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Burnout Among Adolescent Athletes: A Personal Failure or Social Problem?

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Most explanations of burnout among young athletes identify chronic, excessive stress as the cause. Strategies for preventing burnout emphasize techniques that help athletes control stress and adjust to the conditions of sport participation. However, informal interviews with 15 adolescent athletes identified as cases of burnout suggest that the roots of burnout are grounded in the social organization of high performance sport; these roots are tied to identity and control issues. The model developed in this paper conceptualizes burnout as a social problem grounded in forms of social organization that constrain identity development during adolescence and prevent young athletes from having meaningful control over their lives. This model is intended as an alternative to more widely used stress-based models of burnout. Recommendations for preventing burnout call for changes in the social organization of high performance sport, changes in the way sport experiences are integrated into the lives of young athletes, and changes in the structure and dynamics of relationships between athletes and their significant others.

This presentation is partially grounded in my experiences with undergraduates and with people outside the university, often in sport organizations. Over the past 15 years I have found it increasingly difficult to get these people to use the "sociological imagination" (Mills, 1959). Their analyses of behavior, events, and issues are firmly framed in psychological terms; their recommendations for change are based almost exclusively on a "personal troubles" approach. In other words, their analyses of behavior focus on the character of individuals, and change is seen as the outcome of altering individual character and the immediate social relationships believed to shape it.

Although this approach is sometimes used to argue that no one can truly help anyone else, it usually leads to the conclusion that there is a need for more control over the lives of people who experience problems. This control, it is believed, will create new forms of adjustment as well as character changes that

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will provide the basis for avoiding troubles in the future; almost without fail, the family is the recommended context for this control.

I have thought about the implications of this analytical approach in the context of sport as I've developed coaching education programs and identified social issues faced by coaches who work with young people (Coakley & Hughes, in progress). My presentation builds on these thoughts and some of my own work that raises questions about the literature on burnout among elite adolescent athletes—literature in which burnout is often framed as a personal failure to cope with the stress associated with high performance sport participation.

Background on Athlete Burnout

The concept of burnout became widely known around 1980. It took a few years before it was spoken of in connection with sport participation, but in the mid-1980s some people began describing highly talented young athletes who left high performance sport programs in a state of extreme emotional duress as “cases of burnout.” Since then, most people who work with athletes have generally defined burnout as a personal trouble calling for interventions that focus on the character and coping skills of individual athletes facing intense, stress-filled lives of training and competition. Traditional theoretical frameworks in psychology—usually some variation of social behaviorism such as exchange theory—have been used by sport scientists to explain burnout (Gould, 1987; Schmidt & Stein, 1991; Smith, 1986).

Overall, burnout among young athletes has been and continues to be viewed as a problematic characteristic of *individuals*. It is described in terms of a “vocabulary of stress” that has been picked up and regularly used by coaches, parents, and athletes. This vocabulary of stress often leads to interventions that emphasize individual treatment through which young athletes are assisted in managing or adjusting to the conditions of their sport lives. Occasionally, intervention strategies encourage parents, coaches, and other adults who control the conditions of young athletes' sport lives to modify those conditions to control the intensity of stress faced by young athletes.

In most cases, people using this “stress based model” of burnout call for new and more effective controls to be exerted over the lives of young athletes. Intervention is based on the ideological assumption that the social contexts in which young athletes live are fundamentally fair and, if these young people experience problems, they have somehow personally failed to cope with the conditions of their sport participation. Therefore, preventive strategies involve helping young athletes cope with stress and adjust to the conditions of high performance sport participation (these strategies are outlined later in this section). Intervention based on this ideological assumption seldom involves strategies for changing sport organizations or the social organization of high performance sport itself. Nor does it call for changes in *who* controls the conditions of sport participation or the amount of power athletes have over their lives, in and out of sport.

This paper presents information that has led me to reframe burnout as a social problem rooted in the social organization of high performance sport itself. My case is that burnout is a social phenomenon grounded in a set of social relations through which young athletes become disempowered to the point of

realizing that sport participation has become a developmental dead-end for them and that they no longer have any meaningful control over important parts of their lives. I will argue that burnout is best described through a “vocabulary of empowerment” which suggests intervention strategies calling for changes in the following:

1. The social relations associated with elite sport participation;
2. The amount of control young athletes have over their own lives in and out of sport;
3. The ability of young athletes to critically assess why they are participating in sport and how sport participation is tied to the rest of their lives;
4. The social organization of high performance sport programs and the conditions of training and competition in those programs.

This approach to intervention is based on an ideological assumption that high performance sport programs have been organized for the purpose of producing performance outcomes rather than opportunities for overall social development and critical self-assessment of how sport participation is tied to the rest of the lives of young athletes. Of course, the approach to intervention based on this “empowerment model” is radically different from the approach stemming from a stress based model of burnout.

Before discussing the foundations of this empowerment model, the stress based model needs to be explained in more detail. According to the stress based model, athlete burnout is conceptualized as an outcome marking the end of a competitive sport career. Research in sport science has involved a search for the correlates of burnout, and this search has repeatedly identified chronic stress as *the* primary correlate. This literature will not be reviewed in my presentation, but much of it fits with Smith’s (1986) analysis of athlete burnout in which he states the following:

burnout results from an increase in stress-induced costs. . . . [It] involves a psychological, emotional, and sometimes a physical withdrawal from an activity in response to excessive stress. . . . When burnout occurs, a previously enjoyable activity becomes an aversive source of stress. . . . Burnout is a complex phenomenon. . . . One element common to all definitions, however, is an emphasis on burnout as a response to chronic stress. (Smith, 1986, p. 39)

In other words, excessive, chronic stress leads to burnout, and burnout in turn leads to chronic stress. Excessive stress occurs under two main conditions: (a) when environmental demands exceed personal or environmental resources, and (b) when personal or environmental resources exceed environmental demands. Although Smith and others (cf. Feigley, 1984) do identify situational factors that may contribute to burnout, intervention strategies for preventing and coping with burnout tend to emphasize stress management and personal adjustment. For example, some of the commonly recommended intervention strategies focus on the following:

1. Increase demands to provide new challenges or decrease demands to eliminate pressures for the athlete.
2. Help the athlete accurately assess demands and resources, set goals, assess

progress toward goal achievement, and think positively about the achievement of goals.

3. Teach the athlete how to effectively manage stress, how to relax, how to meditate, how to concentrate, how to visualize.
4. Teach the athlete new physical and/or social skills, and use other methods for changing existing antisocial and self-destructive behaviors.

The emphasis in each of these strategies is on treating young people who are assumed to have adjustment problems or lack personal coping skills. In extreme cases, the young people are assumed to be "sick." The prescriptions and cures most often consist of goal-setting exercises, self-talk, mental imagery practice, stress management and relaxation exercises, biofeedback, personal growth exercises, and behavior modification programs. A few discussions of preventive strategies have referred to the need for changes in coach/athlete relationships, more autonomy for athletes, and more systematic social support for athletes (Feigley, 1984; Smith, 1986). However, the strategies outlined in the greatest detail (and, in my experience, the ones most frequently used by sport scientists) are those that involve increased control over the lives of athletes by parents, coaches, administrators, and sport scientists. More will be said about this in the conclusion.

Fifteen Conversations With Young Athletes

Ten years ago, interest in what I formerly referred to as sport dropout led me to have long conversations with 15 young people identified as burnout cases. The conversations were designed to get the young people to describe their lives in as much detail as possible. I specifically wanted to learn about their sport related experiences, but I was generally interested in learning about them as human beings and seeing how sport participation was tied to other dimensions of their lives, including their sense of who they were and how they were connected to the various social worlds in which they lived.

My sample was strictly a sample of convenience. These were young people I contacted because I knew about them through my own children, friends, and associates in the local sport community, including high school varsity sports and national amateur sport organizations. The structure of my conversations was informal; in fact, I had not intended to write a formal report using the information gathered. The content of my conversations varied from person to person depending on his/her experiences and on what I learned in each successive conversation about the careers of young athletes and their relationships with coaches, parents, family members, and friends. Conversations lasted from 45 minutes to over 2 hours. Fourteen of these conversations were with athletes in individual sports including skiing, figure skating, gymnastics, swimming, and tennis; only one was with an athlete from a team sport (baseball). Six of the conversations were with young women, 9 were with young men; their ages ranged from 15 to 19 years.

What I noticed in these conversations was that as these young people described their past, they talked of little except their sport experiences. Even when they were involved in nonsport activities, their involvement was somehow tied to or mediated by their lives as athletes. They frequently mentioned pressures and stress related to sport participation, but the pressures and stress that seemed

to be the worst were those tied to the lack of control they had over their lives in general. For example, they frequently referred to the sacrifices they had to make to stay involved in sport and achieve their goals, goals that had sometimes been set when they were only 10 or 11 years old. Although they often referred to stress, it was clear that stress was related to issues of control—specifically, to a lack of control to do things their peers did, to try new things, to grow in ways unrelated to their sport participation.

I also noticed considerable ambivalence when they talked about how sport was tied to the rest of their lives. On the one hand, most emphasized how lucky they were to have had the opportunity to develop physical skills and have experiences that none of their age peers had. But on the other hand they talked about missing out on the experiences their age peers had. Ten of the 15 talked about how great their parents were and how their sport participation allowed them to become close to one or both parents in special ways, but 7 of those 10 expressed concerns about the future of their relationship with parents now that they were no longer involved in elite sport.

All 15 described emotional high points associated with their sport participation, but they also described devastating low points. Even among the 7 or 8 cases in which I detected some anger or resentment toward parents and/or coaches, there were statements about the fact that their experiences were not all bad. Generally, all the young people seemed appreciative of their success in sport and the rewards associated with that success. But at the same time, they did not see their highly specialized athletic competence as relevant to their future unless it was combined with other things.

As they talked specifically about their experiences immediately prior to burning out, they were apt to describe that they felt “stifled,” “trapped,” “going nowhere,” or “wasting time.” This is illustrated in a statement from a 17-year-old former figure skater:

I told everybody, “I skate for fun, I love the travel, the competition, the attention, the crowds.” I always said, “To reach my goals I have to make sacrifices.” But as I got older I saw I was missing out on a lot too. Other kids were doing things I never had time to do. I felt stifled.

An Alternative Conception of Burnout

There is no doubt that stress is associated with burnout, and that the coping strategies called for by stress based models sometimes delay burnout. However, my conclusion is that the roots of burnout among young athletes go far beyond chronic stress, beyond individual stress management abilities, beyond the emotional demands and consequences of sport competition, and beyond individual psychological resources. In other words, burnout is best explained and dealt with as a social problem rather than a personal failure; it is grounded in social organization rather than the character of individuals. This means that preventive strategies are best aimed at altering (a) the structure and organization of sport programs, (b) the social relations associated with the training and competition in high performance sport, and (c) the range of life experiences available to young athletes.

According to the information in my conversations, burnout among young elite athletes is a social phenomenon in which young people leave competitive sport because of two factors: (a) a constrained set of life experiences leading to the development of a unidimensional self-concept, and (b) power relationships in and around sport that seriously restrict young athletes' control over their lives.

My information suggests that the young people most likely to experience both conditions are *highly accomplished athletes* who have been heavily involved in a single sport for relatively long periods of time. Their sport participation involved social experiences that fostered the development of a single identity exclusively related to sport participation and perpetuated a limited set of social relationships directly tied to sport. The people in their lives continuously responded to them in terms of their specialized sport roles, their time was almost exclusively devoted to the development of specialized skills, and their goals were well defined and tied to assumptions of commitment to long-term specialized sport training.

Identities are claimed and constructed through social relationships (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Thoits, 1983), and these young people found themselves in situations in which it was nearly impossible to make commitments to other activities, roles, and identities. They did not have the personal resources or the power needed to claim and socially construct identities unrelated to sport—as long as they remained committed to their roles and identities as athletes. They were in the equivalent of “developmental tunnels,” as illustrated in Figure 1.

At about 15 to 16 years of age, most of the young people I talked with began to realize that being competent in just one specialized sport activity did not prove they were competent people. Here is the picture of burnout I saw in my conversations: First, the young people wondered if they were giving up too many activities and experiences that seemed very important in the lives of their age peers. Then, as they looked forward to late adolescence and adulthood, they saw that being a great swimmer, gymnast, skier, skater, or tennis player was not very significant in their quest for maturity, which they defined in terms of independence and autonomy. Therefore, even though everyone kept telling them how great they were, these young people began to doubt themselves. And rightly so! Their doubts were completely valid in light of what is known about the self and social development during adolescence (Coakley & Hughes, in progress; Linville, 1985; Thoits, 1983).

For them, sport involvement became analogous to being on a tightrope: it was exciting, they were good, they were the center of attention, but they knew they couldn't shift their focus to anything else without losing their balance. And if they lost their balance, they knew there would be no net to catch them.

In the face of this situation they started to feel insecure. Their insecurity affected their performance. And their inability to meet performance standards led them to withdraw socially and emotionally from those around them; such are the standard clinical symptoms of burnout. But, more important, because their exclusive commitment to sport had begun so early in life, they had little to fall back on, no other way to view themselves outside the narrow experiences associated with sport involvement, and no viable alternative identities for interacting with other people in meaningful ways. Furthermore, the threat of failure was always immediate since improvement in skill levels was inevitably accompanied by increased expectations and new evaluative standards, both self-imposed and

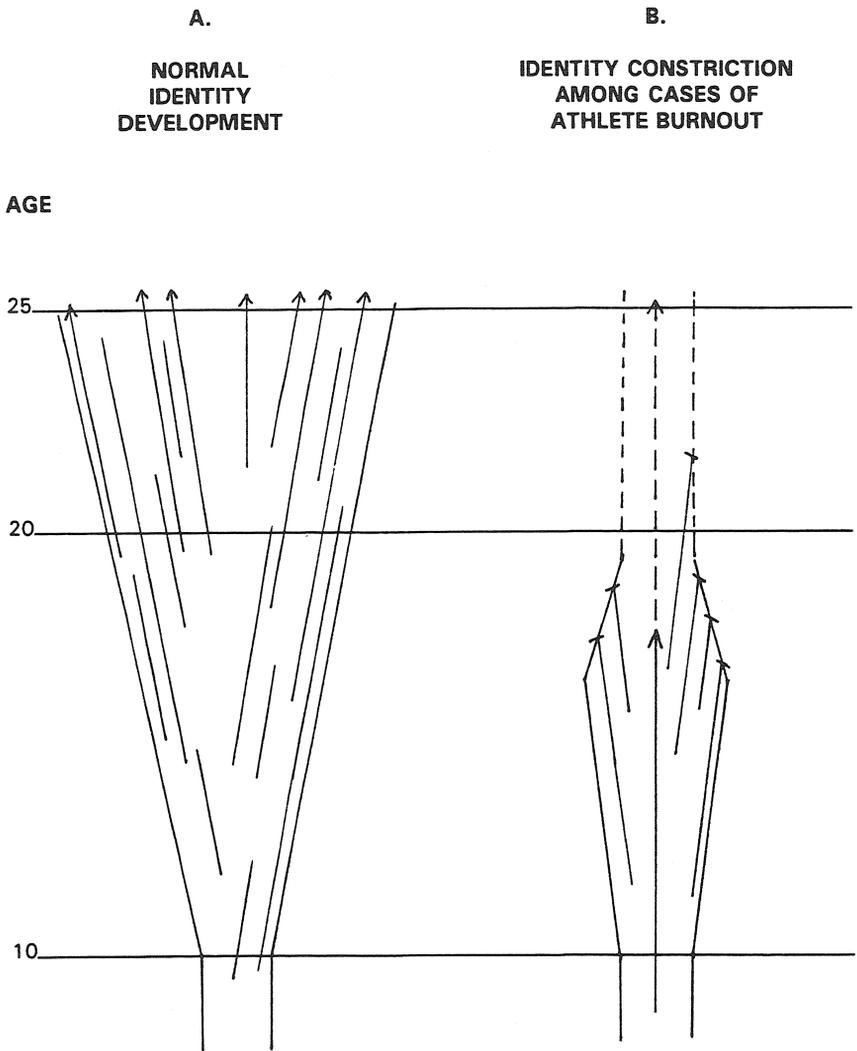


Figure 1 — Two models of identity development. The lines in each model represent different identities or dimensions of self. During adolescence and young adulthood, young people normally try on, experiment with, nurture and extend, and frequently drop roles and associated identities. By young adulthood, identities are normally complex and multifaceted (Model A). However, among cases of burnout, identity development is constricted (Model B). New identities may be “tried on” for brief periods of time, but identity development, apart from one’s identity as an elite athlete, is foreclosed due to constraints in the young athlete’s life.

imposed by others. They knew they were never going to be good enough, and this further jeopardized feelings of confidence and competence.

Research on self-complexity (Linville, 1985)¹ and multiple identities (Thoits, 1983) helps explain what happened to these young elite athletes whose “self and identity eggs” were all placed in one basket. For example it has been found that low self-complexity and a unidimensional identity are positively associated with (a) greater swings in affect and self-appraisal immediately following success or failure, and (b) greater mood swings over the long run. On the other hand, high self-complexity and multiple identities have been found to mediate or buffer the negative effects of stressful events.

These research findings are instructive in light of the symptoms commonly reported in cases of burnout among adolescent athletes. They strongly suggest that the development of self-complexity or multiple identities among adolescent athletes provides a cushion for the stress inherent in their sport lives, mediates the impact of their successes and failures, and helps sustain a more even affective profile. A unidimensional self-identity, on the other hand, sets young athletes up for extreme emotional swings, an inability to handle the consequences of their sport performances, and frequent depression. This application of research findings fits with the work of others (Gergen, 1972; Marsh & Peart, 1988; Marsh, Richards, & Barnes, 1986; Marsh, Smith, Marsh, & Owens, 1988; Thoits, 1983), and it certainly explains the symptoms of burnout described in my conversations.

Of course, the issue of self-complexity needs to be studied further to determine the conditions under which overall social development may be impaired by intense dedication to any highly specialized activity, whether it be sport, dance, music, an academic subject, or even certain types of jobs.

Power, Autonomy, and Burnout

In my conversations it was also clear that when a unidimensional self-concept was combined with a set of relationships through which the lives of young people were tightly controlled by others, the young people who burned out chose to resist the support coming from those others in order to seek autonomy. This lack of control was most often experienced by young people whose parents and coaches made considerable commitments of time and resources, and by those whose performance potential encouraged others to take it upon themselves to make sure the young athletes did not have to make any decisions about their own lives—decisions that might interfere with the achievement of performance goals.

For the young people I talked with, lack of control over their own lives was grounded in a combination of factors, including the actions of parents, coaches, *and* themselves. For example, all but three of the young people indicated that *they* had made the choice to commit themselves to their highly specialized athlete roles and to their ambitious performance goals. They made these decisions because they liked the idea of being accomplished athletes and experiencing everything that goes along with that status. Furthermore, they enjoyed being so good at something. In fact, being an athlete was so rewarding that participation was

¹“Self-complexity” is a function of the number of relatively independent dimensions of self-knowledge defined as salient by a person (Linville, 1985).

continued to the point that it became the only thing of importance in their young lives. This fits closely with research findings indicating that subjective commitment to a role or identity increases as related involvement is characterized by expressive enjoyment, loyalty to role partners, and role enactment leading to anticipated rewards or the avoidance of sanctions (Marks, 1977).

Ironically, these were the dynamics that led the young people themselves to play a major role in creating the conditions that eventually subverted control over their own lives. They made the decision to become elite athletes, but from then on the decisions were made by parents, coaches, and other adults who took it upon themselves to guide these young athletes to their goals. But the athletes themselves were accomplices in the construction of their own powerlessness.

This point about athlete complicity needs to be qualified. When young people make decisions to commit themselves to highly specialized roles or identities, parents and other adults should not take them so seriously that they deprive the young people of chances to make new decisions, claim and construct new roles and identities, and abandon old ones. For example, when discussing his tennis academy, Nick Bollettieri once said that he wanted the decision of coming to his school to be made by the tennis students themselves. But then he also said that once they made that decision, all future decisions would be made by him until the young people left his program. When young athletes are in such a tightly controlled situation, it is difficult to say they are contributing to their own powerlessness, except to say that they have not chosen to run away (as some do). Ironically, parents and coaches often maintain such situations for what *they* think is in the best interests of young athletes.

In my conversations it was difficult to identify whether parents and coaches had subtly coerced young people to maintain their commitment to sport or whether they had simply responded to what they thought the young people wanted for their own lives. But even if they were well intentioned as they helped young people achieve performance goals, these adults unwittingly participated in creating and perpetuating social isolation and dependency among those young people. Once goals were set, environments were created in which the young people could focus nearly all their attention on becoming elite athletes. As this happened, parents also restricted the range of experiences available to their children and “guided” them into a pattern of sport involvement that allowed for little or no autonomy despite progress toward the achievement of performance goals. In fact, the closer these young athletes came to achieving their goals, the less control they had over what happened in their lives.

Information in my conversations indicated that the young people were very aware of the time, resources, money, and effort their parents put into their sport lives. Although none of them said they were living their lives for parents, most did talk about how their successes made parents happy and that they didn’t want to let parents down by failing to meet expectations. In about six cases parents seemed to use guilt to motivate their children, but in the other nine cases the children themselves made the connection between parental support and the need to express gratitude through personal achievement. When this happened, the young athletes were especially likely to feel stifled and cut off from opportunities to do other things. Although there was guilt about not meeting coaches’ expectations, it did not generally seem to have the same impact as guilt about not meeting parental expectations. Of course the young athletes clearly knew that coaches, in most cases, had been paid for their investments of time and energy.

One of the ironies I noted in the conversations was that when these young people started to become aware of the potential negative long-term personal implications of their single-minded, exclusive dedication to sport, four or five of them began to resent their parents. When this happened, they concluded that autonomy and growth depended on rejecting their parents' support for their athletic involvement. As they rejected parental support, considerable family conflict was created. Conflict was also characteristic in the lives of all but three or four of the others, but it was not grounded in resentment as much as in emotion-charged renegotiations of parent/child relationships and expectations.

In summary, information from my conversations strongly supports the notion that burnout is related more to powerlessness than to personal flaws. This is consistent with Lerner's (1991) finding that stress among workers is grounded in the lack of control over the conditions of work and the social organization of the workplace. Lerner emphasizes that the way people experience stress "is a product of the way things are organized" (p. 20), and that chronic stress is a manifestation of an internalization of this lack of control to the point that workers identify their personal inability to cope as the source of their problems. This self-blaming intensifies powerlessness, perpetuates stress, and preserves the forms of social organization in which problems are rooted.

Socioeconomic Status and Burnout: A Hypothesis

Every one of the young people I talked with came from middle- and upper-income families. This may be due to a selection bias built into my contacts, but I have seldom heard the term burnout used in reference to young athletes from lower income families. This has led me to wonder whether the context and dynamics for identity development and the achievement of autonomy are different for athletes from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

My hypothesis is that parents in low-income households seldom have the time, money, or other resources needed to sponsor children in highly specialized activities to the point of creating identity and autonomy constraints. It takes resources to control children's lives to the point that they can ignore everything except the development of sport skills. Furthermore, athletes from low-income households may be more on their own when it comes to making choices about sport participation. A particular sport may be chosen because other alternatives are absent, but at least they are making the choice to participate *without feeling indebted to parents*. And, most important, many young people from lower income backgrounds do not have access to the resources needed to buy the highly specialized and tightly controlled training often associated with certain individual sports.

On the other hand, when young athletes from middle- and upper-middle-income families show athletic promise in certain sports, their parents may be able to summon family resources to make specialization possible and to control the environment in which they are growing up. This happened to all the young people with whom I talked. As children they were showered with resources; most were told how lucky they were, or made that conclusion on their own. They also realized that the time, money, and effort spent on them should not be wasted. So they continued to train, avoiding the sense that they might be wasteful or ungrateful. Most of them indicated they had even talked about dedication and investments of time in the same terms their parents used. They had also talked about sport

goals, that life without goals was meaningless, and that goal achievement required commitment, sacrifice, and giving up normal childhood and adolescent experiences.

The fact that each of the young people who had burned out talked about feeling stifled and about missing opportunities also fits with this explanation for why athletes from low-income backgrounds may not burn out as frequently as their upper-middle-income counterparts. Young people from low-income backgrounds may not be as likely to see sport participation, even when it is rigidly structured, as precluding other developmental opportunities—simply because access to other opportunities is relatively limited. Those who burn out may be those who see the constraints associated with sport participation as problematic in terms of realistic expectations for alternative experiences, opportunities, and identities.

Team Sports and Burnout: Another Hypothesis

All but one of my conversations were with young people who had participated in individual rather than team sports. Again, this may have been due to my contacts, but in my experience I have come across relatively few cases of burnout in team sports. It happens, but perhaps not as often as in individual sports. Although this issue was not explored in my conversations, I would hypothesize the following:

1. The relationships and peer dynamics associated with team sports allow athletes to claim and socially construct identities not directly related to sport or the role of athlete. This is unlike athletes in individual sports who are told to or who choose to refrain from interacting with peer “competitors.”
2. The social dynamics of team sports mediate the control that adults have over the lives of athletes. In other words, teammates may serve as allies in devious and/or creative efforts to subvert the controls of parents, coaches, and others, thereby opening the door to new identity-generating experiences and to the control needed to establish autonomy and independence. Adults simply cannot isolate or control the lives of groups of young athletes in a team sport like they can a single athlete in an individual sport.

Data on differential rates of burnout among athletes in team or individual sports are scarce. However, the probability of differential rates suggests that research on the dynamics of social support within different types of social networks might be fruitful.

Who Does Not Burn Out? A Final Hypothesis

Most young people in elite sport programs do not burn out, even when participation constrains identity development and autonomy. This raises the question of who would not see the constraints associated with certain forms of sport participation as problematic where identity and autonomy are concerned. My guess is that burnout would be least likely among the following:

1. Athletes from backgrounds in which life chances are so limited that there are no attractive identities and roles apart from being an athlete;
2. Athletes who have ready access to opportunities that can be chosen and pursued in connection with sport participation;

3. Athletes who have been heavily rewarded for success in sport and are so tightly controlled that they do not know about nonsport opportunities that might be available to them.

Exploring this issue would require research involving a comparison of in-depth interview data from young athletes who have not burned out with data from athletes who have burned out or have altered their priorities as a result of critical self-assessment of their sport participation.

Summary and Conclusions

Although the young people I talked with did experience stress in connection with their sport participation, some to the point of being emotionally drained for extended periods of time, they did not seem to have suffered permanent developmental damage from it or from their traumatic exit from sport. All but two continued to be physically active in some form of recreational sport or expressive dance, and seven were involved in some competitive sport, albeit at a much less serious level than before (they were playing soccer, volleyball, softball, and baseball).

The stress experienced during their exit from competitive sport was a symptom of burnout, but not the cause. More accurately, burnout was a process connected to the overall social development of these young people, to the social relations associated with sport participation, and to the social organization of high performance sport itself. Burnout occurred when these young people saw no possibility for claiming and socially constructing desired identities apart from the identity of athlete. Therefore, burnout was grounded in social processes and social relations that subverted identity development and precluded the autonomy and independence seriously sought by many young people during adolescence and early adulthood. In summary, athlete burnout occurs in connection with two conditions:

1. When participation in an activity or role constrains or forecloses the development of desired alternative identities;
2. When social worlds of young people are organized in ways that leave them powerless to control events and make decisions about the nature of their experiences and the direction of their own development.

When burnout is conceptualized as a social problem rather than a personal failure, it suggests a need for changes going far beyond the treatment of stress. A fictitious example helps make this point: If a young athlete we knew threatened to drop out of sport because of chronic headaches experienced every time the coach ran drills during which all players were instructed to run into a wall head first, we would say the headaches are a serious problem. But we would not say the best solution would be to get the athlete a season's supply of pain killers, or teach the athlete how to use biofeedback to control the intensity of the headaches. Nor would we say that the coach must learn how to teach athletes how to hit the wall head first without getting headaches.

We would certainly recommend removing the wall from the practice field but, more important, we would raise serious questions about coach/athlete relationships and recommend changing those relationships so athletes themselves

could control their own fate and have access to the knowledge needed to make informed choices about what they should and should not do in their sport lives. We would also raise serious questions about other dimensions of the social organization of sport programs that would lead coaches and athletes to engage in such headache producing behavior.

Unfortunately, many high performance sport programs in North America are organized in ways that make young athletes completely dependent on coaches and parent-sponsors. This dependency creates many problems, among them stress leading to burnout. The major solution to the majority of these problems, including burnout, is to empower athletes and eliminate dependency. This is impossible to do without changing the way high performance sport is organized.

I have a detailed list of specific recommendations for coaches, parents, and athletes themselves that I will not present here. But the main point of each recommendation on my list is to get away from a vocabulary of stress and utilize an empowerment model as a basis for change strategies. Unless this is done, sport scientists are likely to reproduce overcontrol and dependency, subverting the possibility for liberation and empowerment in and through sport. For example, when young athletes have a difficult time adjusting to the social isolation and dependency that accompany certain forms of sport participation, coaches and parents often seek the help of clinical or counseling sport scientists. But if those sport scientists focus their attention exclusively on individual adjustment, stress management, and “taking responsibility” without dealing with the social conditions in which identity development is foreclosed, resulting in young athletes losing meaningful control over important parts of their lives, the sport scientists become guilty of what might be called “psychodoping.”

Specifically, *psychodoping consists of using psychological techniques to help athletes adjust to conditions of dependency and powerlessness, and to discourage them from asking critical questions about why they participate in sport and how sport participation is tied to the rest of their lives.*² Psychodoping is a problem when dealing with burnout because young athletes in various stages of burnout often need more help in critically assessing their sport participation and gaining control over their lives than they do in handling stress through psychological techniques. Their problems are consistent with what might be expected when young people are placed in situations wherein healthy identity development is constrained and there are few opportunities to make informed choices about how they should live their lives. Furthermore, psychodoping often precludes dealing with the people who control the social organizations in which training and competition occur, the very people who need sport scientists to help them make changes that will provide more autonomy and control for the young athletes with whom they work.

²This definition of “psychodoping” was inspired by a critique of sport science by John Hoberman (1986). Hoberman (1992) has extended his critique in an impressively detailed analysis of “the science of performance and the dehumanization of sport.” In this analysis he refers to sport psychology as “psychic engineering” and presents strong historical support from Germany, England, France, and the United States to explain his choice of terminology.

Of course, many clinicians and counselors who work with athletes are not guilty of psychodoping; they *are* concerned with issues of autonomy, control, and critical self-assessment. However, it is important to regularly critique any form of sport science grounded primarily in discourses of performance (Whitson & Macintosh, 1990). As sport scientists compete for research funding and as they present their expertise to the sport community, it has become increasingly clear to me that, for the most part, they are doing little to promote recognition of athletes as human beings rather than performance machines.

Sport science is rarely being used to challenge systems of dependency and overcontrol in sport, or to promote liberation and empowerment among athletes (Hoberman, 1992). Unless the knowledge generated by sport science critically informs decisions about how sport is organized and ultimately ends up in the hands of athletes who are prepared to critically assess it and apply it to their own lives, sport scientists will be nothing more than technicians pandering to the interests of whomever has the resources to hire them.

The rapidly expanding discourses of performance in sport science need to be strongly challenged with questions about social, political, and ethical issues related to sport. This is an old charge offered to the sociology of sport, but it is one in need of regular renewal (Ingham, 1985; Lawson, 1985; McKay, Gore, & Kirk, 1990; Sparks, 1985; Whitson & Macintosh, 1988, 1990).

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