

## **A Psychological Analysis of High Performing and Elite Athletes**

**Seeking Athletic Success:**

**Differentiating between “Elite” and “Amateur”**

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Abstract:

This essay examines the different psychological factors that differentiate an elite athlete from an amateur athlete, along with the psychological factors of acquiring success in sports. The research questions investigate: **how does the psychology of elite, high achieving and performing athletes, affect their performance in comparison to an average, amateur athlete?** and *what are the psychological aspects of success in sports?*

This investigation examines the key psychological factors that are attributed to success in sports including the basic aspects of an elite athlete which investigates daily schedules based solely around sport training, the importance of sole determination, and the usefulness of effective coping skills. Following the basic aspects of an elite athlete, the aspects of Elite Training Regimens are investigated where customized training regimens, psychological health, and overtraining are examined on a brief level. The next factor investigates risk taking, where an athlete must step outside of his or her comfort zone in order to obtain success without anxieties affecting performance. Subsequently, the importance of being psychologically “in the zone” is investigated, where an athlete devotes all focus to their sporting event. The next key factor examines motivation to perform and the implications of failing to do so, which is tied to an athlete’s driving forces to perform. The next key factor, aggression, is crucial to practicing and perfecting in an athletic discipline in order to obtain success. Lastly, effective goal setting and its effect on obtaining success is investigated. In terms of this entire paper, it has been discovered that the factors differentiating an elite athlete from an amateur athlete are nearly the same as those needed for overall success in sports; an elite athlete makes great use of psychological training whereas an amateur athlete usually does not or is highly inexperienced in doing so.

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**Introduction - The Psychological Aspects of Success in a specific Athletic Discipline**

A relationship exists between the mind and body, in which ones physiological abilities are maintained by ones psychological workings. Elite athletes take on pressures that are most likely never experience by average amateur athletes. When one may reflect on elite athletes, they may go about recollecting the fact that they are more often than not more physiologically strong and better known, therefore, they possess elite status. Though it is simple to overlook the psychological aspects of elite athleticism, as there are many factors beyond solely physical strength that are stipulations in order to be an elite or truly high performing athlete. Hence, this essay aims to bring clarification to answers of the questions of: **how does the psychology of elite, high achieving and performing athletes, affect their performance in comparison to an average, amateur athlete?**, along with the question *what are the psychological aspects of success in sports?*

Elite athleticism requires many more psychological pressures. Take for example the Olympic Athlete; they perform at the top of their game *once every four years*. In terms of the average athlete, they may perform at the top of their game once every week or month. Overall, the amateur athlete may become more attuned to performing in general, in which they can mentally gauge where they stand in terms of all of the other competitors that they compete against on that basis. Psychologically, this can affect a person's motivation in training and wanting to succeed and strive to do better. For example, a person who claims first place weekly in a track and field 400 meter sprint race has a higher propensity to drop their motivation in training when in comparison to an Olympic Athlete who is known as the fastest swimmer. This is because the sprinter can assume they will win in their match next week and that no other competitor will improve greatly in a very short period of time. Whereas an Olympic athlete that

is acknowledged as the fastest swimmer of the 200 meter butterfly stroke since the 2008 Beijing, China Olympics, would be obligated to anticipate the possibility of the last 7<sup>th</sup> place winner of the 200 meter butterfly stroke training at a very high intensity to the point where this previous 7<sup>th</sup> place winner could take the Gold Medal in the subsequent Olympic Games. Indeed it is a very large pressure that Elite Athletes are forced to deal with, but if coped with the right way, can bring forth a large amount of motivation towards striving to acquire the gold themselves in the forthcoming Olympic Games. Acquiring the skills to do so is also not as simple as one may imagine. Some of the pressures they are required to cope with are those such as the “demons of anxiety, fear of failure, and worry about injury” (Murphy, 2010). Over a period of 4 years, the criticality of these pressures can build to great levels. These pressures can take a great toll on the athlete’s performance if they do not know how to tackle them. In turn, many Olympic athletes have sports psychologists who closely work with them and their coaches in order to allow them to cope with the pressures and prepare for peak performance as mental training and dealing with “nerves” is a large factor in training for the Olympics (Murphy, 2010). A fact that is observed is that Olympic athletes performing for their second time tend to perform much better than those performing for their first time (Murphy, 2010). This is due to the athlete’s first year of competition in the Olympics serving second-handedly as exposure to the pressures of the event. In turn, they can take those pressures and learn how to deal with them until their next performance in the Olympic Games (Murphy, 2010). By their second showing, they most likely would have gained the skills needed to cope with those pressures.

### **Basic Aspects of an Elite Athlete**

Elite athletes require talent, strength, and physical ability (Murphy, 2010). Speed, strength, and endurance are also vital to success as an elite athlete. Though overall, determination is a great component of success as “it is their minds where medals will be won or lost” (Hamelzou, 2011). An athlete must also desire to play the sport in which they will be sacrificing over 10,000 hours of purposeful practice toward (Murphy, 2010). Also, many athletes tend to have a genetic predisposition which permits them to excel in their specific sport, whether it is based upon endurance, sprint, or skill (Hamelzou, 2011). There are also varying types of personalities throughout the USA Olympic Team, which does not connect qualification as an elite athlete with a specific personality type (Murphy, 2010). In essence, determination is the most prevalent factor in elite athleticism, as with great amounts, an athlete can push him or herself to their outer working limits, in which they are able to perform at their peak level. Then, with the knowledge of their limits, they can further use their coping and determination skills to create newer, broader limits for themselves, in terms of performance in their specified activity. It has also been recently recognized that an elite athlete’s psychological training is as equally important to their physical training (Hamelzou, 2011).

### **Basic Aspects of Elite Athlete Training Regimens**

Every single elite athlete has their own specific training regimen that is customized to their body composition, their yearly schedule, diet, and sport. Allowing their training to be optimized can increase its effectiveness and work an athlete harder. Though with the loads of training that are prescribed for an athlete, major psychological problems can occur which can pose major physical issues (Gore, 2000). Sports psychologists agree that “most consistently successful athletes are psychologically healthy” (Gore, 2000). Elite athletes must be determined in setting smart goals for themselves, generating energy when they need it, and managing anxiety

that accompanies these facets (Gore, 2000). Overtraining must be avoided, as it can cause tremendous physical and mental stress on the athlete themselves. Overtraining normally causes sickness or infection, in which the athlete cannot train at peak levels, causing the athlete to spiral into clinical depression (Gore, 2000). Though, this can easily be avoided by constant checkups with a personalized sports psychologist and adequate recovery time for an athlete's body.

### **Risk Taking as an Elite Athlete**

Olympic Skiers are one of the many athletes who appear to put their lives on the line to go about an action so extreme. Though many spectators of a sport or event may view it as dangerous, the athlete may not necessarily view it as dangerous at all. This is because many elite athletes do not believe what they do is dangerous because they devote countless hours towards training of it to the point where it has not become dangerous (Murphy, 2010). All athletes know the risks, though their focus is to go about doing what they have trained themselves to do (Murphy, 2010). Only when an athlete makes a mistake, the risk factor appears. In terms of taking risks, elite athletes must psychologically train themselves to recognize how anxiety forms and take the anxiety and use it as more motivation to do well (Murphy, 2010). If an athlete were to allow nerves and pressures to affect them and distort their focus while performing, harmful consequences could occur. In essence, elite athletes learn to replace negative thoughts, worries, and doubt, with complete attention to their specified task, allowing them to gain improved focus and have a higher rate of success. This idea can also be implemented into many different situations in which it can aid a person in being increasingly successful.

### **Psychologically Being “in the Zone”**

Being “in the zone” can be most simply described as the allocation of all of one’s attention towards present time and a primary task at hand. This can be applied to many other occupations such as “surgeons, great musicians, ballet dancers, and emergency responders such as firemen” (Murphy, 2010). The phrase “Being in the zone,” can also be related to arousal, which is defined as a “physiological state that prepares the body for action, the fight or flight response” (Law, Halkiopoulos, Bryan-Zaykov, 2010). Arousal is a major component of being in the zone, as it “has a direct effect on the quality of performance.” Arousal will equate to “better performance,” in terms of an elite athlete whereas with an amateur athlete, arousal most likely will equate to “increased errors,” if one does not possess much skill in their specific sporting discipline (Law, Halkiopoulos, Bryan-Zaykov, 2010). Being in the zone is mostly based around remaining in the moment and not worrying about failure. In order to become in the zone, an athlete must have a grasp on psychological skills such as visualization, goal setting, concentration, relaxation or mindfulness, psyching up, positive self-talk and developing a consistent routine in order to get in the zone. Usually, this allows an athlete to perform optimally. Their bodies are then well-prepared for success and the only factor that must be battled is their own mind, an athlete must not allow it to hinder them. In comparison to the average amateur athlete, an Elite athlete will possess much more skill in doing so as psychological training is a major part of their overall training regimen.

### **Motivation to Perform and Failure to do so**

Understanding the forces that drive athletes to excel is largely critical. A large amount of athletes are affected by “the wished, needs, and demands of the people that are most essential to their personal development and feelings of self-worth” (Grant, 1988). In those terms, athletes are subconsciously driven by those wants and needs of others around them and ultimately their own self-demands. The minds of people “seeking success (athletic or not), are quite complex” (Grant, 1988). There are many levels grounding one’s motivation in sports. Many factors such as “money, popularity, accomplishment, victory, or love of the sport” are rarely motivating forces in the eyes of athletes, though they are present at varying levels (Grant, 1988). Typically, athletes are “not consciously aware of why they push themselves” (Grant, 1988). On a subconscious level, factors such as family play a large role in motivation to perform well. These influences are those such as the feelings of worth in the eyes of parents and the feeling of desirability in the eyes of other peers. In essence, an athlete may attempt to prove his/her self-worth through competitive sports. Many problems may arise because of these facts. Many athletes may face the question of “Who am I without my sport?” (Grant, 2008), when dealing with loss or failure. This is a fear that will cause an athlete to feel as if they have “ceased to be important without his/her sport success and thus become a “nobody”” (Grant, 2008). These issues in motivation can cause an athlete to become greatly distressed; veering them off of the path they have created for themselves. When an athlete reaches a mental road block of this sort, they must accept the fact that they are not perfect, nor does society view them as a “nobody,” they must also be familiar with the fact that success is still possible, though it may be a long way away.

In the vast world of elite athletics, failing to succeed is an issue that many athletes must know how to overcome. “Many athletes fear that anything less than dominance or perfection is

unacceptable” (Grant, 1988). In all aspects of this quote, athletes must always win and perform at their maximum of ability. Performing at a lesser level is viewed by the athlete as “limited, flawed, or average” (Grant, 1988). This can cause many athletes to feel lost or as if they are “ceasing to exist for a time” (Grant, 1988). Obviously, the athletes who act out in such a manner are emotionally unstable and will rarely make it to the top. The chance is still there, though they have just put a large mental roadblock in the way. In order for an athlete to avoid falling into these mental states, they must build a solid foundation of “good relationships at home and with friends, a solid love life and other pursuits” (Grant, 1988). By doing so, an athlete can build a solid support system on which they can draw on in order to feel good about themselves, in the case of athletic failure. Possessing a solid support system enables athletes to maintain the motivation that is needed for success in their athletic discipline. Generally, motivation is “the key to superior athletic performance, propelling and sustaining any consistent and disciplined effort” (Grant, 1988). Without adequate, high quality motivation, an athlete will not succeed in their prospective sport. As stated, “if an athlete is pulled emotionally by a multitude of stresses and demands to live up to some idealized self-image or to please others through athletic achievements, then he will be at a tremendous disadvantage.” When an athlete lacks motivation, those stresses will greatly affect his performance negatively. As reviewed, the psychology of an athlete greatly directs the manner in which his/her physiology can respond to motivation.

In essence of motivation, athletes need to “be aware of what drives them” (Grant, 1988). Whether it is competition, family, peers, or wanting to be at the top of their game, athletes must be aware of the driving forces that allow them to progress forward and improve in their chosen discipline. The possession of “talent, intelligence, and proper conditioning,” is almost nearly crucial to success in a sport at any level, amateur or elite; though when an athlete lacks a “strong

emotional basis to stand on,” the athlete’s best efforts will be wasted (Grant, 1988). In essence of these statements, there are countless amounts of ways in which an athlete’s motivation can be thrown off balance, though it is whether the athlete has been taught or learnt that in order for prolonged success, a strong emotional and social backbone is required.

### **Aggression and Different Behaviors – Forces that can Veer an Athlete off the Course of Success**

Aggression is crucial when it comes to practicing and perfecting an athletic discipline, it is the force that is driven by motivation. It is physical or verbal behavior that is influenced by one’s motivation to succeed. Aggression and motivation go hand in hand, one requires motivation to allow themselves to be aggressive and push past psychological roadblocks. Aggression can be viewed in two different ways; “good” aggression, that can be easily related to “going after a loose ball in volleyball or lowering your shoulder in a drive toward a basketball hoop,” or “bad” aggression which for example could be connected to an action such as “committing a flagrant foul in basketball,” (Berger, 2006). Take into thought the term ‘Aggression,’ it tends to stir up positive and negative values judgments and emotional responses. Aggression is defined as “any form of behavior directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment,” (Berger, 2006). In essence of that statement, it is obvious that aggression is a behavior that involves harm or injury that is directed toward a living organism that involves intent.

In the field of psychology, there are two distinguished types of aggression, hostile aggression in which the “primary goal is to inflict injury or psychological harm on someone else,” or instrumental aggression, which “occurs in the quest of some nonaggressive goal,”

(Berger, 2006). An example of hostile aggression is a water polo player intentionally kicking their opponent underwater, in order to inflict injury. An example of instrumental aggression is “when a boxer lands a solid blow to an opponent’s head,” which usually causes injury or harm (Berger, 2006). The only justification as to why this is categorized as an act of instrumental aggression is because causing harm is required, in order for the boxer to succeed. Generally, both forms of aggression involve intent to injure and harm. Although aggression may be categorized as instrumental, it is no different or any more or less acceptable than hostile aggression.

Many misjudgments exist regarding what aggressive acts are and what they are not. An example of an act that is not aggressive is “throwing your helmet on the ground in disgust after striking out in softball.” One may perceive that as an act of aggression, though it neither involves harm or injury nor is it directed toward a living organism. There are also many misjudgments about ‘good’ aggression. “What many people refer to as good aggression in sport (e.g., charging the net in tennis) are labeled assertive behavior in sport psychology,” (Berger, 2006). Assertive behavior is essentially “playing within the rules with high intensity and emotion,” in which there is no intent to do or cause harm (Berger, 2006). In terms of an elite, high performing and achieving athlete, assertive behavior is favored highly over aggression. In order for an athlete to reach elite status, they must have complete power over their aggression. Failing to do so could result in spontaneous harmful actions inflicted on others.

Many mixed opinions exist on whether or not aggressiveness enhances athletic performance, either at a team or individual level. As an example of how aggression aids in sport performance, basketball player “Kermit Washington said that being mean helped keep him from being pushed around on the court,” (Berger, 2006). Many sport psychologists maintain different

viewpoints on whether or not aggression aids or hinders athletic performance. It also remains increasingly hard to determine complete distinctions between aggressive behavior and assertive behavior at a spectator's point of views, as only the athlete truly knows.

### **Goal Setting and Essential Trained Psychological Skills**

Goal setting has always been an essential part of success, whether it is toward academics, personal life, or athletics. Setting smart and reachable goals can also be taken as a form of psychological performance enhancement, only improving the situation and chance of success for the goal setter. The process of goal setting can be defined as simply "Deciding on a desired outcome and designing a strategy to achieve that outcome within a specified period of time" (Sallis, 1997). Under these circumstances, goal setting can be viewed as fail-safe, as one must know what they are planning to achieve or accomplish along with have a strategy that they will enact in order to do so.

Goal effectiveness is usually found in the time one allots for completion of the goal along with what is expected to be completed within the allotted time. If a goal has many internal expectations, though possesses a short duration of allotted time for completion, the chance of goal achievement is decreased, whereas on the other hand, increasing the allotted time or reducing the amount of internal expectations may improve the chance of goal achievement. Though, one should not set their goal based upon time alone as "Goals can be short term (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly) or longer term (i.e., quarterly, every year, every 5 years, etc.)" (Sallis, 1997). A great way to ensure maximum goal effectiveness when setting goals is to use a method such as the "SMART" goal setting criteria. SMART is an acronym, which refers to "Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic/Relevant, and Tangible" (Prather, 2005). This is criteria yields goals that one can refer to as smart goals, which are generally goals that possess a high

propensity of success, as long as one understands the criteria itself. The use of the SMART criteria is highly recommended when constructing goals as the acronym contains the foremost ideas of an attainable goal with maximum effectiveness.

The first word in the SMART acronym is specific, denoting the fact that one's goal must be specific and not vague. For example, a goal such as "lose weight over the next three months," is not at all specific when compared to a goal such as "lose at least twenty-five pounds over the course of three months." The second goal contains the amount of weight to be lost over the period of three months, allowing the goal setter to strive towards that number, versus any random number below their previous weight. The second letter of the SMART acronym symbolizes the word Measurable. In terms of the previous example, having a set goal weight allows the goal setter to, over the course of the three months, periodically weigh in and compare their current weight to their goal weight. The last three words of the SMART acronym are achievable, realistic and tangible, referring to the idea that a goal one fabricates must be attainable. These words convey the idea that one must situate a goal that can be obtained in contrary to a goal that has a high chance of not being attained. For example, the goal "travel around the world within the next two years" may be attainable for some, but that would require many funds, passports, and organizations. Though, the likelihood of this goal's achievement is extremely slim. If one were to modify the goal to "travel around the world within the next ten years," probability of achievement will be greatly increased. The use of the SMART acronym is highly recommended during the creation of goals, effectiveness and attainability will become greatly increased.

In order to find undeniable success in any discipline, setting a goal with maximum effectiveness and attainability is crucial and completely necessary. Failure to do so can result in mental barriers, which can further complicate the achievement of any other sequential goal,

whether or not is more effective than the previous. If an athlete is seeking maximum success in a specific discipline, a complete goal with strategic plans for achievement should be created and enacted.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it appears that the psychological aspects of an elite athlete highly differ from that of an average, amateur athlete. When comparing both elite and amateur athletes, we notice that the psychological aspects of elite athletes are what allow them to obtain maximum success that continues to improve, whereas an amateur athlete may not be psychologically trained to take advantage of the psychological aspects of training for a specific sporting discipline. This is due to the fact that elite athletes are forced to compromise and perform under many mental stresses, stresses that average, amateur athletes are not usually exposed to. Due to the average, amateur athlete's lack of exposure to these types of pressures, intense psychological training is not usually required for general success. Though, one can seek success in sports by focusing not only on the physical aspects of training, but on the psychological aspects of training. Psychological training will allow athletes, amateur and elite, to reach their goals of success. Training psychologically will set the stage for optimal focus towards aspects such as motivation, aggression, and effective goal setting. In order to ensure success in any specific discipline of sports, one must not only train physically, but also train psychologically to ensure maximum mental stability to reach goals and ultimately reach success.

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