

**Youth Sports and Personality: An Overview**

**Matt Tiano**

**St. Olaf College**

**Psychology 264B**

**Michael Sadler**

**May 7, 2007**

Sport and physical activity programs can provide an effective vehicle for youth to develop at a personal, social and emotional level (Morris, Sallybanks, Willis, & Makkai, 2004). Such personality traits as perfectionism, anger, and over-competitiveness, however, also have the potential of influencing a young athlete's sense of self-concept (Vallance, Dunn, & Dunn, 2006). Most psychological literature on the topic of youth and personality reflect a social theoretical perspective. Several approaches analyze moral and motivational variables at the social learning level, a step removed from psychological understanding (Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996).

Conventional sport culture suggests that youth sport effectively promotes personality development and "builds character" (Rees & Howell, 1990). As youth sport participation has risen in recent years, sport psychological literature has as well. However, few empirical sources specifically address personality development and youth athletic involvement (Vallance, Dunn, & Dunn, 2006). Because the sport culture continues to change and higher demands are placed upon youth in terms of performance, the general media has latched on to several of these concepts, but often do not have empirical data to support their claims.

#### *Motivation to participate*

Research has suggested that motivation can affect both performance variables as well as levels of participation. However, it is unclear if motivation affects involvement in physical activity or if involvement in these programs influences motivation (Cervello, Moreno, Villodre, & Iglesias, 2006). Cervello et al. (2006) researched a group of secondary school students (792 athletes; 311 non-athletes), who were administered The Learning and Performance Orientations in Physical Education Classes Questionnaire,

which focused on “competitive orientation” and “worries about mistakes.” Results indicated that achievement settings (e.g., evaluating own ability) can influence decisions in regards to participation in extracurricular physical activity. The results, however, also display a stronger correlation between motivational climate and participation. In this case, students were subjected to an educational environment, perhaps limiting the research to an educational perspective. In addition, this data does not reflect motivation to participate in specific activities, but generally speaking, this study supports the claim that in general, adolescents’ motivation influences decision-making in terms of involvement.

Youth are also motivated to participate in sports via external social influences. Participants wish to be part of a team, be seen in a positive social light and also receive parental pressures. Researchers from a motivational standpoint have tended to analyze an athlete’s perceived ability in combination with their ego orientation (Allen, 2003). Maehr (1984), however, suggested that there are other concerns to youth influencing motivation. He argued that “other goals, other intentions, other attractions continually intrude” (171).

Allen aimed at demonstrating the importance of social motivational constructs in youth sport through a research study that included 100 girls from the Midlands region of the U.K. 88% had participated in at least one organized sport for one or more years, and approximately 27% of the girls had participated in three or more sports for at least one year. 7% had not participated in any sport. The subjects were given the social motivational orientations scale for sport (SMOSS) questionnaire, which aimed to emphasize affiliation and social validation as motivation to participate. In addition, subjects were issued the task and ego orientations in sport questionnaire (TEOSQ), which

asked participants to fill in the statement “I feel most successful in sport when...” Last, perceived physical activity and the enjoyment of the activity were taken into account. Results indicated that there were three primary factors that promote youth motivation to participate in sport. First, the youth investigated were interested in developing social relationships and having fun with others. Second, acquiring social validation was pivotal in the decisions of these athletes.

The current literature on youth sport and motivational factors relies on relatively small sample sizes. Furthermore, conclusions from these samples are then applied to a more general population. Current research fails to take situational affects into account (Anderman, 1999), such as friendship quality, group dynamics as well as role model involvement. While motivation certainly falls under the personality umbrella, nowhere mentioned are the underlying personality traits that have the potential of influencing this motivation.

#### *The Five-Factor Model and sport*

Sport psychologists have conducted significant research in regards to athletic performance and the five-factor model of personality. Costa and McCrae’s model utilizes five dimensions in order to provide a broader description of personality (Piedmont, Hill & Blanco, 1999). These five factors (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness) were derived empirically, using trait ratings to analyze personality (1999). According to Costa and McCrae, these traits are relatively stable over time (Digman, 1990). Most importantly, the model serves as a paradigm to predict life outcomes (Piedmont et al, 1999).

Most of the current research on the five-factor model and athletic performance use statistics as the sole determinant of athletic performance. While this strategy does provide some determination of performance, it fails to take into account other factors of performance, such as coachability or “team playerness” (1999). In Piedmont’s study (1999), 79 female soccer players were asked to complete McCrae and Costa’s (1985) bipolar inventory, designed to account for all five dimensions of personality. In addition, the coaches of the athletes were asked to rate their players in terms of intangibles (e.g., coachability). At the conclusion of the season, comparisons were drawn between personality, on-field performance and the coaches’ ratings.

The results of this study display that the dimensions of Neuroticism and Conscientiousness were related to athletic performance. There were positive correlations between Conscientiousness, athletic performance and positive coaches’ ratings. Previous research (Peterson, Weber, & Trousdale, 1990) suggested that athletes were typically dominant (i.e. low Agreeableness), however, the present study encourages a drive for a success, motivational, approach (Piedmont et al, 1999). Secondly, this research data suggests a positive correlation between performance and low Neuroticism. McCrae & Costa (1992) maintained that a low neuroticism score could be related to performing under pressure, tolerating stress and controlling impulsivity, all positive characteristics of a successful athlete. Third, there was little correlation between low extroversion (i.e. introversion) and high performance levels. This idea has been studied in the past. Previous research (Kane, 1964) suggested that extraversion enabled athletes to perform well in front of audiences. In addition, Peterson et al. (1967) concluded that team players

scored significantly higher on this dimension. There was no significant correlation in Piedmont's study.

McCrae & Costa's theory certainly has a place in the sports psychological discussion. This research is able to generalize to team sports (i.e. soccer), but there may be considerable variability of correlations between personality inventory scores and performance. This type of study also lacks consideration for social motivation and fails to acknowledge the integration of social and personality psychology.

#### *Youth sport and antisocial behavior*

A common assumption suggests that youth sports participation combats obstacles facing youth, such as drug use, self-esteem/suicide issues or truancy. Morris et al (2004) define two key goals of youth sports as "reducing boredom in youth" and "decreasing the amount of unsupervised leisure time." In Morris' research study, 175 Australian youth programs were questioned, addressing methods for conducting their programs. Two themes emerged from this case study research. Programs typically strived to meet youth needs, but equally so, aimed to decrease youth antisocial behavior.

However, it is also suggested that these programs alone will not impact directly on antisocial behavior in youth (Morris et al, 2004). Because of this, sport should be used as a vehicle to combat the broader issue of youth and anti-social nature, but caution should be taken when attempting to utilize sport alone to combat a complex issue. From a personality standpoint, the limited psychological literature suggests that sport influences youth in a positive manner, and indirectly, asserts that sport impacts positive personality development.

#### *Sport and emotional well-being*

If sport positively impacts youth and antisocial behavior, this implies that sport would also positively promote emotional well-being. Current and past research supports the claim that exercise participation enhances psychological and emotional well-being (Pelham, Campagna, Ritvo, & Birnie, 1993). Over 4,000 adolescents 16 years of were questioned for “emotional well-being” (Steptoe & Butler, 1996) using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), and findings indicate that sport and exercise were positively correlated with emotional well-being. In addition, participation in athletic activities seemed to decrease behavioral problems.

Donaldson & Ronan (2006) tested this hypothesis as well, utilizing 203 adolescents aged between 11 and 13. The Youth Self-Report (YSR) was used to assess factors in relation to social and emotional development of youth. Second, the Self-Perception Profile for Children was used to judge self-esteem. Third, the Sports Participation and Attitudes Questionnaire was developed for Donaldson & Ronan’s present study to analyze types of sports and reasons for participation. Results indicated that there was a negative relationship between “number of formal sports, length of participation in formal sports, and reduced social and externalizing problems” (2006). Also, the data supports the claim that “perceived athletic competence had a significant negative relationship with the majority of the YSR sub-scales.” In general, participation in athletic programs has a positive effect on youth.

#### *Perfectionism and anger among youth sport participants*

While most empirical literature strives to prove that athletic participation is in fact a positive endeavor, few sources address the potential pitfalls of athletic involvement. A key personality trait, perfectionism, is an important personality trait to examine because a

high level of perfectionism among athletes has been associated with a variety of affective, cognitive, and behavioral developmental issues (Hall, Kerr, & Matthews, 1998).

Perfectionism is especially relevant in the youth athletics discussion because athletes often strive to be perfect, developing an “all or nothing” (Vallance et al, 2006) attitude in terms of performance. It would seem, then, that anger is theoretically related to perfectionism because the extent that goals are not attained, this will encourage an emotional response (Berkowitz & Harmon-Jones, 2004).

Few studies examine the perfectionism-anger relationship, but Vallance et al aim to research this correlation in their study of 229 male youth ice hockey players, who competed at the highest youth level. Each athlete was assessed using the Sport Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Sport-MPS), which measures four dimensions of personality in sport (e.g., “concern over mistakes”). Second, the Trait Anger Scale (TAS) was used to measure anger levels. Third, the Reactions-to-Mistakes Anger (RTM-Anger) Scale asked the athletes to interpret how mistakes and responses may influence anger and performance on the ice. Results suggested a positive relationship between high perfectionism levels and trait anger.

#### *“Building character”*

Conventional ideology supports the notion that sport “builds character” and has positive effects on “prosocial personality traits” (Rees, Roger, Howell & Frank, 1990). Rees et al suggest that interscholastic activity provides an athlete to “get ahead in the stratification of rewards” and simply, athletics make participants “better people.” In a study (1990), this concept of building character was tested with the broad definition of “character” in mind set forth by previous researchers and common social wisdom. A

sample was taken of about 25 sophomores from 87 high schools. Several questionnaires were used to increase variability within the study, and the questioning methods used acquired data about athletic involvement, demographics (e.g., race) as well as personality.

The results, perhaps surprisingly, show that sport participation can have a positive impact, but also that there tends to be increasing levels of aggressiveness and irritability. The correlations obtained, however, were mainly insignificant. This suggests that there is not a large relationship between sport and “building character,” although there is a slight one. What this also means is that high school athletic programs do little to help nor harm participating athletes from a social and personality development standpoint.

### *Conclusion*

Personality and youth athletic participation are inter-related in that personality development often occurs, for better or for worse, on an athletic field at an early age. Little empirical research has been successful in proving that participation positively or negatively affects personality development. However, personality is hard to measure, especially in youth, because inventories almost always use self-report measures, which may or may not be accurate. Second, the studies discussed lack an effective manner to effectively define “athletic success,” as this varies across sport and position. We can conclude, however, that personality seems to have an impact on athletic participation among youth, performance seems to affect personality, and participation affects personality, although it is difficult to analyze how these relationships interact.

## References

- Allen, J.B. (2003). Social motivation in youth sport. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 25*, 551-567.
- Anderman, L.H. & Anderman, E.M. (1999). Social predictors of changes in students' achievement goal orientation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 32*, 89-103.
- Berkowitz, L., & Harmon-Jones, E. (2004). Toward an understanding of the determinants of anger. *Emotion, 4*, 107-130.
- Cervello, E.M., Moreno, J.A., Villodre, N.A., Iglesias, D. (2006). Goal orientation, motivational climate, and dispositional flow of high school students engaged in extracurricular physical activity. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 102*, 87-92.
- Digman, J.M. (1990). Personality structure: Emergence of the five-factor model. *Annual Review of Psychology, 41*, 417-440.
- Donaldson, S.J. & Ronan, K.R. (2006). The effects of sports participation on young adolescents' emotional well-being. *Adolescence, 41*, 369-389.
- Hall, H.K., Kerr A.W., & Matthews, J. (1998). Precompetitive anxiety in sport: The contribution of achievement goals and perfectionism. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 20*, 194-217.
- Kane, J.E. (1964). Psychological correlates of physique and physical abilities. *International Research in Sports and Education, 85-94*.
- Maehr, M. (1984). Meaning and motivation: Toward a theory of personal investment. *Research on motivation in education: Student motivation, 1*, 115-207.
- McCrae, R.R. & Costa Jr. P.T. (1985). Updating Norman's 'adequate taxonomy': Intelligence and personality dimensions in natural language and in questionnaires. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 49*, 710-721.
- Morris, L., Sallybanks, J., Willis, K., & Makkai, T. (2004). Sport, physical activity and antisocial behavior in youth. *Youth Studies Australia, 23*, 47-52.
- Pelham, T.W., Campagna, P.D., Ritvo, P.G., & Birnie, W.A. (1993). The effects of exercise therapy on clients in a psychiatric program. *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal, 16*, 75-84.
- Peterson, S.L., Weber, J., & Trousdale, W. (1967). Personality traits of women in team sports versus women in individual sports. *Research Quarterly, 38*, 686-690.

- Piedmont, R.L., Hill, D.C., Blanco, S. (1999). Predicting athletic performance using the five-factor model or personality. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 27, 769-777.
- Rees, C., Roger, Howell, Frank, M. (1990). Do high school sports build character? A quasi-experiment on a national sample. *Social Science Journal*, 27.
- Stephens, D.E., & Bredemier, B.J.L. (1996). Moral atmosphere and judgments about aggression in girls' soccer: Relationships among moral and motivational variables. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*. 18, 158-173.
- Stephoe, A. & Butler, N. (1996). Sports participation and emotional well-being in adolescents. *The Lancet*, 347, 1789-1796.
- Vallance, J.K.H., Dunn, J.G.H., & Dunn, J L.C. (2006). Perfectionism, anger, and situation criticality in competitive youth ice hockey. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*. 28, 383-406.