Factors Influencing the Development of Passion in Collegiate Athletes

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Abstract
Vallerand et al. (2003) pioneered research on psychological passion by categorizing passion as being either harmonious or obsessive. Harmonious passion is associated with positive emotions and well-being and invokes a sense of personal enjoyment and freedom while obsessive passion causes one to feel compelled to engage in an activity for a means other than personal enjoyment (e.g., self-validation, social approval, or external rewards). While the effects of harmonious and obsessive passion have been repeatedly observed, the factors that cause these types of passion to surface have scarcely been studied (Mageau et al., 2009). The current work explores the developmental processes of passion in various collegiate athletes and the differences within these processes that may predict the emergence of either harmonious or obsessive passion. Sixty-five participants completed a survey assessing their passion for sport; and from this pool, researchers selected individuals to interview. Specifically, five athletes with high obsessive passion and five athletes with low obsessive passion and high harmonious passion were selected for a follow-up interview about their sport experience with a focus on the factors that influenced their passion development including the influence of various significant others (e.g., parents, coaches, and other athletes). Some themes were common across the two subgroups including high parental involvement, coaches providing autonomy and encouragement, and a high level of competence early in their career. However, some aspects (e.g., high levels of parental pressure, autonomy support/thwarting behaviors) were more prominent in one group than the other. The findings of this study correspond with existing literature demonstrating that positive emotionality in sport can either be facilitated or hindered by passion (Stenseg et al., 2014); and these results can help coaches, parents and practitioners in creating a youth sport experience that is more likely to cultivate harmoniously passionate athletes.

Keywords
passion, harmonious, obsessive, collegiate athletes

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I. Introduction

- Passion is an innate component in sport. It can provide purpose, incite motivation, promote well-being, and stimulate an enthusiastic commitment to an activity (Curran et al., 2015). Existing literature has repeatedly investigated how passion can affect various aspects of sport. However, passion is a relatively new construct in the field of psychology, the development of passion has seldom been studied.

- Passion in sport is defined as a strong penchant toward an activity that dictates the degree to which an individual engages in the activity, values the activity, and is emotionally connected to the activity (Mageau et al., 2009).

- Valerand et al. (2003) created a model of passion that designates two different types:
  - Harmonious: Facilitated by autonomous internalization of an activity
  - Obsessive: Stemmed from controlled internalization of an activity

- Factors that have been suggested as influential in the development of either harmonious or obsessive passion:
  - Degree of autonomy within an activity
  - Parental/Coach involvement and autonomy support in an activity
  - Degree of identification with an activity
  - Individual vs. team sports

- Research Question 1: What factors influence the development of passion in collegiate athletes?
- Research Question 2: Does the college setting impact the type of passion present in an individual?

II. Participants/Methods

Athletes on the Boise State University tennis, track & field, gymnastics, and golf teams were given the chance to complete a survey assessing their sport passion.

The project took place in two phases:
1. Participants completed the Passion Scale questionnaire. This survey was utilized as a way to select participants for follow up interviews. The final question on the survey asked participants if they would be open to completing a follow up interview regarding their responses.
2. From the survey results, two groups of participants were identified—1) high obsessive passion (OP) & 2) low OP, high harmonious passion (HP). Those who provided an email address for the follow up interview completed a one-on-one semi-structured interview with a member of the research team.
   a. During this interview, the investigators explored participants’ sport journey, specifically looking at sport motivation, athletic identity, sport passion, and involvement of parents, coaches, and others in their sport experience. The interview also focused on how these aspects changed across their sport experience.

III. Results

1. Overall, collegiate athletes had a variety of both intrinsic and extrinsic motives for engagement and those factors typically varied dependent on the time of participation (youth, high school, college)

2. Most participants found a shift in their passion levels after entrance to the college environment with an increase in harmonious passion.

3. The influence of parents and coaches was a key factor in athletes in both harmonious and obsessive passion, but an even stronger predictor was how athletes perceived that influence.

IV. Discussion

- Parents made a large impact on athletes; introducing them to the sport and supporting them in many ways. For many athletes, especially in the obsessive passion group, this support often turned into implicit or explicit pressure that might have influenced athlete’s development of obsessive passion for their sport.
- Parents should make it clear when interacting with their child that their support (either financial or otherwise) does not come with contingencies. Instead, their support is because they love and accept their child, not due to their performance.
- The most influential factor in developing passion for these athletes was what type of motivation athletes had for their sport. For most athletes, coaches shaped this motivation by how they interacted with athletes and the opportunities they provided them in sport.
- Coaches should focus on behaviors that are autonomy supportive such as open communication with the athlete including how the athletes view workouts and performance, providing constructive feedback (vs overly critical feedback), and valuing the athlete for more than their performances.