



# High-level athletes' perceptions of success in returning to sport following injury

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** For many injured athletes, a safe and successful return to sport following injury is the ultimate aim of injury recovery. Little consensus exists however, regarding the meaning of a “successful” return to sport following injury recovery [Evans, L., Mitchell, I., & Jones, S. (2006). Psychological responses to sport injury: a review of current research. In S. Hanton, & S. D. Mellalieu (Eds.), *Literature reviews in sport psychology* (pp. 289–319). New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers]. The purpose of this investigation was to obtain greater insight into this issue by examining high-level athletes' perceptions of a successful return to play following injury.

**Method:** Using a longitudinal design, 12 elite athletes from Australia and Canada were interviewed on a total of 40 occasions over a six–eight month period.

**Results:** Perceptions of success centered on (but were not limited to): a return to pre-injury levels and attaining pre-injury goals, staying on the “right” path, creating realistic expectations of post-injury performance, and remaining uninjured.

**Conclusions:** Consistent with previous research [Podlog, L., & Eklund, R. C. (2007a). Professional coaches perspectives on the return to sport following serious injury. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 1, 44–68], findings from this investigation highlight the importance of self-determination theory (SDT) constructs – namely, competence, autonomy and relatedness – in relation to athlete perceptions of a successful return to sport from injury. Such findings support the value of an SDT perspective in guiding future research and intervention efforts aimed at facilitating successful return from injury.

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## Introduction

Over the past three decades, research on the psychology of sport injury has revealed that psychosocial factors play a significant role in the onset, rehabilitation and return to sport following injury recovery (Brewer, 2007). Much empirical attention has been devoted to an examination of the psychosocial variables influencing injury occurrence and rehabilitation. Comparatively little research, however, has examined the psychosocial processes and issues among athletes returning to full activity. Initial investigations examining this transitional period suggest that anxieties and concerns regarding re-injury, skill retention levels, physical fitness, and meeting coach/teammate expectations may be prevalent during the re-entry period (Podlog & Eklund, 2007a).

Preliminary findings regarding the return to sport transition are consistent with current conceptual models viewing the injury process as a stressful event. One model that has received widespread support in the literature is Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, and Morrey's (1998) integrated model of response to sport injury. Grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory of stress and coping, a key model premise is that individual differences in response to injury are the consequence of differing appraisals or perceptions of the injury. In this process, it is posited that cognitive appraisals or perceptions of the injury event influence athletes' emotional and behavioural responses to injury as well as their physical and psychosocial recovery outcomes. Moreover, injury appraisals are thought to be moderated by a variety of personal (e.g., injury characteristics, personality, self-perceptions, age) and situational (e.g., type of sport, social support, rehabilitation environment) factors.

Empirical research largely supports the contention that personal and situational factors affect athletes' cognitive appraisals which in turn influence emotional and behavioural responses to injury

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(Brewer, 2007). Researchers in the sports medicine domain have also examined a number of physical (e.g., joint laxity, instability, muscular strength and endurance) and psychosocial (e.g., re-injury anxiety, confidence in performing sport-specific skills) recovery outcomes identified in the Wiese-Bjornstal et al. (1998) model (Eastlack, Axe, & Snyder-Mackler, 1999; Kvist, Ek, Sporrstedt, & Good, 2005; Webster, Feller, & Lambros, 2007). For example, Kvist et al. (2005) found that re-injury anxiety presented a psychological hindrance for athletes returning to sport following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. Although this and other quantitative investigations address specific factors associated with different recovery outcomes, scant research has focussed on athletes' perceptions of a successful return to sport from injury. That researchers have yet to examine these perceptions is surprising, given that for many athletes a successful return to sport may be the ultimate goal of injury recovery.

As suggested earlier, preliminary findings regarding athlete appraisals and experiences in returning to sport indicate that this transition period may be permeated by a range of physical, psychological and social stressors. For instance, re-injury anxiety, a conspicuous concern among some athletes may lead to a number of physiological and psychological responses that ultimately increase the likelihood of actual re-injury (Walker, Thatcher, Lavallee, & Golby, 2004; Williams & Andersen, 1998). Athletes may also have concerns about achieving or surpassing pre-injury fitness and performance standards, athletic identity, meeting coach and teammate performance expectations and pressures to compete in specific competitions (Andersen, 2001). Additionally, once athletes begin competing they may experience heightened competitive anxiety, struggle to regain technical skills and abilities and experience declines in confidence (Bianco, Malo, & Orlick, 1999; Johnston & Carroll, 1998).

Podlog and Eklund (2007b) suggested that the aforementioned transitional issues were related to athlete perceptions and concerns about competence, autonomy and relatedness (i.e., affiliation), constructs highlighted in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2007). For instance, concerns about reaching pre-injury proficiency levels and achieving future goals, anxieties about physical competency (e.g., re-injury), and doubts about meeting others' performance expectations suggest that competence related concerns may be evident as athletes return to sport following injury rehabilitation. Relatedness issues including the provision and receipt of effective social support and social identity concerns (e.g., "If I'm not competing am I still an athlete?") may also be apparent among returning athletes (Podlog & Eklund, 2006). Moreover, the finding that athletes may receive pressure to return to sport and that they typically value freedom from such pressure (Bianco et al., 1999; Taylor, Stone, Mullin, Ellenbecker, & Walgenbach, 2003) suggests that autonomy issues may be apparent among returning athletes. As a result, given its explicit focus on competence, autonomy and relatedness issues Podlog and Eklund (2007b) argued in favour of a self-determination theoretical (SDT) perspective for understanding the psychosocial processes and factors influencing athletes' return to sport following injury.

#### *Self-determination theory*

SDT focuses on the effects of varying degrees of self-determination on human behaviour, health and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2007). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), the extent to which individuals feel self-determining or volitional in their actions is contingent upon the degree to which the environment satisfies or nourishes their basic needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. Competence is characterized by a sense of ability or proficiency in one's undertakings (Kilpatrick, Hebert, & Jacobsen, 2002).

Autonomy is characterized by an internal locus of causality and the belief that behaviours are personally endorsed or authentic. Finally, relatedness refers to a sense of interconnectedness with others or social integration. Research guided by SDT contentions has demonstrated that environmental supports for competence, autonomy and relatedness yield a range of beneficial performance, well-being and social development consequences across a variety of life domains (e.g., education, interpersonal relationships, and sport) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, when the environment thwarts satisfaction of these basic needs, maladaptive functioning, motivational deficits and ill being (e.g., apathy, alienation, and irresponsibility) may result (Ryan & Deci, 2007).

Initial research indicates that the success of athletes' recovery and return to sport from injury, may in part, be related to the extent to which coaches, rehabilitation specialists and significant others nurture satisfaction of athletes' psychological needs (manuscript under review). In line with Wiese-Bjornstal et al.'s (1998) contentions, it may be that athletes appraise or define the meaning of a successful return to sport in different ways depending upon a range of personal and situational variables. Researchers however, have yet to examine athlete conceptualizations of a successful return from injury. Given, that athletes are ultimately the ones making a return to competitive activity, eliciting their understandings, definitions and beliefs about the meaning of a successful return to sport from injury is of clear significance. Such information can assist in the design and implementation of effective injury interventions by enhancing practitioner knowledge of important areas to address in facilitating perceptions of successful return to sport.

The purpose of the present paper was to explore athlete perceptions and understandings of a successful return to sport following injury. Previously unpublished findings from a qualitative investigation exploring athlete experiences in returning to sport following injury were examined (Podlog & Eklund, 2006). Moreover, given the increasing body of literature suggesting the relevance of SDT in examining the return to sport transition (Podlog & Eklund, 2007b), a second purpose was to examine the extent to which notions of competence, autonomy and relatedness were key aspects of athlete perceptions of a successful return to sport from injury.

#### *Method*

##### *Participants*

Twelve (7 males, 5 females) high-level amateur and semi-professional athletes ranging in age from 18 to 28 years took part in interviews over a 6–8 month period. Participant demographics (available from the first author upon request), indicate that five of the twelve participants competed at an international senior level (e.g., Commonwealth Games, World Championships); two athletes competed at a junior (i.e., 22/23 and under) international level (e.g., Australian or Canadian representative at international competitions); two participants competed at a national/state level; and finally, three participants competed semi-professionally in Western Australia. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of athletes. Athletes in this investigation had made substantial personal investments (e.g., effort, money, identity) to achieve their highest potential level and all participants devoted a significant amount of time training for their sport ( $M = 17.75$  h/week). Finally, none of the participants received high levels of compensation for their sport involvement, and all athletes indicated that making a return to sport following a serious injury was a significant event.

Purposeful sampling was employed in the current investigation to obtain high-level athletes. Participants were approached through researcher contacts at the Western Australian Institute of

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