



# Empowering Women Through Sport: Developing for Competition and Life



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## Abstract

Development through sport has a long and varied history in sport psychology. Unfortunately, there appears to be an under-representation of females in sport psychology research, both generally and in this important area. Thus, it is fair to assume that female athletes are likely receiving coaching, guidance, and psychological strategies focused on their development, but informed by evidence based primarily on males. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to introduce that females need their own specific research to best help them build empowering psychological characteristics. Reflecting the comparatively small numbers who make it to the top, such systems must not only help them in their sport, but also help them succeed in life. Indeed, we propose that the development of the necessary psychological characteristics could help females face the equality challenges they face in sport and in future leadership roles. Furthermore, that there needs to be a shift in focus when it comes to sport, and female athletes should not only be developed for their sport but also from their sport.

**Keywords:** Talent Development Pathway; Psychological Characteristics; Psychology from Sport

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to consider three separate topics and propose that they be examined simultaneously. First, we will offer a general overview of talent development and consider this against the work of Kamin and Collins' [1], 'three ages of support sciences'. This leads us to suggest a fourth 'age'; namely, psychology from sport. Secondly, we highlight the under-representation of females in sport psychology research and the negative effects this will inevitably have on the developmental process. In the third, we highlight the challenges females face in life and how using sport as a vehicle for psychological development could be useful. As a summary and plan for action, we finally consider the implications for conduct and research.

### Part 1: Elite Athletes & Elite People

As research into the support industry for sport has evolved, three different styles of research have emerged. Collins and Kamin [2] referred to these as the 'three ages of support science'. We exemplify these through work in psychology as follows:

#### i. Psychology through performance

Psychology researchers test ideas in various laboratories,

one of which is a sport domain (e.g., a psychologist tests if people have increased activation in the 'happiness' areas in the brain after engagement in activities they like such as exercise/musical performance/dance, etc.). The objective is to increase knowledge in psychology.

#### ii. Psychology of performance

Researchers investigate and develop sport (or dance or music or business or...)-specific theories or domain named variants of mainstream theories, through examination of performers (e.g., the development of a theory of "X construct for Y" such as a psychological skills inventory for dance). The objective is to build knowledge in a sport-specific domain.

#### iii. Psychology for performance

Researchers and support providers utilize psychological principles and methodologies to benefit the performance of specific individuals, teams or groups (e.g., intra-individual or team/group specific work focused on understanding and enhancing performance for this particular group rather than theory development). The objective is to support the performer toward better achievements.

For the purpose of this paper, we are going to refer to 'performance' as a sport domain. We acknowledge that performance could be seen through a variety of domains such as business, music, dance, etc. However, the focus of this paper will be through the lens of psychology for performance, as defined and operationalized in this paper through the medium of sport.

#### iv. Psychology FOR Sport

From an elite sport perspective, talent development and talent identification are valuable, yet complex, processes. Discovering and learning ways to optimize the pathway to produce elite athletes that will contribute to senior teams is arguably a primary focus of talent development [3]. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there has been an optimistic and promising upsurge of interest in the role of psychological characteristics (e.g., coping skills, resilience, confidence, cognitive strategies, determination) in talent development and identification (TID) pathways. Numerous authors, [4,5], have provided evidence that psychological characteristics play an important role in realizing potential; indeed, are perhaps an essential precursor which should be a focus for development systems such as academies of sport.

As such, a primary element in psychology for sport can play a key role in the successful navigation of, and optimum benefit from talent development pathways. Much of this work was based in the existence of a particular skillset in high achievers. For example, Orlick and Partington [6] identified psychological "success factors" (e.g., high level of commitment, long and short-term goals, imagery, focus, pre- and in-competition plans) that distinguished high performance athletes from their less accomplished peers. Another study found that successful Olympic athletes were more focused, committed and mentally prepared than less successful athletes [7]. In contrast, underachievers often have unrealistic expectations, low aspirations, and little persistence [8]. In short, specific skillsets seemed to be a discriminating factor in determining who made it to the top. Consequently, there is a strong case that embedding psychological skills into development pathways could be beneficial for aspiring elites.

In a foundational study, MacNamara, Button, and Collins [4] operationalized these approaches into the TID pathways and developed a framework which they termed the Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence or PCDEs. The PCDEs are a range of psycho-behavioral skills that have been shown to play an important role in developing talent. Their work also suggests that PCDEs equip aspiring elites with the necessary skills to cope with the unavoidable challenges of the developmental pathway and the capability to navigate key transitions, as well as underpinning their capacity to reach their full potential [9]. Accordingly, it is proposed that if individuals are to reach their full potential they must possess and systematically develop the necessary PCDEs that allow them to overcome the challenges and optimally benefit from the developmental opportunities that arise on their pathway

[10].

Although there are a range of context specific differences (e.g., competence structures, age of participants) that vary across the performance domains, there seem to be key features of effective talent development systems that appear to be generic across the various performance domains [4,11]. For example, MacNamara and colleagues report how the same PCDEs that underpin successful development in sport also provide development in other performance domains, from dance to business to music [1,6,12]. As briefly mentioned above, it does appear that these key features of development will be operationalized in various ways depending on the individual's age, domain, stage or particular performance challenge. With all that being said, it seems that PCDEs can be utilized within different domains. Importantly however, and especially for our present purpose, are PCDEs developed and deployed in a particular domain automatically transferable to another? And if not, what additionality is needed to promote this? For example, if an athlete develops psychological characteristics for sport can those characteristics also be subsequently applied as life skills, or skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live, such as school, home and work [13]. Such transfer becomes particularly important since, as is well recognized, not many can effectively achieve at the top level [14], whilst success at the early stages of a pathway is no guarantee of subsequent achievement [15]. Indeed, since it sees talent as less fixed, it highlights the development of such skills as a contribution towards probabilistic success [16].

#### v. Psychology FROM Sport

Arguably the sole focus of the talent development pathways is discovering ways to optimize how to produce elite athletes that will contribute to senior teams [3]; however, we question should the focus be equally shared within other areas of the developmental environments? Research presents the harsh reality that less than 1% of young athletes between 6-17 years of age achieve elite levels in sport (e.g., basketball, soccer, baseball, softball, or football) [14]. Ironically, as argued above, often the sole focus of talent development is to develop young people to become elite athletes rather than being elite in life. Consequently, we question whether psychological development should be focused on the 1% of elites or the other 99% of athletes that do not make it to the next level. Or indeed, if a sporting utopia [17] is possible in which both can be achieved in tandem.

Of course, young people may not only stay involved with the potential of senior success, despite many coaches and administrators stressing the potential for participation to be a developmental opportunity [18]. Much depends on sport demonstrating a real capacity to develop longer term life skills. Unfortunately, although it may be commonly believed that through sport, children and adolescents learn values and skills that will assist and help prepare them well for the rest of their

lives, this is not a guarantee [19-21]. Danish and colleagues define life skills as skills that enable individuals to succeed in various environments in which they live, such as in their neighborhoods, school, and at home. These life skills can also be trained to achieve desirable, if not optimal performance levels (e.g., goal setting, emotional management, and leadership) [22]. Further, there is evidence that sports can be utilized as a skill development vehicle. Several researchers have acknowledged that skills can be transferred and applied to different contexts than the ones that they were originally learned from [23-25]. Additionally, Leberman and McDonald [26] stated that the transferability of skills can be easier among contexts that are similar to each other compared to contexts that might be different. Therefore, it is possible but, we would suggest, not automatic that athletes are developing these psychological characteristics, or skills for sport, but additional research is needed to examine whether or not, and the extent to which, they are capable of applying them in other life domains.

Although it might be a subtle shift of focus, we propose that there should be a fourth 'age of support science', psychology from sport. We define psychology from sport as researchers and support providers studying and utilizing sport as a vehicle to develop psychological principles and methodologies to benefit the athlete later in a life domain (e.g., school, work, or relationships). This shift of focus is surely necessary given that skill transferability is not a guarantee following the psychology for sport mission. Indeed, it would seem apparent that it would be more beneficial for young people to develop skills with the purpose of utilizing them later in life beyond their current sport.

The critical point is that skills should be taught, tested, refined and redeployed as the athlete advances through the pathway, using both naturally occurring (e.g., MacNamara & Collins, 2010) and constructed challenges [27], both within and out with their sporting pathway, instead of leaving such crucial development to chance. In this regard, Gass [28], suggested that transfer of skills can be enhanced by a number of strategies. These include: creating conditions that promote skill transfer at the start of an activity, creating resemblance between the environment of the activity and the environment where the transfer is to occur, including peers who have successfully finished the activity, creating moments to reflect on the experiences, creating moments to practice transferring the skill during the activity, and creating follow-up experiences to strengthen learning.

Indeed, there are a large number of intervention programs that may apply some of the transfer of skill strategies from above. For example, Going for the Goal [29], Teaching Responsibility through Physical Education and Sport [30,31], Play It Smart [32], and Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation (SUPER; Danish, 2002). These programs have all been developed in recent years with the goal of using sport as a context to transfer the psychological characteristics developed into the lives of the young athletes.

As mentioned earlier in the work of MacNamara and colleagues, PCDEs are also proving effective to support the ability to develop and deploy these characteristics among various domains. For the purpose of this paper and moving forward with our research, we have chosen to use the PCDEs as a framework to support our proposal of psychology from sport and the shift of focus on developing elite people as well as elite athletes.

### Part 2: Female Under-representation in Sport Research

As a parallel but distinct concern to this potential transfer, research in the field of sports science and medicine has revealed an alarming under-representation of work on women and girls [33-36]. More specifically, and in the fast-growing work of psychology for sport there is an overwhelming amount of research carried out with male participants rather than females. In a recent study that critically analyzed six journals in sports science and medicine, it was found that 63% of samples were mixed with both males and females, 31% included only males, and just 6% were solely females. Overall, females only represented 34% of all the research participants whilst constituting over 50% of the population; a promising direction of travel but still not enough! The unsettling element of this under-representation seems to be a bias that considers men in sport as the norm and women participants as the exception. To support this, Walton and colleagues [37] found that 69% of female-only studies made reference to sex or gender in the title, whereas, only 9% of male-only studies referred in this fashion. This suggests there is an assumption that sport related studies are male dominated although it would seem to be both unscientific and unjust to apply the same psychology theories and interventions on females. Undeniably, females may experience sport and exercise in ways that are poles apart from males [38]. Backing this, there has been work that has demonstrated the gender differences within psychopathology [39-41]. Thus, research originating from samples that are not representative could lack valuable insights and not appropriately advise practical applications.

### Gender Differences

There are many distinct gender differences in psychopathology within the general population. For example, it is found that women are diagnosed with anxiety and depression disorders roughly twice as often as men [39,40] and also struggle with eating disorders 6 to 10 times more [42]. On the other hand, male struggles more often exist in externalizing and, perhaps consequently, experience higher incidence of dependence disorders, such as drug and alcohol abuse [39,43,44]. Furthermore, these gender differences can be consistently found across different ages, income levels, and populations.

In the present context, a sport-focused study by Schaal and colleagues [45] also found there to be gender differences in psychopathology. Specifically, female elite athletes have a higher chance of being diagnosed with a psychological problem as well

as being more likely to face difficulties in their environment compared to their male counterparts [45]. Additionally, [45] shows the difference by sex within four various psychological disorders. Given these differences, it would seem reasonable to assume that there are also differences in the experiences of challenges associated with these disorders, reiterating the idea that male and female athletes should be looked at through their own lens.

Self-confidence is another factor which shows important but complex differences between the genders. There are various definitions of self-confidence in the literature. For example, Mahoney and Chapman, [46] define it as the feelings and thoughts of the individual in regard to being at peace with oneself, having confidence in oneself, trusting oneself, and being able to achieve success or to achieve the purest state of the skills that one has. The study went on further to divide self-confidence into two different sectors: internal and external self-confidence. Internal self-confidence is seen as the self-relations of the individual and self-reflection, whereas external self-confidence is one's self-control over their emotions, qualities of self-expression against others, and their communications with their environment [47].

Interestingly, when comparing self-confidence levels between males and females in a sporting setting there was no significant difference uncovered in the internal self-confidence sub dimension, but within the external self-confidence sub dimension, females had a significantly lower score than males [48]. While this difference may seem trivial, it could be crucial when working with female athletes and their development (and application) of self-confidence. Research has revealed that athletes with higher levels of self-confidence feel more successful in their efforts and believe they have the emotional, physical, and mental abilities to realize their full potential [49].

These examples bring attention to and support the idea that there have been genuine psychological differences found between males and females, which we see as a matter of critical concern given the under-representation of sport research on females. To reiterate our first point, it is fair to assume that female athletes are likely receiving coaching, guidance, and psychological strategies informed by evidence based primarily on males. This could result in female athletes missing out on approaches that may be more beneficial to them, as well as potentially receiving instructions and guidance that are not specialized to the female experience in sport [37].

### Part 3 - The Female Paradox

Over the last few decades there have been increasing numbers of participating female athletes; in the USA this has been as a result of the enactment of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, which prohibits sex discrimination in any education program that receives federal funds, such as, elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as colleges [50]. Title IX is best

known as the catalyst for females' increased access to athletic participation opportunities. From 1973 to 2018, the number of girls participating in all high school sports increased by 261.7%, from 1,300,169 to 3,402,733 [50]. Improvements were also seen at the collegiate level (all three NCAA divisions), whereas in 1998 there were 6,346 female teams and in 2012 there were 9,274 [51].

Although Title IX limited sex discrimination and created more opportunities for females, there are still additional reasons why women and girls have participated in sport and exercise at a lower rate than men and boys. Reasons range from prescription to certain social norms, pressure around body image, and experiences of microaggressions and bullying [52-55]. Even though participation rates have shown improvements in many areas of the world, females are still facing pressures to uphold fixed gender traits like flexibility and gracefulness [56]. In addition, Sage and Loudermilk [57] have described a constant and damaging myth that suggests that athletic success comes hand in hand with a 'loss of femininity'. Krane and colleagues [58] also described this as the 'female athlete paradox': that being a woman and an athlete are somehow considered as opposing. As a result, females who participate in sports often must navigate complex crossings between femininity and athletic competence [38,58]. This could discourage young women from participating in sports as they might not be comfortable or confident to go against current social norms.

Of course, female gender stereotypes and the social pressures to obtain them do not end in sport. In many Western Cultures one of the strongest gender stereotypes is that women are considered more emotional than men [59]. This particular stereotype might also be a primary reason why women hold less key leadership roles in politics and business [60]. On the September 2013 cover of Harvard Business Review, headlining a story on the "biases that hold female leaders back" were the three phrases in large font on the cover: "Too Nice" "Bossy" "Emotional". On the flip side, characteristics of successful leaders are perceived to be attitudes and temperaments that align with the global masculine stereotype (e.g., competent, strong verbal skills, determined, industrious; Sczesny [61]). However, if females go against these gender stereotypes and demonstrate the characteristics that are perceived for successful leaders (e.g., ambitious, dominant, independent) they may receive backlash effects because they could also be seen as not being cooperative enough [62,63]. For example, it has been consistently shown that, when women engage in self-promotion at work (a violation of feminine norms of modesty), others perceive them as too dominant [64]. A perception which, ironically, leads to them being less likely to be selected for leadership positions than women who do not self-promote [65]. This lose-lose scenario demonstrates the difficult navigation that females might face when attempting to gain leadership positions.

## Cracking The Glass-Ceiling

Research demonstrates that female representation sharply decreases as organizational level increases: the so-called glass ceiling effect. A study by Catalyst [66] showed that in Standard and Poor's 500 companies, women held 25.1% of executive- and senior-level positions, 19.9% of all board seats, and just 5.8% of all CEO positions. However, Spencer and colleagues [67], found common themes and characteristics among the 5%-6% of women that held CEO positions within Fortune 500 companies: courage, risk taking, resilience, and ability to manage the unknown. This brings us back to the initial proposal of this paper; can we use sport as a vehicle to develop psychological characteristics that could best assist women through the additional challenges they face? Women are faced with many "unique" challenges aside from their male counterparts, and it only seems just to provide these unique challenges with unique research and results that would best benefit females for their sport but most importantly from their sport [68-71].

## Conclusion

In summary, we recognize that there has been a lot of recent work on psychology for sport and how it can play a key role in the successful navigation of the talent development pathways. However, what we want to highlight is that the objective of developing for sport might not be as valuable as focusing on the development from sport. If an athlete develops psychological characteristics for sport we address that those characteristics might not be guaranteed to transfer and be applied as life skills, or skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live, such as school, home and work [13]. Such transfer becomes particularly important since not many can effectively achieve or reach the top level [14].

With this in mind, we wish to focus on utilizing sport as a psychological developmental vehicle specifically for young females, who have been under-represented in the field of sport science [33-36]. We believe that this could allow them to captivate the necessary characteristics that will help them navigate the unique challenges in life that females may face distinctly from their male counterparts. Males and females have shown to have differences in various psychological challenges, and we believe it is time that females received their own guidance and curriculum to help them succeed in sport but also most importantly life.

We hope this paper can be seen as a 'call to arms' for those researching in talent development and the wider areas of youth sport involvement. There is a clear need for increasing research in the benefits of such involvement and how they can be optimized, for both men and women. The balance is, however, somewhat tilted towards the male end. As a short-term change, we would ask coaches and managers to note the need for consideration of and catering for the differences; whether the goals are elite senior

achievement, life development or, as we would ideally like to see it, a combination of both.

One other comment - as views and impacts of traditional gender assignments are shown to be excessively dualistic, the complexities and inequities highlighted in this paper are further complicated. We hope that, in offering an overly simplistic picture to stress an inequality, we are not seen as ignoring what is a much wider issue.

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