



Positive Psychology in Sports: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

The paper study attempts to ascertain the importance of how sports benefit from being closely engaged with positive psychology. Further, relationship between Sports and positive psychology is explored i.e. understanding how two distinct disciplines work in tandem. The paper focuses on culmination of sports with positive psychology; moreover it enhances its scope from focussing anxiety, stress, burnout to developing a positive sports psychology that focuses more upon mindset, strengths, grit, mental toughness and resilience. Thus, this study is in a growing line of research that would help to better understand mind-body connection and how it may be possible to prevent what is wrong and focus on what is right.

Keywords: Mental toughness, grit, resilience, positive psychology

Sports is fundamental to the early development of children and youth and the skills learned during sports contribute to the holistic development as it enables to learn the imperativeness of key values such as honesty, teamwork, fair play, respect for themselves and others and adherence to the rules. Physical activity has been recently identified as the most important factor in reaching optimal functioning. Increased activity levels have been linked with improved cognitive functioning, better mood, lower incidence of mental illness and also increased life span. Tal Ben Shahar also suggests that not exercising is the equivalent to taking depressants.

A *sports psychologist* teaches mental skills for an enhanced performance and at times of poor emotional well-being, provides assistance as well. On the other hand, a positive psychologist, works in the health model with a goal of moving from whatever the starting point, beyond neutral and into the plus scale of well-being (as suggested by Narula in her book *Happiness Quotient*, 2016). Recent research in Positive Psychology has spawned a number of positive constructs that can

be implemented in healthy populations to improve elements of their well-being, i.e. from exercises focused on positive emotions to improved performance through accomplishment level of competition. Thus, Positive psychology can be called as a part and parcel of psychology.

Thus, Positive psychology in sports has been defined as the science of happiness and strength (Carr, 2011). Therefore, the present research lays emphasis on the fact that sports can be an integral platform for developing positive psychology constructs such as mental toughness, grit and resiliency among athletes that can increase their motivation levels which is essential to target goals.

Sports Psychology meets Positive Psychology

It is vital to address the question 'What promotes excellence in performance'? The researcher attempts to put forward the reply in form of pictorial presentation- the 'Cognitive Perceptions, Affective Inputs and Developmental Mechanisms' that have received

attention across the discipline of Positive Psychology i.e. 'positive thoughts', 'positive emotions' and package of 'mental toughness, grit and resilience' respectively. Though, these can be inculcated at any age, in the present study the researcher focuses primarily on college students (athletes).

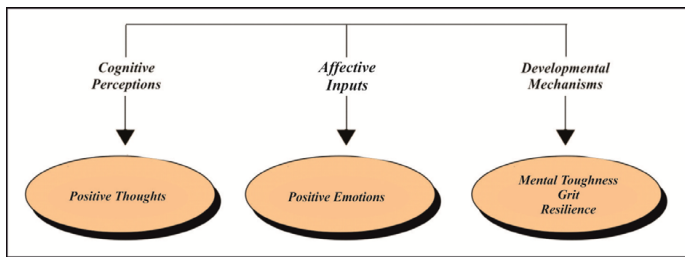


Fig. 1: Positive psychology in sports

The first and foremost evidence of Cognitive Perceptions in terms of 'Positive Thoughts' comes from cognitive training i.e. self-affirmations (e.g., *I feel strong, I stay focused under pressure*), sports visualization (e.g., *winning an important competition*), as well as thoughts reflecting optimism and an unshakable self-belief (De Witt, 1980). Further, guided imagery (GI) is a relaxation technique based on visualizing pleasant images and body awareness to help athletes create sensory-rich images in their minds to promote relaxation, concentration and body awareness (Abdoli, Rahzani, Safaie, & Sattarie, 2011). This relaxed state can aid healing, learning, creativity, and performance, which may help one feel more in control of their emotions and thought processes.

Secondly, dissemination of Affective Inputs in form of 'Positive Emotions', as emotions are always present when goals are engaged. An athlete feels joy when a valued goal is achieved, senses anxiety before a match, sadness after an unexpected loss and pride when accomplishing a difficult or challenging goal. Recently, as suggested by Tamminen, Crocker, & McEwen (2016) in a research paper entitled "*Emotional experiences and coping in sport: How to promote positive adaptational outcomes in sport*" a study of positive emotions by Fredrickson (2001) stood out. The broaden and build theory of positive emotions suggests that enhancing positive emotion in sports could facilitate better performance, social functioning, and physical and emotional well-being in athletes. Negative emotions are not necessarily maladaptive

for sports performance, but negative emotions are associated with motor behaviours, action tendencies, decision making and attention consequences which can be detrimental for performance. Athletes must be able to recognize their negative emotions and engage in emotion regulation or coping behaviours or cognitions to overcome behaviours that would inhibit successful sports performance. Where as positive emotions could promote positive adaptational outcomes among athletes by facilitating behaviours which build physical, social, and psychological resources. Athletes should identify ways in which positive emotions can help improve sport performance.

Thirdly, Developmental Mechanisms through an additive impact of Positive psychology constructs i.e. 'Mental Toughness, Grit and Resilience', a focus that recently is added to the field of sports (Shewmake, 2016). Findings certainly indicate that be it at workplace, school or sports, mental toughness, grit and resilience are essential to accomplishing goals and sports is a fundamental dais for developing them as a complete package. This developmental mechanism is elucidated in the upcoming section.

Mental Toughness

Sports can be stressful with the time demands, emphasis on winning and high expectations. Being able to positively reinterpret events, remain calm and relaxed under pressure, and maintain emotional control may be essential to the ability to cope with the various demands of sports. These elements are characteristics of *mental toughness* (Crust & Clough, 2005). It is suggested that mental toughness is a multi-dimensional construct in which one facet of mental toughness is dispositional, while another is environmental, suggesting that both may exist and coincide in their effects on the person. Research supports the notion that mental toughness is dependent upon situational factors such as stress, pressure, and adversity (Gucciardi, et al., 2008; Guillén & Laborde, 2014). Nevertheless, the literature also supports mental toughness as a dispositional trait that functions the same as other aspects of personality (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012; Cowden et al., 2014; Hardy, et al., 2014). In regards to the five factor model, mentally

tough people are generally high in conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness and show low levels of neuroticism (Delaney, Goldman, King & Nelson-Gray, 2015).

Grit

Grittiness can also be used to describe someone that is diligent and determined over an extended period of time (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007). According to Duckworth's extensive research, passion and perseverance are the essence of success and she even proposed that "Character is at least as important as IQ". What makes a bigger impact than intelligence is being gritty. Studies of grit focus on those who had goals and tasks that lasted months, or even years (Kelly, Matthews, & Bartone, 2014). This belief is held due to grit being about perseverance over an extended period of time, where mental toughness appears to be the perseverance through a short-term stressor so as not to disrupt performance on one particular task. Being mentally tough, as well as being gritty, may explain why some individuals succeed while taking on a task when most cannot. Thus, a psychologically healthy individual will have a balance of grit and mental toughness through different experiences in one's life.

Resilience

Another construct parallel to grit is *resilience*, often stated as a 'dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity' (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Four key tenants in the development of resilience are confidence, purposefulness, adaptability and social support. *Confidence* is developed through self-esteem, self-belief and success. Communicating well with sportsmen, celebrating and recognising success and the value one gives to improvement rather than winning is the vital feature. Secondly, purposefulness means having a strong sense of purpose helps develop resilience; understanding one's role in terms of where he can help a sportsman to gain a sense of purpose. Thirdly, adaptability i.e. creating an adaptable and challenging environment readies individuals for change. Finally, social support plays the most important function in developing an individual's

resilience. Knowing that they have your support and those of their teammates around them is crucial.

Possible Explanations and Causes

It is vital to mention here that researcher endeavours to explain Sports Psychology and Positive Psychology have much in common. The additive impact of these two is discussed in the upcoming sections with theoretical conceptualizations that support the present study:

- ❖ Deci & Ryan (2000), *Self-Determination Theory (SDT)* postulated the existence of three inherent universal needs, or basic psychological nutrients i.e.
 - ✦ *Autonomy*: the need to choose what one is doing, being an agent of one's own life
 - ✦ *Competence*: the need to feel confident in doing what one is doing
 - ✦ *Relatedness*: the need to have human connections that are close and secure, while still respecting autonomy and facilitating competence.

SDT asserts that satisfaction of these needs enhances motivation and well-being, and that deficiencies of these needs undermine effective functioning and well-being. These needs inspire progression from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, thus enabling individuals to feel more self-determined. Self-determination, in turn, is associated with higher self-esteem, work enjoyment, and other positive outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

- ❖ Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton (2002) developed *Mental Toughness Theory* comprising of twelve characteristics. According to this theory, when someone possesses these characteristics, are considered to be mentally tough.
 - ✦ Unshakable self-belief in one's ability to achieve goals in competition
 - ✦ Unshakable self belief that one has qualities and abilities that are unique in a way to make one better than everyone else
 - ✦ The ability to come back from set-backs due to motivation to succeed
 - ✦ An insatiable desire and internalized motives (internal locus of control)

- ✦ Thriving on pressure
- ✦ Knowing that anxiety in competition is inevitable and that one has the skills to cope with it
- ✦ Not negatively affected by another's good or poor performance
- ✦ Doesn't let personal/life issues distract one from the task at hand
- ✦ The ability to turn on focus for a sport, and also turn it off
- ✦ Not distracted by task/competitive specific distractions
- ✦ Can push aside physical or emotional pain when present and maintain proper technique and high performance and
- ✦ Have psychological control during unexpected and uncontrollable events that occur in competition.
- ❖ As per Clough, Earle, & Sewell, (2002) confidence was an addition to the three C's, to create a new theory of *mental toughness*. The three C's of hardiness, which describe this personality construct, consists of commitment, control, and challenge. Confidence was seen as an important factor in performance and therefore beneficial to an athlete. The addition of confidence helped create the theory used most commonly in the research of mental toughness.
- ❖ *Growth Mindset Theory* by Dweck (2006) put forth an important fact that growth mindset individuals don't mind failure much because they realize their performance can be improved in comparison to those who believe their success is based on innate ability and so are said to have a fixed mindset. According to Dweck (2006), sportsmen having growth mindset are aware of where does achievement comes from and are more likely to perceive a challenge as an opportunity rather than an obstacle to overcome, and respond with constructive thoughts in the belief that they can improve, achieve and get better.
- ❖ Another most intriguing aspect of thriving in sports goes parallel with *The PERMA Model* (Seligman, 2012). The model is a theory of well-being which clearly has emerged as a link between positive

psychology and performance. "PERMA" stands for Positive Emotions (P), research has identified certain skills and exercises that can boost our experience of positive emotions. We can learn to feel them more strongly, and to experience them for longer. Engagement (E), i.e. it involves identifying and cultivating personal strengths, virtues and talents. Positive Relationships (R), i.e. key to all relationships is balance. It is not enough to surround ourselves with 'friends' - we must also listen and share, make an effort to maintain our connections, and work to make those connections strong. Meaning (M), i.e. people who belong to a community and pursue shared meaningful goals are happier than people who don't. Lastly, Achievement/Accomplishment (A) i.e. creating and working toward goals helps us anticipate and build hope for the future. Past successes make us feel more confident and optimistic about future attempts. Working on "A" can open many avenues for interventions to be deliberately applied with the intention of improving an individual's wellbeing through increased accomplishment level of competition among sportsmen.

- ❖ Recently, Pidgeon, (2016) suggested *Performance Pyramid Model* which illustrates the lower order skills that are placed at the bottom, with the higher order skills to the top. The General skills placed at the very bottom of the pyramid comprises of attitude and motivation that are traditional sports skills and can be linked to mindsets and optimism of positive psychology. These are skills that are thought to provide a base from which growth mindset follows allowing for awareness of learning opportunities, and encourages challenge. Middle order skills are next to general skills in the performance pyramid. Imagery and self-talk from traditional sports skills are linked with positive psychology concepts of self-awareness, strengths, and positive emotions. Effective use of strengths can help to provide a sense of direction, build resilience, increase positive emotions, and help to achieve goals. Finally, moving to the top part of the traditional sports skills of the pyramid i.e. Peak performance skills that are associated with the management of emotions. It

is related to the positive psychology concepts of resilience and emotional intelligence. Resilience is characterised by learning from adversity, rising above it, and performing even better. In sport, developing emotional intelligence can enhance a sportsmen's ability to control emotional impulses that may lead to poor performances and create emotions that lead to good performances.

In light of the above parallels, it is believed that the emergence of interest in sports and Positive Psychology can be traced to the rise of positive psychology movement and also that these common points to another feature i.e. focus on the individual.

CONCLUSION

The three psychological tools under the umbrella of 'Cognitive Perception, Affective Input and Developmental Mechanisms' comprising of 'positive thoughts, positive emotions and mental toughness, grit and resilience' respectively can be utilized by anyone to reap benefits. Hence, the present study can help fill in the gaps by reaching out to many people and probe its relevance in Indian context. Effective ways of coping at both the individual and team level can promote positive human functioning in sports. Therefore, it is crucial that coaches and mentors identify and harnesses this 'Positive Sport Psychology' integration that not only associates with physical aspects of performance, but with mental performance as well.

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