



# **Preventing Burnout in Elite Sport**

**Chris Lonsdale**

**The Chinese University of Hong Kong**



# Who is concerned about Athlete Burnout?

## Players

("Steve Waugh worried about player burnout", 2001).

## Coaches

("French season too long: Laporte", 2005),

## Administrators

("Tennis burnout rule holds back hot property", 2003)





# What is Athlete Burnout?

## Three symptoms

1. Emotional and Physical Exhaustion
2. Sport Devaluation
3. Reduced Sense of Accomplishment



# Athlete Burnout...



*“I didn’t really want to play - no desire to play whatsoever, I didn’t want to turn up. [I would be] sitting there going ‘What am I doing here? It’s a beautiful sunny day, I could be out’. I started thinking about other things I could be doing, thinking about [travelling] overseas.... I found I was getting quite tired in games. I was rooted, physically knackered [i.e., exhausted]. I’d turn up and play and be rooted in the warm up”*



# What is Athlete Burnout?

1. Exhaustion
2. Devaluation – “I don’t care anymore”
3. Low Accomplishment – “I’m not achieving much”

Important:

- months/years not days/weeks
- not always dropout



# What Causes Burnout?

- Physiological:
  - Over-training / under recovery?
- Psychological:
  - Motivational issues? (ext. vs. int.)
  - Stress?
  - Underlying psych causes?



# What Causes Burnout?

## Basic Needs Theory

1. Autonomy  $\leftrightarrow$  Choice
2. Competence  $\leftrightarrow$  Confidence
3. Relatedness  $\leftrightarrow$  Close Relationships



# Basic Needs Theory

## 1. Autonomy:

“My opinions are taken into consideration”

## 2. Competence:

“I am good at my sport”

## 3. Relatedness:

“I get along well with people in my sport”







# Our Research: Method

Procedure: Questionnaires for basic needs fulfillment and athlete burnout.


Participants:

1. NZ Rugby Academy (n=133) (age = 20)
  2. NZ Academy of Sport (n=343) (age = 24)
  3. PacificSport (Canada) (n=201) (age = 23)
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# Our Research: Results

**Good news:** Most athletes reported positive experiences and low burnout.



**Bad news:** Between 8 and 13 % of athletes were classified as high burnouts.



# Our Research: Results

**Low Needs → Burnout**

**Autonomy + Competence =  
Strong Predictors**

**Relatedness = Modest Predictor**



# Further Research

1. Cross-sectional → Longitudinal →  
Intervention research
2. Cross-cultural issues?
3. Multi-disciplinary research.





# From Research to Practice..

## Promoting Basic Needs Fulfillment:

1. Theory and research.
2. Others' experiences working with elite athletes.
3. My own consulting experiences.







# How can we promote Basic Needs Fulfillment?

Who are “we”?



What specifically can we do?



# Working Together...

Form groups of 4-5.

Include a range of athletes,  
coaches, sport scientists,  
administrators, others.

1. Ideas

2. Specific Methods



# Promoting Autonomy and Competence

1. Focus on self-comparisons.
2. Provide rationale and choices
3. Promote athlete-centred learning.
4. Avoid controlling behaviours



# Feedback and Goals

1. Reduce comparisons with others.
2. Focus on comparisons with self.
3. Focus on effort and performance, downplay outcomes.

Why?

Example...



# Feedback and Goals Example: Baton exchange within zone

1. Times recorded.
2. Players and coaches set goals together.
3. When goals not reached,  
*athletes* look for solutions, guided by coach.
4. Progress *charted*.
5. Goals re-evaluated.
6. Improvements celebrated.





# Provide Rationale and Choices:

Aussie 2000 Olympic Relay Team

**Pre:** Choice of training times, uniforms

**During:**

- Selection -Rationale
- Running Order:

two choices → discuss

**Important:** athletes may need time before they feel confident offering their own opinion.



# Avoid Controlling Behaviours

Coached and Administrators

Avoid using threats and punishment to motivate:

- **short term benefit (?)**
- **long term harm.**



# Promote Athlete-centred Learning: Baton Exchange

1. Two athletes practice an exchange.
2. Participants discuss.
3. Athlete observers give feedback.
4. Observe video
  - athletes make comments.

5. Coaches role

–ask questions:

“Advantages and disadvantages?”

“What was another option?”





# Summary

Initial Evidence:  
Low Autonomy + Competence  
→ Burnout



Promote Needs Fulfilment by:

1. Promoting athlete-centred learning
2. Avoiding controlling behaviours
3. Focusing on self-comparisons.
4. Providing Rationale and Choices



# Final Thought

**Today:**

Only Principles and Ideas



**Application:**

- Requires Creativity and Self-reflection
- Discussion with Peers Helps





Thank you for inviting me!