



A longitudinal examination of elite youth soccer players: The role of passion and basic need satisfaction in athletes' optimal functioning

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Grounded in the basic psychological needs theory (BPNT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and dualistic model of passion (DMP; Vallerand et al., 2003), the aim of the present study was to examine within-person variations in athletes' optimal functioning (i.e., positive and negative affect, athletic satisfaction, and quality of preparation and performance) as a function of passion types and need satisfaction over the course of three competitive seasons.

Method: Elite youth soccer players (n = 91) completed multi-section questionnaires on up to five occasions over the course of three competitive seasons.

Results: Results of Hierarchical Linear Modeling analyses showed that between-person variations in harmonious passion (HP) were positively related to optimal functioning, whereas it was only partially the case with obsessive passion (OP). Moreover, within-person variations in the satisfaction of autonomy, relatedness, and competence were also associated with increases in athletes' psychological well-being (i.e., positive and negative affect, and athletic satisfaction). Additionally, results from a multilevel indirect effects model revealed that HP and increases in competence were both positively related to increases in the quality of athletes' preparation, which in turn led to increases in performance, as rated by coaches, over the span of three competitive seasons.

Conclusions: Overall, the results offer support for the effects of needs and passion on optimal functioning and are discussed in line with their implications for athletes in elite youth sports settings.

1. Introduction

The journey toward becoming a professional athlete requires focus, dedication, and long-term engagement. In order to reach their quest of becoming a professional soccer player, most athletes prepare, practice, and play every day in the youth ranks of a professional team, with the hope of one day playing for the first team. Thus, players have to train rigorously over the course of several years and improve their performance in order to eventually reach their desired goal of becoming professional athletes. In addition to performance, psychological well-being is a key component of the optimal functioning of youth athletes. However, both performance and psychological well-being can fluctuate over time. Over the years of progressing through the youth ranks, athletes are thus very likely to experience ups and downs in terms of both performance and psychological well-being.

1.1. Self-determination theory and basic psychological needs

As part of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan

& Deci, 2017), the Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) posits that three fundamental psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, relatedness, and competence) are essential for the optimal functioning and positive development of all humans at any given point in time. Autonomy is a sense of volition and personal initiative people experience regarding their choices and decisions (DeCharms, 1968). Relatedness refers to a desire to feel connected to significant others and experience belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Finally, competence represents a desire to interact effectively and to assert a sense of mastery within ones' environment (White, 1959). The satisfaction of the three basic needs has been associated with a range of positive outcomes related to psychological well-being such as positive and negative affect (Questaed & Duda, 2010), and life satisfaction (Tay & Diener, 2011), as well as behavioral outcomes such as deliberate practice (Verner-Filion, Vallerand, Amiot, & Mocanu, 2017), and performance (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). More specifically, competence has been shown to be the key need to predict behavioral markers of effort and performance in both the exercise (Edmunds, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2006) and competitive sports (Halvari, Ulstad, Bagoien, & Skjesol, 2009) domains.

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SDT also proposes that many situational and environmental factors can influence the satisfaction of all three basic psychological needs. Over the course of athletes' involvement in academy settings, one's sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be affected by various factors, such as the appointment of a new coach, new teammates, being promoted to another team, one's own personal development, and even the simple passage of time. However, most of the existing research regarding need satisfaction in sport used either cross-sectional or longitudinal designs to study its role at between-person level. To this day, only a handful of papers in the sport and exercise psychology literature have looked at the effects of within-person differences in need satisfaction on changes in the optimal functioning of athletes over time (e.g., Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2012; Gagné, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2003; Reinboth & Duda, 2006). As proposed by Adie, Duda, and Ntoumanis (2008), assessing longitudinal patterns of change among athletic outcomes in relation with changes in need satisfaction is key to provide a better understanding of the fluctuations in athletes' optimal functioning over time.

Gagné et al. (2003) were the first to investigate this issue in the sport and exercise domains. In a study using a daily diary methodology with gymnasts, Gagné and colleagues found that within-person variations in need satisfaction accounted for variations on athletes' well-being on a daily basis. Similar findings were obtained in recent research with youth soccer players (Adie et al., 2012; Cheval, Chalabaev, Quested, Courvoisier, & Sarrazin, 2017), dancers (Quested, Duda, Ntoumanis, & Maxwell, 2013), and athletes from various other sports (Reinboth & Duda, 2006; Stenling, Lindwall, & Hassmén, 2015). To this day, research looking at within-person variations in need satisfaction has predominantly looked at athletes' psychological well-being. To the best of our knowledge, only one published study has looked at the influence of within-person variations of need satisfaction the other key aspect of optimal functioning, namely performance-related outcomes. In a study with recreational basketball players, Sheldon, Zhaoyang, and Williams (2013) found no significant relation between within-person variations in need satisfaction on performance. However, this study focused solely on recreational sports with one performance indicator (i.e., shots taken and shooting percentage during games). Performance, especially in competitive team sports, is a complex and multifaceted variable, encompassing aspects, such as the quality of one's technical, tactical, physical and mental attributes (Hughes & Bartlett, 2002; Morris, 2000). Yet, no research has investigated at the influence of within-person variations in need satisfaction on competitive sports performance using an indicator assessing all of the aforementioned facets, while also investigating the role of needs in changes in psychological well-being.

In addition to need satisfaction, we propose that passion plays a key role in process of the development and attainment of optimal functioning in athletes (Vallerand et al., 2008; Verner-Filion et al., 2017). Indeed, passion is an internalized regulation of a need-satisfying activity (Lalonde et al., 2017). As such, passion represents an important motivational force that helps players maintain focus and overcome the obstacles they inevitably face in the process of reaching the professional ranks.

1.2. The dualistic model of passion

According to the Dualistic Model of Passion (DMP; Vallerand, 2015; Vallerand et al., 2003), passion is defined as a strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that is important, liked (and even loved), and in which a significant amount of time and energy is invested. Passion is thus proposed to be a key contributing factor to the optimal functioning of athletes. Passionate athletes who reach high levels of performance would be expected to also experience higher levels of psychological well-being. Unfortunately, it is not always the case. For some athletes, passion indeed leads to high levels of performance, but at the cost of

their psychological well-being (Vallerand et al., 2008, 2007; Verner-Filion et al., 2017). This is because the DMP posits the existence of two types of passion (i.e., *Harmonious Passion* – HP – and *Obsessive Passion* – OP) that can be distinguished in terms of how the passionate activity is regulated and integrated with other life domains and how they affect outcomes. With HP, the activity occupies a significant, but not overpowering, space in one's identity and remains under the control of the individual as it is in harmony with other important life aspects. This is because, with HP, the process of internalization of the activity in the self occurs in an autonomous fashion (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, individuals with HP freely accept and engage in their passionate activity without any contingency attached to it (Mageau, Carpentier, & Vallerand, 2011).

In contrast, with OP, individuals face an uncontrollable urge to partake in the activity they love and find enjoyable, as activity engagement is beyond their control. Since everything gravitates around the passionate activity, OP is associated with a rigid persistence, even when activity engagement is detrimental to other goals or activities in the person's life (Vallerand et al., 2003). This is because, with OP, the process of internalization of the activity in the self occurs in a controlled way (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as it originates from intra- and/or inter-personal pressures and in addition to some sense of enjoyment can also provide extrinsic benefits such as a boost of self-esteem (Mageau et al., 2011).

Passion represents a major motivational force providing people with the energy for athletes to engage and persevere in demanding behaviors and activities that are essential to reach high levels of performance. The DMP thus posits that passion should influence performance indirectly through such behavior. Past research has shown that deliberate practice, defined as a highly structured activity motivated by the explicit aim of improvement, is a key mediating variable in the relation between passion and performance (Bonneville-Roussy, Lavigne, & Vallerand, 2011; Vallerand et al., 2007, 2008). In line with the construct of deliberate practice (Ericsson & Charness, 1994), the quality of athletes' preparation is important for performance. In addition to the quantity of hours spent training on deliberately enhancing their skills, maintaining a healthy lifestyle also matters for performance. The quality of athletes' preparation thus refers to efforts athletes put toward being in the best form possible (i.e., eating and sleeping habits, seriousness, concentration, and effort displayed daily, etc.). Coaches in professional academies are in a prime position to evaluate the quality of athletes' preparation as they interact with the athletes on a daily basis.

Moreover, passion can go beyond deliberate practice and performance to facilitate other outcomes, such as psychological well-being. In what they called "the two roads to performance", Vallerand et al. (2007, 2008) showed that, in addition to its positive relation with deliberate practice and performance, HP is also associated with higher levels of psychological well-being. In contrast, performance comes at the cost of psychological well-being with OP. This is because HP is characterized by an autonomous (Curran, Appleton, Hill, & Hall, 2011; Mageau et al., 2009; Vallerand et al., 2006), open (Hodgins & Knee, 2002), and mindful (St-Louis, Verner-Filion, Bergeron, & Vallerand, 2018) engagement in the activity that is conducive to positive experiences (e.g., sustained engagement, concentration, positive affect, etc.; Vallerand, 2015) without any contingencies. Consequently, HP allows athletes to experience high levels of both performance and psychological well-being. In contrast, OP is characterized by a controlled (Vallerand et al., 2006), ego-invested (Hodgins & Knee, 2002) and contingent (Mageau et al., 2011) engagement in the activity that one loves that can lead to increased effort (Bélanger, Lafrenière, Vallerand, & Kruglanski, 2013a), albeit at the cost of psychological well-being. Overall, research has shown that HP is associated with more adaptive cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes compared to OP (see Curran, Hill, Appleton, Vallerand, & Standage, 2015; Vallerand, 2015, for reviews).

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