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Home / Articles / Aggression in Sport

Aggression in Sport

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In sport, aggression is a characteristic that can have many negative as well as positive effects on performance. Aggression is defined as “any form of behaviour directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another lived being who is motivated to avoid such treatment” (Baron & Richardson, 1994). Most people view aggression as a negative psychological characteristic, however some sport psychologists agree that aggression can improve performance (Widmeyer & Birch, 1984). This is called an assertive behaviour (Bredemeier, 1994), where a player will play within the rules of the sport at a very high intensity, but will have no intention to harm an opponent. In sport, aggression has been defined into two categories: hostile aggression and instrumental aggression (Silva, 1983). Hostile aggression is when the main aim is to cause harm or injury to your opponent. Instrumental aggression is when the main aim is to be non-aggressive but to win the ball. Coulomb and Pfister (1998) conducted a study looking at aggression in high-level sport. They found that experienced athletes used more instrumental aggression in which they used to their advantage and that hostile aggression was less frequently used. Experienced athletes used self-control to help them with their aggression.

A question that can be asked is where does this aggression come from. The frustration aggression theory (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939) states that aggression occurs because frustration arises due to a goal blockage. However this theory states that every time a player becomes frustrated this will always cause aggression. This theory does not take into account any other intrinsic or extrinsic factors.

On the other hand the general aggression model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) argues that situational and personal factors play a role in causing a person to behave aggressively. Therefore, a player’s personality will play a large role in determining whether they are aggressive or not in certain situations. This model also takes into account socially learnt cues and therefore if a player has been taught not to be aggressive in certain situation then he will not use aggression.

It can be seen that aggression comes from a variety of sources and it is important to understand

ABOUT ADAM MORRIS

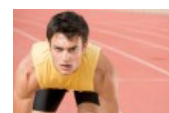


I recently graduated from Nottingham Trent University where I completed a degree in Psychology with Sport Science. I am now currently taking a Masters in Sport and Exercise Psychology. Experience: I have been lucky enough to work at Arsenal FC as a community coach. As well as working for Arsenal I was given the opportunity to work alongside five ex professional managers (inc. Kevin Blackwell, Martin Allen, John Deehan) as an assistant manager. Having had previous experience in team leadership and in the coaching of younger players, I have had the chance to see how players cope with challenges, what factors might lead to good team bonding and team play, and how important mental, psychological and physical preparation is for maximizing performance.

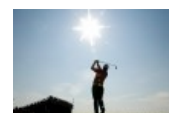
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where these sources stem from. Therefore sport stressors allow us to understand what causes an athlete to become frustrated which can lead to aggression and a decline in performance.

In a player’s career they will come across a number of high-pressured situations where they will have to deal with many stressors. These can range from personal stressors such as worry and anxiety, to situational stressors such as team-related problems. Much research on stress in sport has been focused on golf and figure skaters, therefore identifying stressors in a team environment is very important (Gould, Jackson & Finch, 1993). Stress can have a very negative impact on performance and has been shown to even increase the likelihood of injury (Blackwell & McCullagh, 1990). Noblet and Gifford (2002) studied Australian football players, looking at the different stressors that they experience. They found that the pressure to perform constantly, poor form and high expectations were all key stressors that affected the players. As well as this, players also found it hard to balance their sport and other commitments. This research can prove very important for psychologists and how they help these players deal with these stressors. In elite sport the main type of stress that has been studied is organisational stress. Shirom (1982) defined organisational stress as “work related social psychological stress”. Woodman and Hardy (2001) investigated organisational stress in elite athletes and they found that there were four main stress issues, which were personal, team, leadership and environmental. Within team issues a large factor that caused stress was tension among athletes. Fletcher and Hanton (2003) conducted a similar study looking at organisational stress and they found that the coach athlete tension was a large contributing factor. Therefore strict coaching and negative feedback can affect performance in many ways.

Learning how to deal with sport stressors is key as players must find ways to overcome these problems. In sport psychology, little research has been focused on the coping processes of elite players. It has only just recently been of interest to sport psychologists and is something which needs to be addressed in more detail to improve our understanding (Hardy, Jones & Gould, 1996). Looking at the coping processes of young elite players will allow us to understand how the players deal with stressful situations. To learn more check out our article looking at coping in sport.

Aggression

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