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## BEING A FEMALE ELITE ATHLETE: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Göran Kenttä

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## Göran Kenttä

*Göran currently holds a research position in Stockholm at The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, and has been the director of the Coach Education Program at the university. In addition Göran currently holds a position at the Swedish Sport Federation as Head of Discipline in sport psychology. Over the years Göran has been involved with both the Swedish Olympic Committees and the Swedish National Sport Federation (NGB), and several Olympic and Paralympic sports, in order to develop strategies for sport psychological support for the elite athletes and coaches.*

## SUMMARY

This text briefly reviews and critically discusses three domains of importance and relevance to the psychological health of female athletes competing at the elite level: the psychological issues related to parenthood and to the coach–athlete relationship, and subjective wellbeing versus ill-being, which is interdependent with the other two domains. The relationship of perfectionism and performance-based self-esteem to wellbeing is also examined.

## TAKE-HOME MESSAGES:

- Psychological differences *between* genders actually may be smaller than those *within* each gender.
- The biological fact that only women athletes become pregnant is also related to psychological issues around parenthood and continuing sports participation.
- Coach–athlete relationships for most elite female athletes are different from those of male athletes in terms of gender match.
- Female–athlete–coach relationships may involve open or clandestine intimate relationships that can be either debilitating or facilitative to wellbeing and performance.
- With regard to performance *and* wellbeing, coach–athlete relationships must be examined beyond professional roles, including feelings of closeness and interpersonal attraction.
- In general, women’s levels of happiness and subjective wellbeing have been steadily declining since 1972, and women are placing increasing importance on too many domains in their life.
- Characteristics of *perfectionism* and *performance-based self-esteem* influence the perception of stress in all important life domains, including sport.
- Perfectionism is about the compulsive and unremitting pursuit of impossible goals, with self-worth defined by productivity and accomplishment.
- Striving for perfection and using external performance evaluation as a basis for self-worth is stressful for anyone in a competitive context.
- Commitment to elite sports, regardless of gender, is not primarily about maintaining good health; it is about pushing the limits to constantly enhance performance.
- More work is required to understand the psychological experience of being an elite athlete and how to promote the subjective wellbeing of individual athletes, regardless of gender.

## INTRODUCTION

A database search of published research abstracts using the search term ‘female athletes and psychology’ resulted in 40 citations, with the first entry concerning eating disorders. Apparently, female athletes have received limited attention in sports psychology research. This deficiency was noted about 25 years ago by Pemberton and Petlichkoff (1988) in their article ‘Sport psychology and the female Olympic athlete — an uncharted frontier’. However, their exhortation that more research be carried out on female athletes has had limited impact on the field of sports psychology research.

In the existing research, inconsistent gender differences have been reported with regard to motivational profiles, pre-competition anxiety, competitiveness, self-confidence, self-esteem and cognitive strategies. However, after the type of sport and the level of participation have been accounted for, it has been suggested that the differences *between* genders actually may be smaller than those *within* each gender. This notion is supported by research that assessed various psychological skills in elite and ‘sub-elite’ athletes. The skills assessed included goal setting, relaxation, activation, imagery, self-talk, attention and emotional control. Male and female elite athletes showed no differences, but the psychological skills of both genders of elite athletes were significantly greater than those of their sub-elite counterparts.

Furthermore, when examining potential differences in psychological characteristics, researchers should consider contextual and cultural influences. For example, the cultural influence of what have traditionally been regarded as typically ‘masculine’ sports such as rugby, ice hockey and weightlifting, as compared to the more ‘feminine’ aesthetic sports such as figure skating, gymnastics, dancing and diving. In aesthetic sports, the athlete’s body (i.e. appearance) is judged in both training and competition—and the female athletes are always dressed in revealing sports attire. In addition, there is a widespread belief that a leaner athlete will perform better, which often causes sportswomen, especially those in aesthetic sports, to strive for so-called competitive thinness. In this culture, ‘Fat don’t fly’ is a common catchcry. Stop for a moment and ask yourself: Why is the attire of sportswomen generally more revealing than that of sportsmen in the same sport? Seek out some pictures and compare. Reflect upon the psychological impact this difference may have on female athletes.

This chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the 40 articles mentioned above; rather, its purpose is to briefly review and critically discuss three domains of importance and relevance to female athletes competing at the elite level. The first two domains are the psychological issues related to parenthood and to the coach–athlete relationship; then we will discuss in more detail subjective wellbeing versus ill-being, since it is interdependent with the other two domains. We do not claim that these issues are exclusive to female athletes; however, each domain appears to illustrate qualitative differences between the experiences of the genders. Although the domains described are based on limited research, the ideas presented are supported by dialogue with several elite female athletes, Olympic sports psychologists and colleagues. However, the domains have also been chosen to challenge you, the reader, to critically reflect upon these—and potentially other—themes relevant to female athletes.

## PARENTHOOD

The most obvious difference between men and women is often overlooked, being regarded as simply a biological difference: women can become pregnant. As we all know, you can become a parent in various ways: 'by accident' (an unplanned pregnancy), after conscious efforts with a partner or, sometimes, with medical assistance. In all relationships—be they between sportspeople or non-sportspeople—issues related to discussing possibilities, making a decision to have a child, and eventually becoming parents will encompass great psychological changes in life circumstances. Consider a female Olympic athlete aged over 30 years thinking about a good time to become pregnant. Many thoughts may arise for her. For example: Perhaps a pregnancy between Olympic Games is best? If so, should I become pregnant immediately after one Games to allow 3 years to return to peak physical fitness for the next Olympics? But could I manage to train twice a day, and compete and travel 100 days a year with a one-year-old child demanding food and attention all the time? Will my partner, teammates, coach and society accept this situation? Will I have overwhelming feelings of guilt that make it difficult to focus on and engage with my sport? Perhaps it's better to wait until I've finished my competitive career—if I'm not too old by then? Again, please reflect upon the kind of thoughts and decisions a female athlete may have to deal with, and what psychological effects they may have.

Interestingly, Swedish data from 2011 revealed that only three mothers were playing football in the women's super league, in contrast to about 100 fathers playing in the men's super league. The average age of the women was 25.7 years, which is close to the men's average age of 26.5 years. Why this difference in parenthood status? The research literature provides no answers. In addition, you might find that female athletes would answer this question differently from their male counterparts. However, it is obvious that the physical reality of a nine-month pregnancy followed by—in most cases—having the greatest responsibility for the child during its first year will hinder mother-athletes in the highly competitive environment of elite sport. Taking maternity leave will also result in a large drop in ranking in some sports, which makes a comeback somewhat more difficult.

No available, comprehensive statistics exist about parenthood and either team or individual sports. A recent study of all top-ten tennis players (97 women and 144 men) investigated their success and decline in the sport. Age at the highest level reached, based on the number of victories per season, was 21.5 years for the women and 23.7 years for the men. The careers of the women also declined earlier than those of the men. This earlier peaking and age at retirement of the women may be related to a desire to have children.

Another interesting phenomenon related to partnerships is the widespread label 'player's wife'. The stereotype often portrayed by the media is an attractive female who supports her male partner simply by cheering for his team at the games with all the other wives and girlfriends. Male athletic success and fame seems to attract lots of women. A Google search with the Swedish word 'spelarfru' (player's wife) results in an amazing 11 300 hits, including headlines such as 'Which player has the most beautiful wife?' This is aside from another acronym, 'WAGs', which originates from British male football (soccer) players and their *wives and girlfriends* appearing in the media. Search the web for pictures of WAGs and notice your personal emotional reaction. In stark contrast, it is impossible to find any results about men following their athlete girlfriends or partners—unless they are their female partner's personal coach. In fact, the coach of many successful female athletes is also their husband or partner. Furthermore, many successful sportswomen are coached by one or both of their parents. Once again, this situation contrasts sharply with that of elite male athletes, who rarely have their girlfriend or mother as coach.

## COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIPS

The first point to note about the coach–athlete relationship is that the emotions, thought processes and behaviours of the coach and the athletes are interdependent. In addition, the coach–athlete relationship is arguably the most important relationship in the sports world. Coaches' behaviour does matter and can be either facilitative or debilitating to the wellbeing and performance of their athletes.

With this in mind, we should note that the coach–athlete relationships for many of the best female athletes are quite different from those of male athletes in terms of the gender match. At the Olympic level, female coaches are rarities. In this context, many female-athlete–coach relationships develop into love and marriage. This phenomenon is anecdotally reported in team sports, but is more common in individual sports. In any sport that involves a number of athletes (e.g. regular team sports or teams for swimming and track and field events), such a relationship will likely influence group dynamics. A major concern relates to fairness regarding any type of selection procedure (e.g. traditional team selection or selecting individual athletes for single events, relays and doubles, etc.), in addition to other ethical issues besides the lawful age of the individuals. The husband–wife relationship may also be affected in terms of increased domestic conflict if a coach and an athlete are in a partner relationship. In the worst-case scenario, a temporary separation or a divorce will seriously affect the coach–athlete relationship.

Currently, the frequency of stable or temporary intimate relationships is unknown; however, some preliminary research on Canadian elite athletes reported that 22% of the female athletes had engaged in sexual intercourse with a male coach or a man in a position of authority in the sports world. In contrast, a recent Swedish study reported that only 2% of the athletes had had or were currently engaged in an intimate and loving relationship with one or more coaches. Three percent reported having had a temporary sexual relationship with one or more coaches. That is, a total of 5% of the women reported having had a sexual relationship with one or more coaches. However, the large difference between the Canadian and Swedish studies may partly be explained by the inclusion of both male and female athletes in the Swedish study.

Another frequently occurring example of a coach–athlete relationship that involves more than the professional roles is that of female athletes who have their father or mother as a coach. The parent-as-coach relationship may involve conflicting roles that cause stress to either the coach–athlete or the parent–daughter relationship. Most issues that cause conflict mirror those found in athlete–coach relationships involving partnerships. The majority of governing bodies report a lack of policies or rules regarding coach–athlete relationships, but there are some exceptions. However, we must remember that not all such relationships are problematic; in fact, there are many examples of great performance success associated with these frequently occurring relationships.

Moreover, successful athletes, regardless of gender, have emphasised the importance of all the support they have received from their coaches throughout their athletic career. Overwhelming evidence supports the view that this relationship is fundamentally important in an athlete's development. However, coach–athlete relationships need to be approached with caution since they not only have the potential to be facilitative, but can also be debilitating in nature. Strong evidence shows that some of these relationships can become a source of stress and dissatisfaction, can promote feelings of entrapment and can result in diminished performance and lowered self-esteem.

Undoubtedly, the nature and characteristics of the coach–athlete relationship have an important role in guiding and developing the athlete not only as a performer, but also in their personal development. Therefore, we need further research to better understand all aspects of the coach–athlete relationship: the feelings of closeness, including interpersonal attraction, trust and respect; the co-oriented thoughts, such as common beliefs and goals; and the complementary roles and tasks. This research should examine not only the professional roles and relationships between coaches and athletes, but also the associated and often entwined relationships and roles such as parent and daughter and married and intimate couples. Further, addressing these questions in coach education programs is highly recommended. Sports governing bodies would also benefit from developing more explicit policies regarding coach–athlete relationships.

## **SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING VERSUS ILL-BEING: THE RELATIONSHIP OF PERFECTIONISM AND SELF-ESTEEM**

As initially noted, the two previous domains (parenthood and the coach–athlete relationship) will influence and interact with subjective feelings of wellbeing and ill-being. Modern research regarding subjective wellbeing, commonly labelled as the hedonic perspective, mostly focuses on happiness, the presence of positive affect, the absence of negative affect and the degree of life-satisfaction. These characteristics are frequently measured with self-report questionnaires. In this context, women have notably made tremendous progress since 1972 in many life domains (areas), including in the domain of competitive sports. Yet, despite this progress, women's levels of happiness and subjective wellbeing have been steadily declining since 1972—both in absolute terms and relative to men's status. These controversial research findings were published in an article called 'The paradox of declining female happiness' (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2009).

Furthermore, women today are twice as likely as men to develop depression. How can this decline in female happiness, or increase in ill-being, be explained? Although Stevenson and Wolfers do not review the reasons behind this decline, they do suggest some possible explanations. One possible reason is that women are placing increasing importance on too many domains in their life, resulting in feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed. In fact, according to the Monitoring the Future Survey, young women are progressively attaching greater importance to 13 of the 14 life domains examined. This is the most striking feature when wellbeing trends during the past four decades are examined in young women and men in the USA.

It is difficult to find a clear, straightforward answer to this generally occurring phenomenon in wellbeing, which is also evident in sports psychology research. Firstly, it has been previously noted that sportsmen and sportswomen in the same sport and at similar levels of participation possess similar psychological profiles. Secondly, sports science research has reported no, small or inconsistent gender differences with regard to maladaptive disorders related to excessive stress in sports, namely the overtraining syndrome and athlete burnout. Thirdly, a recent review of 17 articles in sports psychology concluded that reliable comparisons across studies or gender are difficult due to the inconsistent definitions of wellbeing and the large variety of assessments used in the studies. The review further noted a lack of empirical knowledge about what constitutes subjective wellbeing in the more specific contextual domain of sport.

Nevertheless, the higher levels of stress and the lower levels of wellbeing reported among women in general may transfer to female athletes. We will briefly discuss this notion in the light of *perfectionism* and *performance-based self-esteem*, since both characteristics influence the perception of stress in all the life domains perceived as important, including sport. People who lack a basic sense of self-worth will constantly strive to enhance their self-esteem by doing well and will value themselves by external standards. The term 'performance-based self-esteem' (also called competence-based self-esteem) refers to self-esteem that is contingent (dependent) on competence and achievements. The concept of performance-based self-esteem also infers that a person with low basic self-esteem will compensate through excessive striving for success and perfection.

General research on stress has found that the process of 'burnout' in women differs from that in men; in women, performance-based self-esteem and maladaptive perfectionism are implicated to a greater extent in the unhealthy, dysfunctional process that leads to burnout. Further, sports psychology research indicates that sportswomen score marginally higher on perfectionism than sportsmen do. A high vulnerability to excessive stress is associated with individuals who base their self-value on success and perfection. Perfect is the enemy of 'good enough', and the desire to strive for perfection is arguably a dangerous, unhealthy driving force.

The core dimensions of perfectionism include the pursuit of exceedingly high or extreme, rigid standards; harsh, self-critical evaluation and a preoccupation with shortcomings that leads to doubts about ability; over-generalisation of failure; and the tying of self-acceptance to performance and accomplishments. Here is a basic but telling definition of perfectionism: 'Perfectionism is about the compulsive and unremitting pursuit of impossible goals where self-worth is defined by productivity and accomplishment'.

Obviously, the theoretical construct of perfectionism is closely related to performance-based self-esteem, and they are both amplified by the competitive, critical, judgmental, controlling and outcome-oriented climate and context often found in elite sports. Both climate and context can increase arousal, stress and anxiety in any performance situation, including in other life domains besides sport. Male athletes seem to find it easier to focus on a limited number of important life domains—sometimes, in fact, only the single domain of sport—rather than to worry about performing well in multiple domains. Although this singular focus may be beneficial in the short to medium term, it may be associated with negative effects in the long term; for example, the potentially difficult transition to a 'normal life' after an elite athletic career.

This difference in the number of life domains to which men and women attach importance may partly explain the difference in their educational achievements. In Sweden and Norway, female athletes generally have both higher-level educational degrees and better grades than those of male athletes. This gender difference is also evident among younger elite-level athletes in the Swedish system for college athletes (Riksidrottsgymnasier). Of note, a study of recent statistics in Sweden (Högskoleverket och statistiska centralbyrån) concluded that the most diligent student is typically a female aged between 22 and 24 years, and that female students completed more exams than did male students at any age or in any program. Another plausible explanation for the greater academic achievements of sportswomen is that female athletes often face a harsher reality, with limited financial resources, as compared to the conditions for male athletes. Consequently, only a small number of female athletes can make a living from being semi-professional or fully professional in their chosen sport.



Striving for perfection and using external performance evaluation as a basis for self-worth is stressful for anyone in a competitive context. As in occupational burnout, it may be that this combination better explains the process leading to overtraining and burnout syndrome in female athletes. In general, the stress from excessive training, paired with inadequate time for recovery, plays an essential role in overtraining and the burnout syndrome. However, excessive training alone is seldom the primary cause of overtraining syndrome. Rather, it appears that the total amount of stress exceeds the athlete's capacity to cope. Training and non-training stressors combine to produce the total stress load, which also limits recovery and may therefore result in overtraining syndrome and, ultimately, in burnout. In fact, the *physiological* stress response to an acute bout of physical exercise parallels the effect of acute *psychological* stressors. Prolonged psychological stress experienced in a highly competitive environment, in combination with a high physiological training load, will put many athletes at risk of non-functional overtraining. The following poem was written by an elite female athlete during her experience of a severe case of overtraining syndrome.

*Oh tiredness, where do you come from?  
When you cover my body with your blanket,  
or wipe out my vision, I crave for sleep.  
Right then, right there.  
I lie down on the ground, close my eyes.  
Leave everything.  
Do not speak with me.  
Do not ask me to speak.  
Do not demand me to smile.  
Let me be still.  
Let me.  
Allow me.  
Forgive me.*

Sadly, some elite athletes feel that this poem essentially captures and reflects the experience of their constant daily struggle to be an elite athlete. Dealing with feelings of fatigue, exhaustion and pain is simply a part of many athletes' identity. More explicitly, being an elite sportsperson, regardless of gender, is not primarily about maintaining good health; it is all about pushing the limits to constantly enhance performance.

Another source of non-training stress related to perfectionism and low self-worth, which was mentioned at the beginning of this text is concern about body image. This stress can manifest in eating disorders of various severity, especially in athletes in aesthetic sports where they are required to wear revealing attire, in sports with weight classes, and in weight-bearing sports where a lighter bodyweight is advantageous. A combination of performance-based self-esteem and perfectionism in such sports will increase the risk of developing an unhealthy drive for competitive thinness.

In general, research shows that media messages add to the pressure to be thin, especially those in magazines aimed at younger women. Cahill and Mussap found that, after exposure to ideal images of thin women, female subjects experienced increased anger, anxiety, depression and body dissatisfaction. Another study found that media exposure to similar images predicted eating disorder symptoms, drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction and ineffectiveness in undergraduate women. The more women compare themselves to air-brushed images of 'perfect' models, the greater the contribution to their decline in happiness.

Furthermore, in sports science research, eating disorders have been associated with negative consequences such as overtraining syndrome, overuse injuries (especially

stress fractures), athlete burnout, poor coach–athlete relationships, training dependency and the female athlete triad. The female athlete triad—with the ironic abbreviation FAT—encompasses eating disorders, amenorrhea and osteoporosis. Thus, the prevalence of stress fractures may be high in female athletes in sports that involve running, as these disorders are commonly seen in these sports. In addition to the maladaptive outcomes associated with the female athlete triad, performance-based self-esteem and perfectionism have been associated with over-commitment to training despite pain, minor injuries and illnesses.

In sharp contrast to the maladaptive striving for achievement seen in athletes with perfectionism and performance-based self-esteem, internally regulated (intrinsic) motivation is highly desirable. Research shows that intrinsic motivation facilitates more interest, excitement and confidence, which results in enhanced performance, persistence, creativity, self-esteem and wellbeing.

Self-determination theory emphasises the importance of fulfilling three basic needs in order to facilitate wellbeing and a high degree of self-determined motivation. The three needs are perceived competence, relatedness and autonomy, and fulfilment of these needs is associated with healthy and adaptive striving for achievement. Each of these basic needs may be either thwarted or fulfilled and is potentially influenced by gender in sport. For example, female athletes are often socialised into playing sport at an early age; however, they receive limited support for autonomy in terms of seeking a professional athletic career, especially in traditionally masculine sports. In addition, many of the best female athletes push and evaluate themselves through seeking greater competition, sometimes through finding male training partners. Also, sports media frequently compare and judge the performance and competence of world-class female athletes in various sports against that of their male counterparts. For instance, female football players are frequently interviewed by prejudiced journalists who use the performance and professionalism of male footballers as the norm. The women are thus disadvantaged and often must defend themselves and their performance. Does this frequent comparison to a male standard influence the women's perceived competences to any degree?

In conclusion, sports participation can promote subjective wellbeing through healthy striving for achievement; however, certain circumstances more frequently seen in the context of sport at the elite level can be detrimental to wellbeing and performance. I therefore challenge sports practitioners and sports scientists to advance knowledge about the psychological perspectives associated with wellbeing and ill-being in the context of elite sports in general and, specifically, in female elite sports. In this regard, I have modified a quote from positive psychology:

Look for male psychology and you will find it. Look for female psychology and you will find it. *Look for both*, and we may begin to understand how they fit together.

I believe that to fully understand what it means to be an elite athlete from a psychological perspective would be far easier if we first have a comprehensive understanding of the experience of both genders. Essentially, more work is required to fulfil this quest for understanding and to promote the subjective wellbeing of individual elite athletes, regardless of gender.

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