



It's a thin line: Mental health and mental toughness within the context of Hughes and Coakley's Sport Ethic Model

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In recent years, the landscape of college athletics has become increasingly more competitive. This exacts a greater commitment and dedication from athletes. This dedication and commitment to a given sport(s) is often inextricably linked to mental toughness. However, within this phenomenon of commitment and dedication may lie risk for mental health challenges. That is, while mental toughness is generally seen as a positive trait that may help individuals cope with stress and adversity, there is some evidence to suggest that heavy reliance on mental toughness may increase the risk of developing a mental illness over time (Grobler et al., 2022). The current discussion utilizes the Sport Ethic Model developed by Hughes and Coakley (1991) to explore the sometimes-tedious differentiation between mental toughness for high level competitive athletics and mental illness among college / university student-athletes. Practice implications for sports social workers are also discussed.

Keywords: sport social work, mental toughness, mental health, student-athlete, sport ethic model

Recent data from the Sports & Fitness Industry Association indicates that in the United States approximately 61% of children between the ages of 6 and 17 participate in team sports (State of Play Report, 2023). This perhaps contributes to the notion that in recent years, youth and amateur athletics have become increasingly competitive. Indeed, national sports organizations like MaxPreps, Perfect Game, and Rivals, produce local, state, and national rankings of young athletes (according to their skill level) as early as age 12 (Bennett, 2023). Some have argued that this has spawned the professionalization of youth sports (Gould, 2009). Further, the number of student-athletes competing in NCAA championship sports in 2021-22 increased to over 520,000. This represents a record high, according to the latest data from the NCAA Sports Sponsorship and Participation Rates Report (NCAA, 2022). The recent NCAA ruling permitting student-athletes to profit from their name, image, or likeness (NIL), and earn income from endorsements, sponsorships, and other financial opportunities is perhaps further

evidence of the widespread magnitude of youth and amateur sports (Caulfield et al., 2023; Kunkel et al., 2021).

The increased competitiveness of youth sports now demands greater commitment and dedication from athletes and requires them to do so at younger ages. Dedication and commitment to a given sport(s) is often inextricably linked to mental toughness. That is, endemic to the ever-increasing competitiveness of youth sport is not only dedication and commitment, but also a requisite measure of mental toughness. This is thought to provide the resilience, motivation, discipline, pressure management, persistence, focus, and self-confidence needed to overcome challenges, excel in competition, and continuously strive for improvement (Liew et al., 2019). Prior research has also referred to this phenomenon as a performance-centric outlook and argued that it may be detrimental to the student-athlete (Whitehead & Senecal (2020).

However, within this phenomenon of increased competitiveness may lie the risk for mental health challenges. That is, while mental toughness is generally seen as a positive trait that may help individuals cope with stress and adversity, there is some evidence to suggest that heavy reliance on mental toughness may increase the risk of developing a mental illness over time (Grobler et al., 2022). The current discussion explores the sometimes-tedious differentiation between what is considered the requisite mental toughness for high level competitive athletics and mental illness among college / university student-athletes. The Sport Ethic Model developed by Hughes and Coakley (1991) will serve as a framework for this discussion.

The Sport Ethic Model

The Sport Ethic Model was introduced to examine the potentially harmful aspects of intense competitiveness and emphasis on winning in sports culture. The Sport Ethic Model highlights the extreme pursuit of victory and the associated attitudes, behaviors, and consequences that can arise within competitive sports (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Within the Sport Ethic Model, Hughes and Coakley (1991) developed a definition of positive deviance and applied that definition in an analysis of behavior among athletes. The concept of positive deviance posits that deviant behavior among athletes involves excessive over-conformity to the norms and values embodied within sport itself. That is, athletes may use the “*sport ethic*” - which emphasizes sacrifice for “*the game*”, to seek distinction, take risks, and challenge limits - as a sole guide for behavioral practices within a sport context (Shogan & Ford, 2000).

Hughes and Coakley (1991) argue that strict adherence to this ethic may cause athletes to become especially vulnerable to corruption (e.g., performance enhancing drugs) by transforming behaviors that conform to positive norms into deviant behaviors that are prohibited and negatively sanctioned within society and within sport organizations themselves. In the current discussion the Sport Ethic Model is used as a framework to explore the potential relationship between mental toughness and mental illness among student-athletes.

Mental Toughness through the Lens of the Sport Ethic Model

While the Sport Ethic Model may focus primarily on the cultural norms and values within a sports context, it may also tacitly influence the development of mental toughness in athletes. The sport ethic model highlights cultural norms that are prevalent in most competitive sports

(Fournier et al., 2022). These norms emphasize the importance of rigorous training, sacrificing personal interests for their sport, and prioritizing success. That is, the “*sport ethic*” is thought to give credence to a host of psychological constructs that loom large for mental toughness.

The Sport Ethic Model posits that athletes may face external pressure to conform to the norms of the sport culture, which may include ignoring pain, injuries, or personal well-being (Budziszewski, 2019). This may relate to mental toughness by encouraging athletes to push through physical and mental barriers, demonstrate resilience, and display mental and emotional strength in the face of adversity (Fourie & Potgieter, 2001).

The Sport Ethic Model also emphasizes the pursuit of excellence and optimal performance. This pursuit may lead to internalized pressure to perform at a consistently high level. Athletes who embrace these expectations may cultivate mental toughness as they learn to cope with pressure, handle stress, and maintain focus and confidence under demanding circumstances (Caulfield et al., 2023).

Athletes who adhere to these “*sport ethic*” norms may also be more likely to develop some measure of mental toughness due to internalizing the values of perseverance, discipline, and a strong work ethic. In this regard, mental toughness may help athletes recover from setbacks, failures, and injuries (Johnson et al., 2023). Moreover, it may enable them to maintain focus and motivation despite encountering obstacles or experiencing disappointment. Further, sustaining a high level of dedication and commitment to a sport is thought to require intrinsic motivation (Liew et al., 2019). As such, mental toughness may help some athletes stay motivated even when the initial excitement wanes or external circumstances become challenging.

Mental toughness also has strong implications for self-discipline. That is, athletes must develop self-discipline to adhere to training regimens, follow nutrition plans, prioritize rest and recovery, and make sacrifices to achieve their goals. Mental toughness imbues athletes with the ability to resist temptations, overcome distractions, and stay focused on their long-term objectives (Weinberg et al., 2022).

The tacit influence of the “*sport ethic*” further extends to constructs like managing pressure, persistence, focus, concentration, and handling criticism; all of which have implications for mental toughness. Competing in college / university athletics often involves high-pressure situations. Developing mental toughness enables athletes to remain composed under said pressure, make calculated decisions, and perform optimally when it matters most (Calmeiro et al., 2014). It may also help them control their emotions, manage anxiety, and maintain confidence in their abilities.

Competitive athletes understand that progress is derived through persistence and consistent effort over time. As such, many athletes develop a sense of perseverance and a “never give up” attitude (Le Bars et al., 2009). Athletes who have curated mental toughness are more likely to keep pushing forward when faced with challenges, setbacks, or plateaus in their performance.

In order for athletes to be successful, it is imperative that they are able maintain focus and concentration during both training and competition. Doing so allows them minimize distractions, maintain attention to detail, and stay fully engaged in the athletic endeavor. Achieving focus and concentration allows athletes to make split-second decisions, execute techniques accurately, and seize opportunities during games (Antonini-Philippe et al., 2022; Zakrajsek et al., 2019).

Ethical Complexity

Differentiating between mental toughness and mental illness in elite level competitive athletes can be challenging, as both can at times involve similar behaviors and symptoms (Souter et al., 2018). Further, mental toughness may sometimes mask underlying mental health issues. For example, an athlete experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety may push themselves even harder in an effort to maintain optimal performance (Souter et al., 2018). While some may view this as mental toughness, this type of behavior may inevitably lead to burnout and ultimately become detrimental to an athlete's mental health over time.

Adding to the complexity of this issue is that currently there is no consensus as to how mental toughness is defined or developed. Stamatis et al. (2023) explored perspectives on the conceptualization, measurement and training of mental toughness. They found that while coaches may value mental toughness and believe it plays an important role in competitive sport, most were unclear on how mental toughness is actually achieved. In some instances, anecdotally based physical protocols were used to develop athlete's mental toughness. However, the effectiveness of these training approaches, using psychometrically sound instruments, was rarely assessed (Stamatis et al., 2023).

Adding even further complexity to the concept of mental toughness is the specter of mental illness. That is, in some instances athletes may push themselves too hard, neglect time for rest and recovery, and thus may place themselves at increased risk for developing symptoms of anxiety, depression, or burnout (Martin et al., 2022; Strand & Samuelson, 2021). At times mental toughness may become so extreme that it leads to self-destructive behaviors, such as disordered eating, substance abuse, or other risky behaviors that negatively impact mental health (Lynch, 2021).

Due to what may often be a complex presentation, coupled with the mental toughness ideal, and couched within the sport ethic model, mental illness among competitive athletes can be challenging to diagnose and effectively treat. Several barriers specific to the athletic context exists which may inadvertently delay or prevent access to the appropriate clinical interventions (Lynch, 2021). It's also important to acknowledge that mental toughness and mental illness may coexist. To be sure, it may not always be easy to discern between the two. In some instances, the context of sport or competitive athletics, along with over-conformity to the sport ethic, may provide a means by which to mask certain symptoms of mental illness (Parrott, 2023). Ultimately, it's important to understand that mental toughness and mental illness are not mutually exclusive, and it's possible for an athlete to exhibit both traits.

What it is? What it isn't?

And so, it is at this point that the critical question becomes "*how does one differentiate between the presentation of mental toughness and the presentation of mental illness among competitive athletes?*" As stated previously, it may not always be easy to discern between mental toughness and mental illness in elite-level competitive athletes. At times both may manifest in similar ways. Yet, there may also be subtle areas of distinction. Practitioners in the athletic context must be aware of this and be able to make such a distinction.

Application of the ecological perspective may provide a means by which to determine where mental toughness ends, and mental illness potentially begins. The ecological perspective is

based on the premise that athletes are best understood in the context of the various systems in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Moore & Gummelt, 2019). This framework acknowledges micro, mezzo, and macro level factors and examines person-in-environment transactions and how said transactions may impact student-athlete mental health and well-being (Bennett, 2023). This approach broadens understanding of the multiple factors that ultimately influence athlete behavior.

In an effort to offer some guidance in this area, there are several areas of examination that warrant consideration. Once again, it is important to understand the concept of mental toughness. So, while mental toughness broadly and somewhat abstractly refers to an athlete's ability to persevere, maintain focus, and perform well under pressure, even in adverse circumstances (Benjamin & John, 2021), it should also be regarded as a positive trait that enhances performance and well-being, and helps athletes push through difficulties and setbacks without experiencing significant distress (Gucciardi et al., 2017). That is, while athletes who exhibit mental toughness may invariably experience stress, anxiety, or negative emotions, they may also, because of their psychological disposition, effectively manage and channel those phenomena to maintain optimal performance (Kalinin et al., 2019).

Where symptomatology may be concerned, mental toughness typically involves the display of resilience, determination, and the ability to handle adversity. Various coping strategies, including positive self-talk, visualization, or seeking support from coaches or teammates may also be employed. Mental toughness may therefore be viewed as a contextually dependent character trait (Gucciardi et al., 2015). It may involve short-term stress or anxiety that subsides once the situation or circumstance improves.

While athletic performance is a key objective within the athletic context, it is imperative for practitioners to remain cognizant of the overall health and well-being of the student athlete. In this regard, it should be clear that while mental toughness is generally associated with positive outcomes and an athlete's ability to thrive in competitive situations, it should not result in long-term harm to an athlete's mental health or overall well-being.

Therefore, in contrast to mental toughness, the presentation of mental illness is likely to impair not only athletic performance, but adversely impact overall social functioning as well. The presentation of mental illness is typically characterized by chronic, persistent, and significant impairment in multiple aspects of life, including athletic performance, personal relationships, and social functioning (Chow et al., 2020). This may include intense feelings of sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, changes in eating or sleeping patterns, difficulty concentrating, social withdrawal, and mood swings (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). Further, these phenomena may last for extended periods of time and ultimately require clinical intervention.

It's important to note that mental toughness and mental illness are not mutually exclusive. Athletes can possess mental toughness while also experiencing mental health challenges. The distinction lies in the context of a particular behavior, its duration, severity, persistence, and magnitude of functional impairment. Therefore, it is important to consider the context in which the behaviors or emotions are occurring. As stated previously, mental toughness encompasses pushing through temporary discomfort (Benjamin & John, 2021), while mental illness often presents persistent and distressing symptoms (Chow et al., 2020). It is also important to determine whether an athlete's mental state is causing functional impairment in various other areas of their life, such as academic performance, relationships, and training. This requires open

communication, promoting mental health awareness, and the provision of appropriate support systems to help athletes maintain their mental well-being while striving for elite performance.

Put me in Coach!

It is essential to involve mental health professionals including sports social workers when attempting to differentiate between mental toughness and mental illness in student-athlete populations. These professionals have the proficiency to evaluate an athlete's psychological well-being, assess the severity and impact of symptoms, and provide appropriate recommendations or interventions if needed. To be sure, this is a proposition that is incumbent upon appropriate education and awareness to continue to de-stigmatize mental health in the athletic community.

Although education and awareness of athlete mental health has increased in recent years, it continues to compete with prevailing stigma and false misconceptions that athletes must have an indestructible psyche (Larsen et al., 2021). This represents a key obstacle. That is, mental toughness may lead some individuals to resist seeking help when they are struggling with mental health issues. Moreover, this can delay diagnosis and treatment and worsen the severity of the mental illness.

It's important to recognize that mental toughness is just one aspect of an individual's overall mental health. Attending to one's mental health and well-being involves a balance of challenges and self-care. Although mental toughness may be a valuable tool for coping with adversity, it's important to be mindful of potential risks and seek appropriate intervention when needed in order to prevent the further onset of mental illness (Bauman, 2018).

Once again, it should be noted that mental toughness and mental illness can coexist in athletes. Indeed, both are related to an individual's psychological well-being and can affect their behavior, emotions, and thoughts. An athlete may exhibit mental toughness in their ability to persevere through challenging situations and maintain a positive attitude, while also experiencing symptoms of mental illness. In such an instance, the challenge would be to not let the athlete's mental illness impact their ability to compete at their best.

It is at this point that sports social workers play a vital role in the process. Sports social workers can conduct thorough assessments and screenings to identify whether an athlete's experiences are indicative of mental toughness or potential mental health concerns. Sports social workers may then collaborate with other mental health professionals, such as psychologists or psychiatrists, to provide comprehensive care for athletes (Newman et al., 2019).

Once mental illness in an athlete has been identified, it is vital to collaborate with qualified mental health professionals, including sports social workers. This will allow for the proper monitoring and evaluation of performance, overall social functioning, and potential modification of training approaches (Bennett, 2022). To be sure, an attitude of mental toughness can be maintained despite the presentation of mental illness. However, it is important to have a support system in place, consisting of coaches, teammates, and family members to provide encouragement and support during difficult times (Sullivan et al., 2020). Ultimately, maintaining an attitude of mental toughness requires a balance of challenge and self-care. Athletes with mental illness may need to adjust their expectations and approach to training and competition. Yet, given the appropriate support and resources, they may still excel in their sport while effectively managing their mental health.

Conclusion

The efficacious use of the aforementioned strategies and techniques are predicated on several key factors. It is vital to establish a means of open communication wherein a safe environment is created for student-athletes to discuss their well-being. Such an environment may also serve to educate student-athletes about mental health and encourage them to seek help when needed. It is also important to recognize that each student-athlete is unique and their responses to stress and challenge are likely to vary. Thus, those working with student-athlete populations should take an individualized approach to understanding their experiences.

Ongoing education about mental health and athlete specific concerns is essential. Sports social workers are knowledgeable and can play a vital role in this regard. They can be instrumental in promoting the overall health and wellness of the student-athlete, creating programming, and developing psychoeducational training tools/materials for all members of the athletic department community (athletes, coaches, support staff, administrators, etc.) on issues relating to the total health of student-athletes.

Lastly, it is important for sports social workers to build intentional relationships with all members of the athletic department. Establishing a rapport with all those involved in athletics may help to promote a culture that normalizes conversations about mental health and thereby reduces the stigma that may hinder athletes from seeking help. Once again, the line between mental toughness and mental illness can be precarious at times. A comprehensive and compassionate approach that considers the overall well-being of the student-athlete is vital for providing effective support.

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