



Original research

What doesn't kill me. . . : Adversity-related experiences are vital in the development of superior Olympic performance



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Recent research suggests that experiencing some adversity can have beneficial outcomes for human growth and development. The purpose of this paper was to explore the adversities that the world's best athletes encounter and the perceived role that these experiences play in their psychological and performance development.

Design: A qualitative design was employed because detailed information of rich quality was required to better understand adversity-related experiences in the world's best athletes.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Olympic gold medalists from a variety of sports. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

Results: The findings indicate that the participants encountered a range of sport- and non-sport adversities that they considered were essential for winning their gold medals, including repeated non-selection, significant sporting failure, serious injury, political unrest, and the death of a family member. The participants described the role that these experiences played in their psychological and performance development, specifically focusing on their resultant trauma, motivation, and learning.

Conclusions: Adversity-related experiences were deemed to be vital in the psychological and performance development of Olympic champions. In the future, researchers should conduct more in-depth comparative studies of Olympic athletes' adversity- and growth-related experiences, and draw on existing and alternative theoretical explanations of the growth–performance relationship. For professional practitioners, adversity-related experiences offer potential developmental opportunities if they are carefully and purposely harnessed.

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1. Introduction

The ability to positively adapt to adversity is of central importance for optimal sport performance [1,2]. Positive adaptation has typically been investigated in the context of negative life events [3], and traditionally there has been a tendency to assume that such adversities impede growth and development [4]. However, Seery [5] argued that people with a history of some lifetime adversity report better mental health and well-being than those with no history of adversity. Specifically, some lifetime adversity predicted relatively lower global distress, lower self-rated functional impairment, fewer posttraumatic stress symptoms, and higher life satisfaction over time [6]. Seery suggested that facing difficulties in one's life may contribute to a greater subsequent propensity for

positive adaptation via a variety of potential mechanisms including creating a sense of mastery over past adversity, fostering perceived control and belief in managing successfully, and establishing effective social support networks. Hence, this work indicates that, in moderation, the experience of some adversity can have beneficial outcomes [5].

Across the psychology literature various terms have been used to describe the positive changes that can result from adverse experiences including perceived benefits [7], stress-related growth [8], posttraumatic growth (PTG) [9], thriving [10], positive adaptation [11], and adversarial growth [12]. One of the most popular areas of inquiry is the topic of PTG where researchers have formulated a number of theoretical models [13,14]. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun [13,15], the process of PTG is initiated by the occurrence of a major life crisis that severely challenges an individual's understanding of the world and his or her place in it. Subsequently, the individual strives to rebuild his or her views of the world and of the future using strategies such as cognitive processing,

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self-disclosure, social support, and schema change. These strategies together with the sociocultural context of the growth process influence the development of PTG in five main domains: appreciation of life, relationships, personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, and spirituality.

Adversity-related growth has only begun to be recognized and explicitly researched in a sport context over the past few years [16–18]. In their opinion article, Collins and MacNamara [19] speculated that “talent needs trauma” (p. 907) and argued that experiencing a variety of challenges during an athletic career can facilitate high-level performance. Research findings have revealed that sport performers’ attempts to work through negative events can lead them to perceive growth in the form of a new life philosophy, self-changes, and interpersonal changes [16], and that performers’ experiences of adversity can initiate a process of questioning their identities and searching for meaning in their experiences [17]. In their study of Olympic champions, Fletcher and Sarkar [1] reported that experiencing adversity was important in the development of optimal sport performance:

Exposure to stressors was an essential feature of the stress-resilience-performance relationship in Olympic champions. Indeed, most of the participants argued that if they had not experienced certain types of stressors at specific times, including highly demanding adversities . . . they would not have won their gold medals. (p. 672)

Despite these observations and the recognition that experiencing adversity can have beneficial outcomes for human growth, little is known about the adversities that the world’s best athletes encounter and the perceived role that these experiences play in their psychological and performance development. We investigated these issues by conducting follow-up interviews with a subsample of the Olympic champions who originally participated in Fletcher and Sarkar’s [1] study.

2. Method

The sample comprised of 10 Olympic champions (6 male and 4 female) who had collectively won 11 Olympic gold medals spanning four decades. The age of the participants ranged from 33 to 70 years ($M=47.60$, $SD=12.06$) and a range of individual and team sports were represented: athletics, curling, cycling, field hockey, figure skating, modern pentathlon, rowing, and sailing. The participants represented four countries: five were from England, two were from Scotland, two were from Ireland, and one was from New Zealand.

Following institutional ethical approval, the 12 participants of Fletcher and Sarkar’s [1] study were contacted by email and invited to participate in a follow-up interview. The 10 Olympic champions who were willing to be interviewed were re-contacted to arrange a mutually convenient time and location to meet. All of the participants provided informed consent prior to the start of data collection. Face-to-face interviews were conducted and a semi-structured interview guide was developed to facilitate discussions about participants’ adversity-related experiences that occurred during their development and prior to their gold medal victory. All of the interviews involved asking open-ended questions, such as “can you describe to me any significant events during your sporting career?” and “could you describe the effect this situation had on you as an athlete?” Although the participants were guided through an identical set of questions, the order of questioning varied with the flow of the conversation depending on the direction taken by the participant. This procedural flexibility enhanced the fluency of the interview and richness of the information gleaned, while still retaining the systematic

nature of data collection between the participants. The interviews lasted between 34 and 47 minutes, and the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, yielding 110 pages of single spaced text.

The transcripts were analyzed using the inductive thematic analysis procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke [20]. First, to become familiar with the data, the transcripts were read and reread, and brief notes were recorded to create some preliminary ideas for the next phase of the analysis. Second, codes of interest were generated by extracting and collating pertinent excerpts of the data. Third, all of the codes were organized into potential themes that reflected the content and meaning of the data. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined in relation to the generated codes and the entire data set. Fifth, the themes were labeled and defined by attempting to capture the essence of the data it contained. Sixth, compelling extracts were selected to relate the analysis back to the research question. To establish methodological rigor, a number of practices were employed and these were similar to those adopted by Fletcher and Sarkar [1]. Specifically, this involved using a distinctive sample, employing appropriate data collection and analysis procedures, writing a field log and self-reflective memos throughout the research process about potential subjective biases, and using rich quotations from the participants in the hope of allowing complex experiences to vividly emerge [21].

3. Results

The results derived from the data collection and analysis procedures represent the collated interview responses from all of the participants pertaining to their adversity-related experiences. The Olympic champions encountered a range of adversities that they considered were essential for winning their gold medals, including repeated non-selection, significant sporting failure, serious injury, political unrest, and the death of a family member. The participants described the role that these experiences played in their psychological and performance development, specifically focusing on their resultant trauma, motivation, and learning. Drawing directly from the experiences of the participants, these incidents and aspects of growth are described forthwith.

The most common sporting adversity identified by the participants was repeated non-selection. The Olympic gold medalists recalled how continually failing to be selected for international competitions initially led to intense feelings of frustration, but subsequently fostered greater effort and desire, as the following quote illustrates:

I went to trials for the senior team in 1980, 1981, 1982, and 1983 and missed out every time . . . I can remember being pretty furious missing out one or two times when I thought I deserved to be in . . . But when I did get the opportunity, I was elevated into the [rowing] crew that had huge potential [and] I tried my best. That’s all you can do really. You just work hard . . . There was probably a hell of pressure there, but it was my first time I’d been in a crew like this . . . so everything was just an opportunity to be taken. If something wasn’t right, you’d work hard and listen . . . these guys had won world titles so it was my job to listen and to learn.

The majority of the participants had encountered at least one significant perceived sporting failure during their athletic career before their gold medal victory. Examples of this sporting failure included disappointment in a major championship, underperformance at a previous Olympic Games, or losing in an early round in an Olympics that they ultimately succeeded in. One participant described her team’s highly focused reflection and increased effort after failing at a major championship just a couple of months prior to winning gold:

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