



Athletes behaving badly!

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The media revels in reporting on sporting stars who appear incapable of controlling their behaviour. They are publicly humiliated and scorned, while the sports they represent are criticised for their failure to address problems. Through the perspective of sport and forensic psychology, this article attempts to understand why these behaviours emerge, and appeals to sport organisations to implement preventative rather than reactive measures.

A sport psychologist's perspective: Why elite athletes misbehave

Jeffrey Bond first addressed this issue in his published article 'The Pedestal Syndrome', arguing that both external and internal factors explained why athletes engaged in dysfunctional behaviour.

In relation to *external factors*, Bond argued that the media elevated athletes to positions in society that exaggerated their real worth. Since 1960, 12 out of 48 recipients of the prestigious 'Australian of the Year' award have been sporting identities. Placing sports people on 'pedestals' puts them under much greater stress to perform as 'super humans' in all areas of their lives, leading to dysfunctional coping strategies. Sport hierarchies have also appeared to condone dysfunctional behaviour and/or protect athletes from being punished.

Internal factors include excessive free time, an abundance of funds and the opportunities to misbehave. In addition, Bond argued that should the athlete be a particular personality type that was orientated towards dysfunctional behaviour, the likelihood of inappropriate 'acting out' behaviour was further increased. These personality types typically came from the Cluster B (DSM-IV, Axis II) Personality Disorders that include Antisocial, Borderline, Narcissistic and Histrionic Personality Disorders. Based on data by Jackson and Burgess (2000), 6.5 per cent of the Australian adult population suffer a personality disorder, so, among a selection of 756 registered AFL footballers, 49 players would be expected to display a significant personality disorder.

Recent research on 'emotional labour' (EL) in sport (Sridhar, 2007; Kiely, 2009) highlights the increasing difficulties experienced by professional athletes, specifically in regulating their feelings and expressions in the service of professional sport. EL, first defined by Hochschild (1983) as the "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display during interpersonal interactions" (p. 7), routinely involves 'surface acting' (SA) and 'deep acting' (DA). SA can include faking unfelt emotions (e.g., expressing pleasure while attending mandated appearances in shopping malls) or suppressing felt emotions (such as homesickness and loneliness when away from home). DA is akin to 'method acting', which is used to experience or alter feelings so that desirable emotional displays follow.

Research indicates SA and DA among athletes is induced by media interviewing, codes of behavior conduct, brand management and protection of sponsor investments. A long-term consequence of EL is 'burnout', characterised by exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and sport devaluation. Other negative effects include impaired health, personal dysfunction, insomnia, increased use of alcohol and drugs, as well as marital and family problems.

A forensic psychologist's perspective: Why elite athletes offend

In AFL football, the level of criminal dysfunction is candidly illustrated on a public website (<http://the-specy.blogspot.com/>), citing 71 criminal incidents involving players from every AFL club between 2004 and 2008. Serious offences related to assault (21), sex (6), drink driving (10), drugs/alcohol (16), driving (7), gambling (4) and misconduct/property damage (7), with more than 60 per cent of these resulting in a criminal conviction.

To determine why elite athletes might offend, a forensic psychologist may first ask why criminals offend, and compare elite athletes with that group.

Analysis of criminal offenders

White, Day and Hackett (2007), like Bond, identified internal factors related to the person's psychological profile including measures of personality, intelligence and interpersonal communication style, and external factors related to life stressors and personal supports. Cramer and White (2008) analysed data from a sample of 940 male offenders (mean age 31.6 years), using a selection of psychological tests¹. The study aimed to examine how internal factors (personality, intelligence and interpersonal style) and external factors (stress and lack of personal support) may affect a person's self-rated dysfunctional responses in areas of mental health, personality, substance abuse and 'acting out' behaviours. Results are summarised in Table 1.

Offenders as a group were relatively emotionally stable, of lower than average intelligence and were more submissive in their interpersonal interactions. They reported much less personal support and much higher stress than the normal population. The resulting dysfunctional responses indicated that offenders exhibited significantly greater mental health problems, personality dysfunction, substance abuse problems and 'acting out' behaviour, particularly in the areas of physical aggression, self-harm and suicide ideation.

The offenders' most common type of dysfunction was 'drug problems', and offending related to this could include possession of drugs, drug trafficking, theft to sustain a drug habit, or violent offences as a result of drugs exacerbating risk-taking behaviour. Targeted criminal rehabilitation programs could involve stress

¹Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test; NEO Personality Inventory – Revised; Personality Assessment Inventory; Maroondah Assessment Profile for Gambling; Traumatic Stress Inventory

management, reducing psychological impairment and substance abuse, and addressing anger and impulsivity problems.

Comparable analysis of elite athletes

Sporting organisations were invited to have their athletes participate in a study that could potentially identify individuals at risk. However, there was a general reluctance to participate because “what we don’t know, won’t hurt”. Several AFL football clubs volunteered players on the basis of absolute confidentiality and that it was the players’ responsibility to address any problems identified. The study included a total of 48 AFL footballers (mean age 21.4 years, significantly younger than the offender sample).

The internal factors associated with the AFL footballer profile showed them to be emotionally stable, of average intelligence, attracted to excitement seeking activities and having an interpersonal style of warmth and dominance. Compared with the offenders, AFL footballers were less stressed, impulsive and

emotionally unstable. They had better personal supports, were more intelligent, more attracted to excitement seeking activities and exhibited more leader-like qualities.

The self-report measures of dysfunction indicated that the AFL footballers were more than a standard deviation above the norm for measures of alcohol problems, anxiety, verbal aggression and antisocial behaviour, and measures of drug problems and sexual promiscuity were elevated. The data suggested that AFL footballers were most likely to offend in the context of alcohol usage, through offences such as drunk and disorderly, drink driving, or violent or reckless behaviour.

That AFL footballers were elevated on anxiety scores may be a factor influencing their orientation towards alcohol usage to reduce tension. The relatively high sexual promiscuity scores for AFL footballers compared with offender and normal sample groups suggested AFL footballers may potentially place themselves at greater risk for sex related offences and vulnerability to scandal.

Table 1. Mean scores for male offenders and AFL footballers (Intelligence measure standardised against ‘normal’ population [mean:100; standard deviation:15]; remaining measures T scores standardised against ‘normal’ [mean:50; standard deviation:10])

| | Offenders | AFL footballers | Normal population |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Internal factors | | | |
| <i>Personality</i> | | | |
| Emotional insecurity | 47.1 | 40.6 | 50 |
| Excitement seeking | 46.6 | 56.8 | 50 |
| Impulsivity | 47.1 | 42.2 | 50 |
| <i>Intelligence</i> | 86.3 | 98.6 | 100 |
| <i>Interpersonal style</i> | | | |
| Dominance | 46.7 | 57.3 | 50 |
| Warmth | 50.7 | 59.3 | 50 |
| External factors | | | |
| <i>Lack personal supports</i> | 66.9 | 46.5 | 50 |
| <i>Stress</i> | 61.0 | 46.0 | 50 |
| Dysfunctional responses | | | |
| <i>Mental Health</i> | | | |
| Anxiety Disorder | 68.8 | 60.8 | 50 |
| PTSD | 72.1 | 50.3 | 50 |
| Depression Disorder | 63.8 | 47.0 | 50 |
| Psychotic Disorder | 62.6 | 39.0 | 50 |
| <i>Personality dysfunction</i> | | | |
| Antisocial Personality Disorder | 64.3 | 61.3 | 50 |
| Borderline Personality Disorder | 65.0 | 50.1 | 50 |
| <i>Substance abuse</i> | | | |
| Alcohol problems | 67.4 | 71.3 | 50 |
| Drug problems | 80.2 | 59.8 | 50 |
| <i>Acting out behaviour</i> | | | |
| Verbal aggression | 57.9 | 65.9 | 50 |
| Physical aggression | 61.2 | 52.4 | 50 |
| Self-harm | 63.4 | 48.8 | 50 |
| Suicide ideation | 62.3 | 47.0 | 50 |
| Gambling problems | 47.4 | 49.1 | 50 |
| Sexual promiscuity | 50.0 | 57.8 | 50 |

Conclusions

Sporting identities attract disproportionate attention from the media scrutinising their behaviour and this additional stress may interfere with their lifestyle, and potentially increase their level of general anxiety. Athletes can be paid exorbitant sums of money to play their sport, have considerable free time, and may have personality traits that attract them to risk-taking and dysfunctional behaviour. They are also likely to be targets for gambling, sexual favours and drugs. Young athletes have little awareness or training in dealing with situations likely to lead to dysfunctional behaviour, and often find themselves trapped in a dysfunctional ‘honeypot’, only to become the target of media derision and public scorn or, in the extreme, leading to criminal behaviour.

Sporting organisations should provide group or individual education programs so that ‘at risk’ athletes can develop strategies for dealing with a range of hypothetical circumstances that could bring them trouble. It is also the responsibility of sporting organisations to recognise, address and change problem cultures their sport may attract. The real cost of player dysfunction is high: the media gloat, sponsorships are withdrawn, team unity crumbles and supporters are disillusioned. ■

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