Worksheet 9.2

Burnout in athletes

Although we commonly hear about top-level athletes burning out, researchers have not focused exclusively on elite athletes. It may be more important that coaches and psychologists are able to prevent burnout in younger athletes as there are more of them, and the consequences of burnout at critical times can, in many cases, be at least as devastating as for higher-level athletes.

Consider the value of the two following studies.

Duda and Gano–Overway (1996) conducted a thematic content analysis of interview data gathered from 75 girls aged of 9–12 in a US national gymnastics team, using a structured interview based on a questionnaire dealing partly with stress. Questions included: In gymnastics, what do you find most stressful? What makes you feel really nervous? The sources of stress identified were as follows (in descending order of frequency).

1. Performance of skills, particularly new skills; skills performed for the first time in competition.
2. Fear of evaluation, along with a fear being judged for mistakes by their audience.
3. Aspects of competition, such as presence of judges and significant competitors.
5. Expectations from self and others, particularly from coaches.
6. Time pressures, such as waiting or rushing.
7. Fear of injury.
8. Environmental conditions, such as slippery bars.

Based on these findings, the authors recommend that coaches establish a less judgmental learning phase to help improve confidence and hold simulated competitions to allow gymnasts to adapt to the pressured environment.

1. What problems could there be with interviewing a sample of children?
2. Based on the information you have here, do you feel that the authors’ recommendations are justifiable?

At a higher level, Lonsdale et al. (2009) studied elite Canadian athletes from 51 different sports, with an average age of 22.9 years. They used an online survey to gather data about the satisfaction of basic needs (for autonomy, competence and relatedness), the nature of their motivation to engage
in their sport and the extent of any athletic burnout. Scores in each of these areas were then correlated with each other. The relationships they found were as follows:

- basic need satisfaction correlated negatively with athletic burnout
- controlled motivation (extrinsic, and regulated by others) and a lack of motivation correlated positively with athletic burnout
- autonomous motivation correlated negatively with athletic burnout

Of particular interest to the authors was that autonomy and competence did predict levels of burnout, but this appears to be mediated by levels of self-determination – meaning the degree to which athletes perceive their involvement to be motivated by the achievement of positive benefits, particularly those that are most congruent with their own sense of self. The most important burnout component that is moderated by self-determination is sport devaluation: losing a sense that the sport is an important or useful part of one’s life. The researchers argue that the more physical side of burnout (the feeling of physical exhaustion) is not so affected by self-determination and may be affected more by physical overtraining.

3 What are the strengths and limitations of using an online survey rather than the interview approach used by Duda and Gano–Overway (1996)?

4 The design used by Lonsdale et al. (2009) is cross-sectional, meaning all data was collected from all participants at one time. They recommend using longitudinal research in future. Why?

5 If the findings of Lonsdale et al. (2009) are accurate, how would you modify, expand or clarify the recommendations made by Duda and Gano–Overway (1996) who are targeting much younger athletes?

References