



Perfectionism in Youth Footballers: The Role of Perfectionistic Thinking

**Research Overview
and Applied
Recommendations**

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1. What is Perfectionism?

Perfectionism involves setting extremely high standards for oneself and striving to achieve them without making any mistakes. While this can sometimes lead to high achievement, it often causes significant stress, anxiety, and a fear of failure.

2. Types of Perfectionism

Self-Oriented Perfectionism: Setting high standards for oneself and being critical of one's own performance.

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism: Feeling pressure to meet the high expectations of others, e.g., parents, coaches, or teammates.

Other-Oriented Perfectionism: Expecting others to be perfect, which can lead to strained relationships.

3. Perfectionistic Cognitions

These are the automatic thoughts around the need to be perfect, such as “I must not fail” or “I have to be the best.” These thoughts can be relentless and make individuals feel inadequate, even when they perform well.

Study 1: The relationship between perfectionism and pre-competition emotions of youth footballers.

Study 2: Perfectionism and pre-competition emotions in youth footballers: A three-wave longitudinal test of the mediating role of perfectionistic cognitions

Aims: We aimed to find out how self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, and perfectionistic cognitions impact footballers' emotions before games, and if perfectionistic thoughts, such as constantly thinking “I must not make any mistakes” explained why athletes with higher levels of perfectionism feel certain pre-competition emotions.

Key findings

- Footballers who felt pressured by others to be perfect (higher in **socially prescribed perfectionism**) were more likely to **feel angry before competitions**. This suggests that believing that others have high expectations may lead to frustration or being upset, even before they start playing.
- Footballers who pushed for high standards for themselves (higher in **self oriented perfectionism**) were more likely to **feel excited before competitions**. This suggests that having high standards can be motivating and lead to positive feelings when preparing for a match.
- Footballers who frequently **thought about needing to be perfect** felt more **anxious, angry, and dejected before competitions**. This suggests that perfectionistic thinking, regardless of whether it is self-imposed or resulting from external pressures, can lead to negative emotional experiences.
- **Perfectionistic thoughts are a key factor in why athletes higher in perfectionism experience negative emotions before competitions**. This means that the more often young athletes have perfectionistic thoughts, the more likely it is that they will feel nervous or angry before competition.

Conclusion

- It is important for coaches and parents to understand that repetitive self-critical thoughts may lead youth footballers to experience anxiety and anger before competition.
- Research by Hill and Appleton (2011) found that the environment created by parents and coaches can increase youth athletes frequency of perfectionistic thoughts.
- Therefore, parents and coaches should be mindful of the impact they have on athletes and the thoughts that they have.

Study 3: Exploring how footballers with perfectionism navigate challenges in talent pathways.

Aim: The study explored how young football players who exhibit high levels of perfectionism deal with the pressures and challenges of talent pathways, such as being in competitive academies. We wanted to understand how perfectionistic athletes respond to challenges such as poor performance, being substituted, or getting injured, and how these responses impact on their well-being.

Key Findings

Perfectionism and Emotional Reactions

- Players with high levels of perfectionism often experience intense anxiety, particularly before competitions. This anxiety is due to external pressure and/or their own high expectations of themselves.
- When perfectionistic players make mistakes, perform poorly, or face setbacks, they tend to be very self-critical, leading to feelings of hopelessness and dejection. They often view even minor errors as catastrophic, which increases their stress and emotional turmoil.

Challenges in Coping

- Players struggle to cope with not being selected for games or being substituted. They interpret these situations as a sign of failure and inadequacy, which affects their self-confidence and can lead to emotional distress.
- Injuries are particularly difficult for these players, as they feel worthless and frustrated when they can't train or play. This sometimes leads them to return to play too soon, risking further injury.

Perfectionistic Thoughts and Rumination

- Players who had frequent perfectionistic thoughts, such as "I must not make mistakes", found it hard to move on from setbacks. Players often replayed mistakes or poor performances in their mind. Players felt undeserving of praise even after a good performance if any aspect of that performance was less than perfect.

Psychological Distress

- Some players experienced severe psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and self-harm, as a result of their intense perfectionistic standards. The unrelenting pressure to achieve perfection created a cycle of self-criticism and despair, leaving them feeling trapped and overwhelmed by their perceived failures.

Sport as Central to Identity

- Football was not just a game but a core part of their identity, with their self-worth deeply tied to their performance. Success on the pitch validated their sense of self, while any perceived failure was difficult to deal with, leading players to make sacrifices such as forgoing social interactions and hobbies in favour of dedicating all their time and energy to football.

Environmental Influences

- The high-pressure football environment emphasised winning and performance, fostering a culture where perfectionism and fear of failure thrived. Harsh feedback and constant competition reinforced negative self-beliefs, significantly impacting athletes' mental health.

Role of Coaches and Parents

- High expectations and critical feedback often intensified athletes' fears of making mistakes, fuelling their perfectionistic tendencies. Placing excessive emphasis on success and achievement contributed to the anxiety felt by the young players.

Study 4: Helping Football Players Help Themselves: Effectiveness of a Psychoeducational Book in Reducing Perfectionism

Aim: The study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a self-help book intervention, "When Perfect Isn't Good Enough" (Antony & Swinson, 2009), in reducing perfectionism, perfectionistic cognitions, and negative pre-competition emotions (anxiety, anger, and dejection) in football players.



Key Findings

- **Reduced Socially Prescribed Perfectionism:** The intervention group decreased in socially prescribed perfectionism compared to the control group. This indicates that the self-help book lessened the pressure athletes felt to meet the high expectations of others, such as coaches and parents.
- **Lower Frequency of Perfectionistic Cognitions:** Participants who used the self-help book experienced a notable reduction in perfectionistic cognitions. This suggests the intervention helped athletes to reduce the occurrence of automatic, self-critical thoughts like "I must be perfect".
- **Decreased Negative Pre-Competition Emotions:** The intervention group reported a significant reduction in feelings of anxiety, anger, and dejection before competitions. This suggests that the self-help book effectively mitigated negative emotions commonly associated with perfectionistic thinking.

Conclusion

- The findings suggest that accessible and self-directed resources can help athletes manage perfectionism and improve their emotional well-being in competitive settings.

What can we do to help?

Set Realistic Expectations

- Help athletes set challenging but achievable goals that are based on their own capabilities and values to help reduce feelings of pressure and anxiety.
- Encourage athletes to connect their efforts to what truly matters to them, such as enjoying the game or teamwork.
- Emphasise effort and enjoyment over results. Praise hard-work, not just victories.

Promote a Growth Mindset and Emphasise Learning

- Encourage athletes to focus on improvement and learning from mistakes rather than striving for perfection. Reinforce the idea that mistakes are a valuable part of the learning process.

Create a Supportive and Balanced Environment

- Cultivate a team culture that values effort, resilience, and mutual support over winning at all costs. Celebrate personal bests, teamwork, and dedication.

Mindfulness and Healthy Coping Strategies

- Introduce mindfulness techniques to help athletes manage stress and perfectionistic thoughts and to stay present rather than getting caught up in the need to be perfect.
- Encourage healthy coping mechanisms such as relaxation techniques and positive self-reflection to handle setbacks.

Recognise Distress

- Be attentive to signs of emotional distress, such as increased anxiety or withdrawal, and provide a safe space for athletes to express their feelings.
- Offer access to mental health resources and professional support if needed so that athletes know they are not alone in managing the pressures they face.