is an emotion or state of mind commonly associated with athletic success. Indeed, the following quote from tennis champion Jimmy Connors provides great insight into the confidence level of an elite athlete:

The whole thing is never to get negative about yourself. Sure, it's possible that the other guy you're playing is tough, and that he may have beaten you the last time you played, and okay, maybe you haven't been playing all that well yourself. But the minute you start thinking about these things you're dead. I go out to every match convinced that I'm going to win. That is all there is to it. (Weinberg 1988, p. 127)

The importance of high levels of confidence in elite athletics is also highlighted in the studies of Jones and Hardy (1990) and Hemery (1986). In Jones and Hardy's report of interviews of elite athletes, they found that in general, elite athletes tended to have very high levels of confidence and felt that the athletes felt that these high levels were needed for the performances that they were looking for. Hemery's study of 63 elite athletes showed that 90% of the sample had "a very high level of self-confidence." (Hemery 1986 p. 156)

Confidence is usually a result of an athlete anticipating success in their upcoming event. An athlete's anticipated outcome is the greatest indicator of confidence (Kauss 1980). This expectation for success can be based on an athlete's confidence in themselves, in teammates, emotional readiness, physical ability, knowledge of the opponent, goals, strategies, physical condition, or in the coach (Kauss 1980).

Elite athletes are renowned for high confidence levels. DeVenzio believes that this may be a result of being an elite athlete and not necessarily a cause. He believes that "confidence level mirrors skill level" (DeVenzio 1997 p. 91). This view points to the link between talent or previous success and confidence level.

If the preceding paragraph is true, perhaps the best therapy for low confidence is success. Coaches in every sport have employed this tactic. It can be seen whenever top ranked teams schedule lower ranked teams so that they can rack up wins and boost confidence. In addition to this technique, O'Connor suggests that an athlete can also build confidence just by acting confident. He says that an athlete should always act as if they are confident even if they are not. In doing so, the athlete does not let on any weaknesses to opponents and can even build up their own confidence (O'Connor 1970).

I believe that one cannot clearly define confidence as a cause or effect of being an elite athlete. It is obvious that to reach the very pinnacle of sport, an athlete must have a high confidence in their abilities; and getting to that elite level and all the preceding successes that it took to get to that level must surely build the confidence levels of an athlete.

### **Anxiety:**

The link between anxiety and performance in sport has been known for a long time. Stories abound of athletes or teams that performed poorly because they underestimated their opponent (below optimum anxiety levels) or worried themselves out of the game (above optimum anxiety levels). Dealing with anxiety successfully is an important characteristic of the elite athlete.

Research has shown that the ability to cope with pressure and anxiety is an integral part of sports, particularly among elite athletes (Hardy *et al.* 1996; Orlick & Partington, 1988). This is also evidenced by the report that more than 50% of consultations among athletes at an Olympic festival were related to stress or anxiety related problems (Murphy 1988). As a result of this high link between performance and anxiety, anxiety in athletes has become one of the most common topics of sports psychology research.

One of the earliest models that attempted to explain the relationship between arousal / anxiety and performance was the inverted-U hypothesis (Broadhurst 1957; Hebb 1955). The inverted-U hypothesis stated that as arousal increased performance would increase as well; but if arousal became too great performance would deteriorate. In other words, as stress began to build an individual still felt confident in their ability to control it and performance would improve. However, once a stressor became so great that the individual started to doubt their ability to cope with it, performance would decline.

An individualistic approach was added to this hypothesis when researchers developed the concept of individualized zones of optimal functioning or IZOFs (Hanin 1980, 1986). According to this theory, each individual has an optimal level of pre-performance anxiety. If the athlete is in this "zone," peak performances will be the result. However, if anxiety levels are too high or low, the athlete will not see optimum results. (Hanin 1980, 1986). IZOFs can be determined by repeatedly measuring anxiety and performance or through athlete's recall of anxiety levels prior to peak performances.

Research conducted with an elite group of swimmers found that anxiety intensity levels were higher in subjects who interpreted their anxiety as harmful than those who reported it as being an aid (Jones *et al.* 1994). This has also been found to be true of gymnasts (Jones *et al.* 1993) as well as basketball players (Swain & Jones, 1996). Another interesting research study was performed on a group of tennis players. Gould, Petrchlikoff, and Weinberg (1984) reported that the strongest predictor of cognitive anxiety was years of experience such that the more experience an individual had the lower the level of cognitive anxiety. This seems to make sense, because as an athlete gains experience he or she learns the tricks of the game, proper stress management techniques, and the added experience reduces the likelihood of encountering new and stressful events. This can be seen in the case of the Chicago Bulls of 1996-1998. Despite being the oldest team (and most experienced team) in the league, they dominated like no other team in NBA history (having Michael Jordan on the team probably didn't hurt either).

Clearly, anxiety levels can have a variety of effects on athletic performance. These effects vary based on sport and the individual. Luckily research has shown anxiety can be reduced through mental imagery, relaxation, and cognitive intervention (Meyers *et al.* 1982; Holm *et al.* 1996). These methods not only aim at reducing stress and anxiety levels but also aim to improve confidence levels. The goal is to help the athlete enter his or her IZOF.

I think that confidence level and anxiety level are closely related. The higher an athletes' confidence, the less he or she will worry about the competition- they know they are prepared and ready. Likewise, if an athlete is over-anxious, it may be a sign of self-doubt.

### **Motivation:**

To become an elite athlete in any sport requires hours upon hours of training. Often this training is rigorous, painful, or injurious. However, the athletes who have reached the pinnacle of their sport have more than likely put in their time to get to achieve that high level of success. To do this, these athletes must have something that motivates them to continually push their bodies, and come back from whatever struggles or setbacks they may experience along the way. This motivation may come intrinsically or extrinsically. Intrinsic motivation is an athletes' personal drive to achieve their goal. This may be setting a school record, winning a race, or defeating a particular opponent. Extrinsic motivation is the resulting motivation from an outside source such as parents, coaches, or teammates.

Research has shown the link between extremely high levels of motivation and the achievement of elite status (Hardy and Parfit, 1994; Mahoney *et al.*, 1987; Orlick and Partington, 1988). This would seem to be an obvious conclusion. There are many people out there who have the talent to succeed but very few who have the motivational drive to do what it takes to succeed. In light of this, it appears that intrinsic motivation may be the greater determinant of achieving success in sports. This view is supported by several research studies (Hardy and Parfit, 1994; Mahoney *et al.*, 1987; Orlick and Partington,

1988). To achieve an elite level in sport, an athlete must have the motivation to train hard on a daily basis and to overcome any obstacles or setbacks that athlete might face in reaching or maintaining that level of performance.

Overall, it would appear that the following traits would be common among elite athletes: extreme self-confidence, low performance anxiety, and high motivation. These three things are very closely related and would seem to form a cyclic pattern. For example, the athlete that is highly motivated to succeed knows the importance of physical preparation and that motivation carries over to their training. As a result, the athlete is well conditioned and physically prepared to meet the demands of the competition. Because the athlete is physically prepared he or she gains confidence in knowing that they have done what they need to do, and that they are physically prepared. This high confidence level carries over and results in decreased anxiety because the athlete knows that they have put in the time, are prepared, and are confident in their chances for success. Now this athlete is primed to achieve the desired results. If the athlete meets or exceeds expectations and achieves a level of success, this fuels the athletes' motivation to train and return to or exceed that level again. Elite performers have shown a strong need to demonstrate their personal competence and self-determination. As a result, they commit themselves to difficult and demanding goals, when these goals are achieved, the athletes' feelings of self-competence are confirmed and their intrinsic motivation enhanced (Hardy *et al.* 1996).

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