

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATION IN SPORTS

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Abstract:

The psychological motivation is defined as the internal energy force that dictates all facets of human behavior, influencing how individuals think, feel and interact with others. In competitive sport, high motivation is widely recognized as an essential prerequisite for athletes to fulfill their full potential. This paper explores the psychological motivation in sports primarily through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT)I, which posits that motivation exists along a continuum ranging from amotivation to intrinsic motivation. SDT emphasizes the importance of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—in fostering self-determined engagement. The highest motivational state, Flow, characterized by complete immersion and a perfect match between challenge and skill, is detailed. Furthermore, the recent research suggests that a blend of high extrinsic and high intrinsic motivation, provided the intrinsic foundation is strong, yields the most positive outcomes for adult athletes. Finally, the article outlines four evidence-based motivational techniques—goal setting, using extrinsic rewards informationally, motivational music, and positive self-talk—that coaches and practitioners can utilize to enhance sustained performance and psychological well-being.

Keywords: Motivation, self-determination theory, athlete performance

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Introduction:

Motivation is the internal process that initiates, directs, and sustains goal-oriented behavior. It shapes both the direction and the intensity of an individual's actions. In sport, the relentless drive required to train rigorously, compete at peak levels, and strive continuously for improvement often distinguishes elite performers. Dwight D. Eisenhower once captured this idea, stating that motivation is "the art of getting people to do what you want them to do because they want to do it". Motivation is crucial not only for performance outcomes but also for influencing an athlete's mental toughness, emotional regulation, enjoyment level, resilience and long-term commitment to the activity.

While motivation is abstract and sometimes elusive, elite athletes, such as the 45-year-old sprinter Merlene Ottey, who competed in her seventh Olympics in Athens in 2004, demonstrate an exceptional ability to channel their energies effectively. Motivation, in this context, is essentially about the direction of effort over a prolonged period of time.

The Self-Determination Continuum:

The behavioral regulations within SDT can be placed on a continuum, moving from the least self-determined to the most self-determined:

1. **Amotivation:** This represents a complete lack of intention to engage in a behavior. It is characterized by feelings of incompetence and a perceived disconnect between one's actions and the expected outcome. An amotivated athlete might state, "I can't see the point in training any more—it just tires me out". These athletes often experience a sense of helplessness and are highly prone to dropping out, sometimes requiring counseling.
2. **External Regulation:** This is a non-self-determined, or controlling, type of extrinsic motivation. The behavior is driven purely by external factors, and athletes do not sense their behavior is choiceful, leading to psychological pressure. Examples include participating solely to receive prize money, win a trophy/gold medal, or avoid negative evaluation or punishment.
3. **Introjected Regulation:** This is also a controlling form of extrinsic motivation, though the pressure is internalized. Athletes participate under internal pressure, such as feelings of guilt or to achieve recognition.
4. **Identified Regulation:** This marks the beginning of the self-determined types of extrinsic motivation, where behavior is initiated out of choice, although the activity itself might not be inherently enjoyable. The athlete engages in the behavior because it is highly valued.
5. **Integrated Regulation:** When a behavior becomes integrated, it is in harmony with one's sense of self and is almost entirely self-determined. For instance, completing daily flexibility exercises because the athlete realizes they are a crucial part of the overarching goal of enhanced performance represents integrated regulation. Identified and integrated regulations account for why athletes devote hundreds of hours to mundane drills; they realize the activity will help them improve.
6. **Intrinsic Motivation:** This is the most self-determined form, characterized by internal interest and enjoyment derived directly from sports participation. There are three specific subtypes:
 - *Intrinsic motivation to know.*
 - *Intrinsic motivation to accomplish.*
 - *Intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation.* Intrinsic motivation reflects an athlete's drive to perform an activity simply for the reward inherent in their participation.

Basic Psychological Needs:

SDT further posits that the quality of motivation is highly influenced by the satisfaction of three innate psychological needs:

1. **Autonomy:** The need to feel a sense of **control and agency** over one's actions and decisions. In sports, this involves having a say in training plans or selecting personal goals.
2. **Competence:** The need to feel **effective and capable** of achieving desired outcomes, requiring appropriate challenges and feedback to develop a sense of mastery.

3. **Relatedness:** The need to feel **connected, accepted, and supported** by others, emphasized by a positive team environment and supportive coach-athlete relationships.

When these needs are satisfied, athletes are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation and sustained effort, leading to improved performance. Conversely, if these needs are thwarted, motivation and performance may decrease.

Flow: The Ultimate Motivational State

According to Hungarian psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *the highest level of intrinsic motivation is the flow state*.² Flow is defined by complete immersion in an activity to the degree that nothing else matters.

The core requirement for achieving flow is a **perfect match** between the perceived demands of an activity (challenge) and an athlete's perceived ability or skills. During flow, athletes lose self-consciousness and become "one with the activity". For example, a World champion canoeist described the paddle feeling like an extension of her arms while in flow.

Motivational imbalances prevent flow and result in different psychological states:

- An overbearing or unrealistic challenge relative to skill can cause **excess anxiety**.
- If athletes bring a high level of skill to an activity that provides a relatively low challenge—such as a world-class player like *Ronaldinho* playing in a minor football league—this can result in **boredom**.
- When both challenge and skill are low, the resulting state is **apathy**.

To promote flow, coaches must ensure athletes set realistic goals and introduce challenges that stretch them "just a touch further than they have been stretched before".

A qualitative study that explored "why does the 'fire' of elite athletes burn so brightly?" involved interviews with 10 elite Australian track and field athletes. The research aimed to demystify the differences between high achievers and "also-rans". Three overarching themes emerged:

1. Elite athletes set personal goals based on **both self-determined and extrinsic motives**.
2. They possessed a **high self-belief** in their ability to succeed.
3. Their sport was **central to their lives**—everything revolved around their involvement.

Using cluster analysis, two "motivation profiles" have been identified among adult athletes. The first profile was characterized by **high levels of both controlling (extrinsic) and self-determined (intrinsic) behavioral regulations**, while the second showed high self-determined and low controlling motivation. The first profile reported higher levels across eight positive motivation outcomes, including enjoyment, effort, positive affect, satisfaction, and frequency of attendance. This finding suggests that for adult athletes, the **simultaneous presence of high extrinsic and high intrinsic motivation** likely yields the most positive benefits.

However, the sources stress that it is absolutely **critical that extrinsic motives are nurtured on a firm foundation of high intrinsic motivation**. Without strong intrinsic motivation, athletes are prone to dropping out when faced with setbacks like injury, non-selection, or demotion. A follow-up study confirmed these profiles and also noted that participants in the highly motivated cluster (Cluster 1) reported better concentration on the task at hand.

Practical Motivational Techniques for Coaches and Athletes:

Coaches and analysts play a critical role in shaping motivation through their feedback and interactions. By creating a supportive and **autonomy-supportive environment**, coaches can foster intrinsic motivation, which is associated with increased performance and enhanced well-being. *Dr. Richard Ryan* noted that the most effective coaches are those who support the psychological needs of their athletes, cultivating a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Four evidence-based techniques are recommended for enhancing motivation:

1. Goal Setting: Goal setting works best when there is flexibility, and the individual athlete takes ownership of the goals; thus, coaches should exercise some democracy when setting goals, particularly with experienced athletes. *Athletes should be empowered to set their own goals to enhance acceptance and enthusiasm*³. Goal setting involves defining three time horizons:

- **Long-Term Goals:** These should be ambitious yet achievable, perhaps focusing on major championships several years away.
- **Medium-Term Goals:** These are set to keep athletes on track toward their long-term objectives. For example, *Kelly Sotherton* set the medium-term goal of winning the 2006 Commonwealth title on her path toward the 2008 *Beijing Olympics*.
- **Short-Term Goals:** In practical terms, these are the most important, as they keep athletes focused on the seminal checkmarks necessary for superior performance. Short-term goals should be predominantly **process-oriented**. For example, when *Wayne Rooney* was injured before the soccer World Cup, he set process goals like daily physiotherapy, remedial exercises in an oxygen chamber, and nutritional monitoring to regain fitness. Goals must be monitored and revised regularly.

2. Using Extrinsic Rewards: When utilizing extrinsic rewards, the key aspect, according to SDT, is ensuring they reinforce an athlete's sense of competence and self-worth. The reward must be **informational in nature rather than controlling**. If a reward becomes perceived as controlling, it can significantly undermine intrinsic motivation.

To maintain an informational focus, it is advisable that the reward has relatively little monetary worth (a **token reward**), such as a "woman of the match" title. The reward should be presented publicly, with emphasis placed on the associated prestige. Other popular token rewards include etching names on honors boards or awarding special items of clothing.

3. Motivational Music: Music that athletes perceive to be inspirational is a particularly effective way to enhance motivation during training and prior to competition. Research indicates that regulating work and recovery times with music—using loud/fast music during effort periods (like circuit training) and soft/slow music during recovery periods—can **increase work output, reduce perceived exertion, and improve in-task affect** (pleasure experienced during the activity).

4. Positive Self-Talk: It is a technique that uses an athlete's powerful inner voice to reinforce their self-esteem or vital aspects of performance. Appropriate repetition of self-talk can positively alter an athlete's belief

system. Three types of positive self-talk are used:

- **Task-Relevant Self-Talk:** Focuses the athlete's attention on the immediate task. *Example:* A karateka used the mantra 'pillar of power' to reinforce strong posture.
- **Mood-Related Self-Talk:** Impacts how athletes feel. *Example:* An international water skier used 'butterflies in formation' to ensure pre-competition anxiety worked for her instead of against her.
- **Positive Self-Affirmation Statement:** A direct claim reinforcing self-belief, most famously used by legendary boxer *Mohammed Ali*, who repeated the claim, "I am the greatest," so many times that even his opponents believed it. *Ali* himself noted: "I figured that, if I said it enough, I would convince the world that I really was the greatest".

Conclusion:

The psychological motivation is not just one component of athletic performance; it is the psychological engine driving persistence, goal-directed behavior, and excellence in sport. The core premise of SDT, exploring the continuum of motivational regulation, clarifies that while extrinsic motivation has its place, **intrinsic motivation**—rooted in personal satisfaction, enjoyment, and a sense of ownership—is the most powerful and enduring predictor of sustained commitment, psychological resilience, and overall well-being.

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