



The experience of losing: Qualitative study of elite lacrosse athletes and team performance at a world championship

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To examine the motivational experiences and psychological responses of members of an under-performing national lacrosse team at their four most important games (all losses) at a world championship tournament.

Design: Structural (deductive) qualitative methods supported by reversal theory.

Method: Volunteer participants, from a national men's lacrosse team, took part in semi-structured post-game interviews.

Results: Team performance problems: a late change of warm-up location; the impact of the preliminary ceremonies and national anthems; emotional reactions to substitution provoked negative psychological responses in some participants. Analysis suggested that these negative responses were the result of inappropriate metamotivational states, reversals and emotions that were not conducive to participants' preferred performance states. The study also identified participants' motivational and emotional responses to losing which were related to inadequate performance rather than losing itself.

Conclusions: The findings direct attention to possible causal factors for motivational reversals, allowing subsequent studies to start with a number of known focus areas. The implications of the findings for reversal theory-based sport psychology consulting were examined.

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While athletes generally strive for and enjoy improved performances, even the most successful athletes have first-hand experience of losing in competitions and most athletes have to learn to deal with losing as they progress through the different performance levels towards eventually achieving elite athlete status (Lavallee, Thatcher, & Jones, 2004).

Psychology databases (e.g., EBSCOhost Research Databases) and sport psychology journal searches reveal that sport psychology research on elite athletes has tended to concentrate on successful athletes and winning performances at the expense of studying unsuccessful athletes and losing performances. (e.g., Chantal, Guay, Dobрева-Martinova, & Vallerand, 1996; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002; Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Males, Kerr, & Gerkovich, 1998; Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004). There are several likely reasons why this has occurred, including: (a) researchers wanted to acquire knowledge of successful athletes' psychological experience so that it could be applied to enhance performance in other athletes and teams

(e.g., Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007); (b) elite-level athlete participants in research investigations may have been less willing to complete questionnaires or engage in interviews after losing than after winning performances; (c) investigating successful elite athletes and teams may have been a more attractive proposition for researchers than investigating unsuccessful performance and losing teams. In general, it appears that there have only been a few studies in the extant sport psychology research literature which have investigated less successful or losing elite athletes and teams and the psychological changes that accompany under-performance and losing (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbury, & Peterson, 1999; Males, Kerr, Thatcher, & Bellew, 2006).

In the early days of published sport psychology research, from 1985 until the mid 1990s, the vast majority of research studies were quantitative studies (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001; Culver, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2003). Since that time, following calls for more diversity and the use of qualitative methods in sport psychology research (Biddle et al., 2001; Dale, 1996; Strean, 1998), the numbers of published qualitative studies have been increasing. In line with this trend, qualitative methods were adopted in the present study underpinned by reversal theory's conceptual framework (Apter, 2001).

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Reversal theory includes individual and/or inter-personal factors as central in an athlete's experience of motivation and emotion. It can also accommodate other relevant team performance factors such as the role of personality, leadership, and team motivation. The study was not intended as a test of reversal theory, but the findings were examined through the lens of reversal theory which was used to help explain and understand the psychological processes involved. Previous qualitative research studies of athletes' psychological experiences have used reversal theory in a similar manner (e.g., Hudson & Walker, 2002; Males et al., 1998; Thatcher, Kerr, Amies, & Day, 2007). The combination of qualitative methods with reversal theory allowed the detail and depth of information documented from interviews to be supported by the conceptual framework of an established theory. This was thought to be a useful strategy for advancing sport psychology knowledge on this topic and gaining an improved understanding of how and why an athlete's motivation and emotion in the intensity of elite competition may change with losing games.

A brief explanation of reversal theory

Reversal theory postulates that individuals reverse between pairs of metamotivational states on a relatively frequent basis. These are the *telic*–*paratelic* (serious–playful), *negativistic*–*conformist* (rebellious–compliant), *mastery*–*sympathy* (competitive–cooperative), and *autic*–*alloic* (egoistic–altruistic) states. One state in each pair of states is operative at any one time giving rise to changing sequences of state combinations over time. There are three inducing agents that may provoke reversals: *contingency* (environmental events or particular settings); *frustration* (when an athlete's needs in a particular state are not being met); and *satiation* (the longer an athlete remains in one state, the more likely that a reversal to its opposite state occurs). Different combinations of metamotivational states result in the possible experience of 16 primary emotions. The *somatic emotions* are based on an individual's experience of bodily arousal and the *transactional emotions* on the perceived outcome (gain or loss) of transactions with other people or objects. As shown in Table 1, for both somatic and transactional emotion categories, there are four pleasant and four unpleasant emotions arising from separate combinations of somatic and transactional metamotivational states (e.g., excitement results from a combination of paratelic and conformist states). This conceptual arrangement provides a balanced, broad, and structured pattern of emotional experience.

The present study

The aim of the present study was to apply reversal theory to an examination of the psychological responses and emotional experiences among members of an under-performing national lacrosse team at a world championship tournament. Within this

examination the participants' motivational and emotional responses to losing games were of particular interest. Therefore, this examination concentrated on the team's four most important games at the tournament which were all losses.

The next sections set out the details of the participants, events during the tournament, and the pragmatic qualitative research methodology in a naturalistic research environment adopted for the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were four volunteer elite male lacrosse players who were members of a national team playing in a world lacrosse championship tournament. The participants were a valuable group of different playing positions and experience at international level. The four were: a 30-year-old defender, with eight years international experience; a 28 year-old attacker, who had two years international experience; a 27-year-old "shortstick" midfielder, with four years international experience; a 22-year-old "longstick" midfield player and vice-captain of the team, with six years international experience. Three participants were playing in their first world lacrosse championship tournament, but the vice-captain was playing in his second. The participants completed multiple semi-structured post-game interviews. One player was dropped for game 2 by the head coach and did not participate and another was too injured to play in game 4, reducing the number from 16 to 14 interviews and units of analysis. Two of the four participants were regular members of the starting team and two were reserves who played in games as part of international lacrosse's policy of "rolling" substitution. In international lacrosse, players in the different team units (attackers, midfield players (midis) and defenders) rotate on and off the pitch as the team either attacks or defends, in addition to rotating player substitutions within each unit.

Background and context

The game of lacrosse is a vigorous, fast paced, full contact team sport. Teams consist of nine out-field players (three attack, three midfield (midis), three defence) and a goal-keeper. A small, solid rubber ball is scooped up, carried, and passed between members of the same team using the net that forms the top part of a lacrosse stick. Goals are scored when the ball is projected with the stick past the goal-keeper and into the goal. Lacrosse, although something of a minor sport, has grown rapidly in recent years, with the 2006 men's world lacrosse championship contested by 21 national teams. Prior to the world championships in question, the lacrosse team's management and players had worked hard to improve the team's performance, with increased player commitment and coaching and some basic sport science (mainly physiology) support. Part of the team's enhanced preparation included a playing tour to another country strong in lacrosse earlier in the year of the world championships. Closer to the tournament, the team easily won two warm-up games. These warm-up games played a role in final squad selection for the world championships. The team had never achieved higher than fourth place at the world championships, but the athlete interviews revealed that they were confident that they could achieve second place on this occasion. Pre-tournament observation by the second author, who would later conduct the post-game interviews, indicated that the lacrosse coaches were generally friendly, well organised, committed, and professional in outlook. There appeared to be an absence of disputes or open conflict among players or between players and coaches.

Table 1

Somatic and transactional state combinations and the resulting 16 primary emotions.

State combination	Pleasant	Unpleasant
<i>Somatic emotions</i>		
Telic–conformity	Relaxation	Anxiety
Telic–negativism	Placidity	Anger
Paratelic–conformity	Excitement	Boredom
Paratelic–negativism	Provocativeness	Sullenness
<i>Transactional emotions</i>		
Autic–mastery	Pride	Humiliation
Autic–sympathy	Gratitude	Resentment
Alloic–mastery	Modesty	Shame
Alloic–sympathy	Virtue	Guilt

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