



Perfectionistic strivings, perfectionistic concerns, and reactions to poor personal performances among intercollegiate athletes



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The ability of athletes to successfully ‘bounce back’ from failure and adversity is generally viewed as a central characteristic of psychological resilience in sport. Therefore, understanding how and why athletes react in certain ways to adversity and failure in competition is of primary interest to sport practitioners. The purpose of this study was to determine if perfectionism—or, more specifically, the higher-order dimensions of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns—was associated with the dispositional tendencies of athletes to respond to poor personal performances with self-compassion, optimism, pessimism, and rumination.

Design: A cross-sectional correlational design was employed.

Method: A total of 239 (140 men, 99 women) intercollegiate team-sport athletes (M age = 20.50 years, $SD = 1.99$) completed a measure of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns in sport. Athletes also completed self-report measures that asked them to indicate the extent to which they typically responded with self-compassion, optimism, pessimism, and rumination following poor personal performances in sport.

Results: Standardized regression coefficients from hierarchical regression analyses indicated that perfectionistic concerns was negatively associated with self-compassion and optimism, and positively associated with pessimism and rumination (all $ps < 0.001$), whereas perfectionistic strivings was positively associated with self-compassion and optimism, and negatively associated with pessimism (all $ps < 0.01$).

Conclusions: Findings illustrate important links between perfectionistic strivings, perfectionistic concerns, and athletes' cognitive reactions to personal failure in competitive sport. Results also support the benefits of assessing athletes' psychological perfectionistic reactivity (Flett & Hewitt, 2016) in the context of poor personal performances in sport.

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In a well-publicized sporting-goods commercial that aired on North American TV in the late 1990s, Michael Jordan—the five-time winner of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Most Valuable Player (MVP) award—was heard saying, “I’ve missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. Twenty six times I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot, and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.” Implicit within Jordan's words are two important lessons for athletes pursuing sporting excellence. First, personal failure, substandard performance, and/or personal mistakes are

inherent parts of the sporting experience even for the most elite performers. Second, the successful journey undertaken by many elite performers in sport is founded upon their ability to respond in a constructive manner when faced with adversity (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).

Although the criteria for what constitutes a poor performance or failure in sport will almost certainly vary across individuals, it is important for researchers and sport practitioners to identify potential reasons why some athletes react to failure with responses that reflect typically adaptive or healthy forms of psychological, affective, and behavioural adjustment (e.g., confidence, hope, and task engagement) while others react to failure with seemingly maladaptive or unhealthy forms of maladjustment (e.g., pessimism, dejection, and task avoidance). Research indicates that insight into how and why athletes react differently to failure in sport can be

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obtained by assessing athletes' perfectionistic dispositions (see Flett & Hewitt, 2016; Lizmore, Dunn, & Causgrove Dunn, 2016).

At a general level, perfectionism can be conceptualized as a multidimensional personality characteristic that is comprised of two higher-order dimensions: *perfectionistic strivings* and *perfectionistic concerns* (see Hill, 2016; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). In the context of sport, Stoeber (2011) defined perfectionistic strivings as “those aspects of perfectionism associated with striving for perfection and setting exceedingly high standards of performance” and perfectionistic concerns as “those aspects [of perfectionism] associated with concerns over making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation by others, feelings of discrepancy between one's expectations and performance, and negative reactions to imperfection” (p. 129). Differentiating between the two dimensions is important because perfectionistic concerns are typically linked to maladaptive cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses/outcomes in sport, whereas perfectionistic strivings are more likely to be associated with adaptive responses/outcomes in sport, particularly when the overlap with perfectionistic concerns is controlled (see Gotwals, Stoeber, Dunn, & Stoll, 2012; Jowett, Mallinson, & Hill, 2016).

Flett and Hewitt (2016) recently suggested that a greater understanding of perfectionism, and the degree to which its constituent dimensions are linked to adaptive or maladaptive responses/outcomes in sport, is likely to be achieved when researchers give consideration to the situational context in which athletes' behaviours occur. More specifically, Flett and Hewitt argued that whether perfectionism is adaptive or maladaptive should not only be determined by a person's level of perfectionistic strivings and/or perfectionistic concerns, but also by the manner in which a person reacts to unfavourable or distressing situational circumstances. Building upon this idea, Flett and Hewitt introduced the concept of *perfectionistic reactivity*—defined as a person's “characteristic style of responding to adversity that includes both psychological and physiological reactivity” (p. 301)—and proposed that a better understanding of perfectionism could be attained if an individual's perfectionistic tendencies are considered with respect to how a person “reacts and responds to those situations and contexts that are clearly discrepant to his or her goals and ambitions” (p. 299).

Although Flett and Hewitt (2016) primarily presented the concept of perfectionistic reactivity within a person-oriented framework of perfectionism that focusses upon the reactions of *perfectionists*, the concept of perfectionistic reactivity can also be applied within a variable-oriented framework (see Flett & Hewitt, 2016, p. 308) where relationships between the higher-order dimensions of perfectionism (i.e., perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns) and cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses may be examined in situations that threaten athletes' goals. In other words, if achieving high performance standards is a central feature of perfectionistic strivings and the desire to avoid mistakes and negative social evaluation are central features of perfectionistic concerns, situations where athletes experience personal failure or commit mistakes in competition would likely provide conditions that are antithetical to the goals and ambitions of performers who have high—as opposed to low—perfectionistic strivings and/or perfectionistic concerns. The general objective of the current study was to explore the concept of perfectionistic reactivity within a variable-oriented framework of perfectionism and examine relationships between perfectionistic strivings, perfectionistic concerns, and athletes' cognitive reactions to poor personal performance in competition.

A number of variable-oriented studies have investigated relationships between facets (i.e., sub-dimensions) of perfectionistic

strivings/concerns and athletes' reactions to personal failure/mistakes in competition. This body of research has typically shown that higher scores on scales/subscales representing perfectionistic concerns are associated with indicators of maladjustment including heightened anger reactivity (Dunn, Gotwals, Causgrove Dunn, & Syrotuik, 2006), an inability to forget about mistakes and heightened disappointment (Frost & Henderson, 1991), heightened fear of failure (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009), and a heightened tendency to perceive threat and experience negative affect (Crocker, Gaudreau, Mosewich, & Kljajic, 2014). Person-oriented studies—where groups or clusters of unhealthy/maladaptive perfectionists have been identified on the basis of scores reflecting high perfectionistic strivings and high perfectionistic concerns—reveal that unhealthy/maladaptive perfectionists have a tendency to employ avoidance coping strategies (see Dunn, Causgrove Dunn, Gamache, & Holt, 2014) and to experience heightened anger/dejection and lower confidence/optimism following personal failure in competition (Lizmore et al., 2016).

In contrast to the relatively clear and consistent pattern of relationships that exist between heightened perfectionistic concerns and indicators of cognitive, affective, and behavioural maladjustment following personal failure in sport, relationships between athletes' perfectionistic strivings and responses to failure in competition are less clear. For example, scales/subscales that reflect aspects of perfectionistic strivings in sport have been positively correlated with indicators of psycho-emotional maladjustment—including heightened anger reactivity (Dunn et al., 2006), heightened fear of failure (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009), and heightened anger/dejection (Lizmore et al., 2016)—and positively correlated with indicators of psycho-emotional adjustment—including heightened confidence/optimism (Lizmore et al., 2016), heightened positive affect, and stronger perceptions of goal progress (Crocker et al., 2014). Given the mixed findings regarding the relationships between perfectionistic strivings and athletes' reactions to personal failure/mistakes in competition, there is a clear need to examine perfectionistic strivings in the context of athletes' perfectionistic reactivity. Addressing this issue would enable researchers to better understand if, how, and when perfectionistic strivings might play a role in the perfectionistic reactivity of athletes following personal failure or mistakes in competition.

The specific purpose of this study was to determine if perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns differentially predicted the dispositional tendency of athletes to respond to poor personal performances in competition with self-compassion, optimism, pessimism, and rumination. The decision to focus on cognitive reactions to failure follows the position of Flett and Hewitt (2014) who have previously noted that “perfectionism has a very salient cognitive element” (p. 401). Self-compassion, optimism, pessimism, and rumination were selected because all four variables can be unambiguously classified as indicators of either psychological adjustment (i.e., self-compassion and optimism) or psychological maladjustment (i.e., pessimism and rumination) in sport (see Gotwals et al., 2012, for a related discussion) and because all four variables appear to be relevant cognitive indicators of perfectionistic reactivity (see Flett & Hewitt, 2016, p. 309). Including indicators of both cognitive adjustment and maladjustment was considered to be an essential part of this study because while perfectionistic reactivity can be discussed in terms of negative responses, Flett and Hewitt (2016) noted that it is also important to discuss or assess “perfectionistic reactivity in terms of a lack of positive responses” (p. 308). Thus, a lack of self-compassionate thoughts or optimistic thinking following personal failure in sport may provide insight into perfectionistic reactivity in the same way that heightened pessimism or rumination might achieve.

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