



## Can perfectionism Reduce Football Players' Stress and Athletic Burnout?

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### ABSTRACT

Football withdrawal has always created many psychological problems for players and it has had destructive effects on their health. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of perfectionism on the reduction stress and athletic burnout in football players. The statistical population of this study included all football players at youth level in Guilan, Iran. 378 players were selected as a sample size through random sampling method. A combination of valid and reliable standard questionnaires was distributed to collect the research data. Research hypotheses were analyzed by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, Pearson correlation coefficient, and linear regression. The SPSS software (version 24) was used for data analysis ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ). The results showed that there was a significant correlation between athletic burnout and positive perfectionism (-0.622), negative perfectionism (0.555), problem-oriented strategy (-0.358), and emotion-oriented strategy (0.401). According the results of this study, developing efficient plans with focusing on the psychological variables of perfectionism, stress, and athletic burnout can improve the coaches' awareness of coaching behaviors as well as increasing athletes' optimal mental performance and efficiency.

### Introduction

Today, football is the leader of all important events in the world of professional sports and has a special place among the most popular and attractive sports (Lathlean, Gastin, Newstead, & Finch, 2019). Football players in sports clubs have a serious responsibility and their presence is necessary and inseparable to create this social process. Football is one of the most stressful sports in the world

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and the profession of a football player has always been associated with high stress and anxiety due to interpersonal conflicts (Mousavi et al., 2020). The possibility of a player's burnout is more observed in sports that the percentage of players' physical contact with each other is high (Auer et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, football is the most exciting sport in the world among high-impact sports and the occurrence of this sensitivity creates a lot of stress for players' attitude of this sport. Thus, the persistence of stress that indicates the physical-chemical, mental, and emotional reactions of the body to sensitive events and situations causes an interference in a person's general process that has very severe consequences (Lambert, Lambert, & Ito, 2004). Therefore, it has a weak effect on the football players' performance and quality of their performance and increases psychological stress and has destructive effects on the players' mental health (Mousavi et al., 2020). And a syndrome occurs that is called burnout. The success of a sports team depends on various factors (Kocher, Lenz, & Sutter, 2012).

The players' psychological needs of sport teams are very important factors that can affect the success or failure of sports teams (Monacis, Estrada, Sinatra, Tanucci, & De Palo, 2013). Players are interpreted as an important part of the football phenomenon in today's society and its positive aspects are combined with valuable functions along with the negative approach and its harmful effects (Olmedilla, Ortega, Robles-Palazón, Salom, & García-Mas, 2018). Arguments, protests, and TV cameras should also be added to these interventions that it will create stress for the players. These psychological pressures increase will lead to the players' burnout dissatisfaction (Mirjamali, Ramzaninezhad, Rahmaninia, & Reihani, 2012). Recent studies have shown that burnout is one of the main problems in exercise and the loss of sensation of performance is one of the dimensions of burnout and it is more common in people who experience a lot of stressful stimuli (Auer et al., 2020).

Athletes spend many hours on sports activities that require a lot of physical and mental energy that this imposes a lot of stress on them and increases the rate of their burnout (Chen & Cunradi, 2008). This stress will increase when athletes do not perform according to their expectations. An imbalance between the needs and their sources would lead to stress in the long term and this will cause burnout. A person's commitment gradually decreases when he/she suffers from burnout. Perfectionism is one of the psychological variables that may affect football players' burnout and the highest level of perfection to achieve the ideal performance is one of the goals that football players seek it to feel satisfaction and to increase their self-confidence. Therefore, players work hard to reach the highest level of perfection (Flett & Hewitt, 2005). The player's the style of perfectionism can sometimes be negative through the determination of very high standards and paying too much attention to mistakes. High motivation in the style of negative perfectionism causes that the player do a lot of activities in a long time and with little rest (Hanton, Neil, Mellalieu, & Fletcher, 2008). Burnout usually occurs in these situations. Negative perfectionism raises concerns unattainable standards of perfectionism in the individual. This worrying situation makes the person feel helpless and he/she fails to use effective coping strategies and the consequences of negative perfectionism occur in the context of emotional cognitive inconsistencies such as self-blame and helplessness (Volkers, 2021). Most studies in sports psychology have sought to determine the variables that play a major role in athletic performance in recent years. In this regard, it is necessary for the athlete to be in an optimal position to achieve athletic success (Jafari, 2018). However, the role of some of these psychological variables such as perfectionism, motivation, anxiety, stress, and burnout has been considered in this context that these variables may have a significant effect on football players (Castro-Sánchez et al., 2019).

Studies show that abnormal perfectionism, poor management, and competitive anxiety lead to the increase of burnout and withdrawal of athletes from sports (Mirjamali et al., 2012). In this regard, the results of Cresswell & Eklund study showed that Elite athletes had a high degree of burnout. This causes that the athlete to enjoy very little participation in sports and to withdraw from sport participation (Cresswell & Eklund, 2004). We can refer to several researches related to the variables of the present study. Hosseini, et al., (2015) examined the role of moderator of perceived overtraining on perfectionism with fatigue and burnout in professional athletes. The results showed that there was

a negative and significant relationship between positive perfectionism with fatigue and athletic burnout in professional athletes. There was also a positive and significant relationship between negative perfectionism with fatigue and athletic burnout and a positive and significant relationship between perceived overtraining with athletic fatigue and burnout in professional athletes (Hosaini, Besharat, & Jahed, 2015). Nafian, et al., (2016) surveyed the correlation between burnout and self-efficacy in the coaches of group sports (basketball, volleyball, and futsal) and in the coaches of individual sports (Taekwondo, Wushu, and Karate). The results showed there was a significant difference between basketball coaches' burnout and volleyball and futsal coaches' burnout in group sports, the results also showed that there was no significant difference between the components of burnout in individual sports (Nafian, Moradi, & Shams, 2016). Alam, et al., (2016) examined the relationship of perfectionism with competitive anxiety and job burnout in male Taekwondo players of the Premier League of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The results showed that there was a positive and significant relationship between negative perfectionism and competitive anxiety and athletic burnout in male taekwondo players of the Iranian premier league and negative perfectionism had an indirect positive effect on burnout (Alam, Rafiee, & Kashizadeh, 2016). Hill, et al., (2010) studied perfectionism and athletic burnout. They believe that self-oriented perfectionism and community-oriented perfectionism have a significant effect on burnout in athletes and the dimensions of this perfectionism indirectly affect athletic burnout through the effectiveness on its acceptance (Hill, Hall, & Appleton, 2010). Madigan, et al., (2015) examined the relationship between perfectionism and burnout in junior athletes, the results showed that Perfectionism had a significant effect on burnout in junior athletes (Madigan, Stoeber, & Passfield, 2015). The factors of success are different in football. There are certainly a few football clubs that pay attention to psychological issues. It seems that a better understanding of the dimensions of the components of perfectionism will increase athletes' self-efficacy and will be able to overcome many problems in sports. According to the limited research on perfectionism in sports and coping mechanisms with stress and burnout in athletes, the present study examined the role of perfectionism dimensions in coping strategies with stress and athletic burnout in young football players.

## Methodology

This study was a descriptive correlation research. The statistical population of this study were all young football players in the country. According to the statistics, their number were 24535 players that 378 football players were estimated to be proper for sample size by Cochran's formula. The inclusion criteria in this study were young players who played in one of the national football leagues. Study population was all the football players at youth level in Guilan province league. Sample randomized technique was used for sampling. Among the criteria to include in this study were: playing in Guilan football league teams, having suitable bodily and mental status to answer the items of questionnaires. This study was performed in Guilan province under the supervision of sports and youth general directorate and football board of Guilan province. Football players were selected from different youth teams using random sampling method. If any player in the youth league suffered a significant injury that could not play in the team, he would be removed from the sample. The instrument of this study was included three questionnaires. The Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Raedeke & Smith, 2009). It contains 3 subscales and a total of 15 items to measure physical/emotional exhaustion in exercise, reduced sense of accomplishment in exercise, and sport devaluation. The scale reliability coefficient was found to be between 0.75 and 0.85 using Cronbach's alpha coefficient that it shows the desired reliability. The Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale was designed by Terry Short et al. (1995) to measure different levels of positive and negative perfectionism. This scale is a 40 items test that measures 20 items of positive perfectionism and 20 items of negative perfectionism (Raedeke & Smith, 2009). The Persian form of the scale has been normalized for all male and female students with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.90 to 0.80. The Stress Coping Strategies Scale (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) that has 66 items that includes eight scales that are classified into two clusters of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies.

Factor analysis of the components of this questionnaire has shown that all scales of this test are in two main clusters of emotion-focused coping skills (coping, distancing, self-control, and escape/avoidance) and problem-focused coping skills (seeking social support, responsibility, problem-solving plans, and positive appraisal) (Raedeke & Smith, 2009). The coefficient of total validity of the test is equal to 0.84 for this questionnaire. The purpose of study was explained to subjects. All subjects completed a consent form to participate in this study and they attended with the complete satisfaction in this study. The questionnaires were distributed among the subjects. Subjects personally completed the questionnaires of their own free will. The collected data were classified by descriptive statistical methods and were analyzed by Pearson correlation coefficient and linear regression to test the hypotheses. The SPSS software (version 24) was used for data analysis ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ).

## Results

The results in Table (1) showed that 10.0% of the respondents in the Youth Premier League, 38.9% in the first group of youth, 6.6% in the second group league, 24.3% in the third division league, and 20.1% in Guilan League has been active.

**Table 1.** Youth Football leagues in the country

Leagues	F	Percent	Valid percent
Youth Premier League	38	10.0	<b>10.0</b>
The first group of youth	147	38.9	<b>38.9</b>
The second group of youth	25	6.7	<b>6.7</b>
The third group of youth	92	24.3	<b>24.3</b>
Guilan League	76	20.1	<b>20.1</b>
Total	378	100	<b>100</b>

The indices of central tendency and the index of dispersion of athletic burnout showed that emotional and physical fatigue dimension has been reported 13.55, the reduction in the sense of success was 13.54, the reduction in value was 13.56, and total athletic burnout was 40.65. The Indices of central tendency and the index of dispersion of the perfectionism dimension showed that positive perfectionism was 53.92 and negative perfectionism was 46.05. The Indices of central tendency and the index of dispersion of the problem-solving strategy dimension showed that social support-seeking was 9.24, responsibility was 6.37, planned problem solving was 7.91, positive reassessment was 11.06, and total problem-oriented strategy was 34.60. The indices of central tendency and the index of dispersion of dimension of emotional strategy showed that direct coping dimension was 10.14, avoidance was 8.79, escape-avoidance was 12.66, self-control was 9.53, and total emotional strategy is reported to be 41.12.

The results in Table (2) showed that there was a significant and inverse correlation between positive perfectionism and athletic burnout in football players (correlation coefficient: -0.622).

**Table 2.** Correlation coefficients of positive perfectionism and athletic burnout

Variables	Positive perfectionism	Athletic burnout
Positive perfectionism	1.000	<b>0</b>
Athletic burnout	-.622**	<b>1.000</b>

A 99% significance level; \*A 95% significance level

The results in Table (3) showed that there was a significant and positive correlation between negative perfectionism and athletic burnout in football players (correlation coefficient: 0.555).

**Table 3.** Correlation coefficients of negative perfectionism and athletic burnout

eVariables	xNegative perfectionism	Athletic burnout
Negative perfectionism	1.000	0
Athletic burnout	.555**	1.000

A 99% significance level; \*A 95% significance level

The results in Table (4) showed that there was a significant and positive correlation between emotion-focused strategies and athletic burnout in football players. In other words, football players' athletic burnout decreases with the increase of positive perfectionism and conversely, their athletic burnout increases with the reduction of positive perfectionism. There was a significant relationship between positive perfectionism and athletic burnout of football players. There was a significant and direct correlation between direct coping (correlation coefficient: 0.279), avoidance (correlation coefficient: 0.309), escape-avoidance (correlation coefficient: 0.348), continence (correlation coefficient: 0.340), and total emotion-focused strategy (correlation coefficient: 0.401) with athletic burnout. It means that football players' athletic burnout increases with the increase of emotion-focused strategies, football players' athletic burnout decreases with the reduction of emotion-focused strategies.

**Table 4.** Correlation coefficients of emotion-focused coping strategies with stress and athletic burnout

Variables	Athletic burnout	Direct Coping	Avoidance	Escape-Avoidance	Continenence	emotion-focused strategies
Athletic burnout	1.000					
Direct Coping	.279**	1.000				
Avoidance	.309**	.477**	1.000			
Escape-Avoidance	.348**	.514**	.523**	1.000		
Continenence	.340**	.464**	.472**	.637**	1.000	
emotion-focused strategies	.401**	.754**	.768**	.857**	.808**	1.000

A 99% significance level; \*A 95% significance level

The results in Table (5) showed that coefficient of determination of the model was 0.559 (standard coefficient: 0.555). In other words, the regression test showed that the regression model was able to predict 0.56% of the variance of athletic burnout. The significance level of F statistic is less than 0.05 and this means that the change that is created by the model is not due to coincidence. Reported beta coefficients indicate that the best predictors of athletic burnout are positive perfectionism (beta: 0.412), problem-oriented strategy (beta: 0.306), and negative perfectionism (beta: 0.267), and emotion-focused strategy (beta: 0.114), respectively. According to the results of alignment coefficients (tolerance coefficient and inflation variance coefficient), the assumption of alignment of independent variables is also rejected. Perfectionism and stress coping strategies are good predictors for changes of football players' athletic burnout.

**Table 5.** The results of regression test for effectiveness of perfectionism and coping strategies with stress on athletic burnout

Model	R	Coefficient of Determination	Standardized Coefficients	df	Mean square	F	Sig
1	0.748	0.559	0.555	4	6270.98	118.38	0.000
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig	collinearity statistics	

B	Std. Error of the Estimate	Beta	Tolerance	Variance Inflation
54.338	2.956	18.383	.000	
-.289	.029	-.412	.000	.699
		10.020		1.430
.212	.034	.267	.000	.647
-.313	.036	-.306	.000	.977
.072	.026	.114	.005	.712
		2.795		1.404

## Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the role of perfectionism dimensions in coping strategies with stress and athletic burnout in young football players. The results of this study showed that there was a significant relationship between the variables of the present study. Today, famous leagues in different continents of the world not only do not hold football matches, but each of them has potential assets that millions and sometimes billions of dollars are exchanged between league organizations, clubs, and federations.

Each of the world famous leagues is trying to raise its standards to maintain its growing path to professionalism for future years (Conlin, Orsini, & Tang, 2013). According to the correlation coefficients results, there was a significant and inverse correlation between positive perfectionism and athletic burnout in football players (correlation coefficient: -0.622). This finding is consistent with the results of Jafari, et al., (2012) ; Hosseini, et al., (2014) ; Alam, et al., (2015) ; Hill, et al., (2010) ; and Madigan, et al., (2015) ; and Martinent & Ferrand's (2007) study (Alam et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2010; Hosaini et al., 2015; Jafari, 2018; Madigan et al., 2015; Martinent & Ferrand, 2007). It should be noted that those athletes who have positive perfectionism are less likely to suffer from athletic burnout due to reasonable expectations commensurate with their level of athletic performance and ability for the explanation of this finding (Stoeber, Kempe, & Keogh, 2008). Positive (normal) perfectionism is a developed defense mechanism of transcendence that it works in an adapted, normal, and efficient way and makes people successful (Hajloo, Sobhi, Babayi, & Sadegi, 2015). Therefore, more use of this style of perfectionism in football players will lead less football players to athletic burnout due to its logical and realistic nature. The output of statistical analysis in this study showed that there was a significant and positive correlation between negative perfectionism and athletic burnout in football players.

In other words, the football players' athletic burnout increases with the increase of negative perfectionism and conversely, their athletic burnout decreases with the reduction of negative perfectionism. This finding is consistent with the results of Nafian, et al., (2014); Hajloo, et al., (2015); Harris, et al., (2008); Gunnell, et al. (2013); and Rice and Dellwo's (2002) study (Gunnell, Crocker, Wilson, Mack, & Zumbo, 2013; Hajloo et al., 2015; Harris, Livesey, Gharaei, & Westbrook, 2008; Nafian et al., 2016; Rice & Dellwo, 2002). It should be noted that negative (abnormal) perfectionism is associated with high levels of perfectionism endeavor and high levels of perfectionism concerns for the explanation of this finding (Castro-Sánchez et al., 2019). In fact, the extreme generalization of failures, strict self-assessment, and all-or-nothing thinking are negative perfectionists' characteristics that it causes many problems for them, such as athletic burnout (Stoeber et al., 2008). Players who set difficult goals based on their perfectionist nature are forced to overtraining (Stoeber et al., 2008). Overtraining is an abnormal behavior that can play an important role in football players' burnout. The results of correlation coefficients showed that there was a significant and positive correlation between emotion-focused strategies and athletes' athletic burnout. In other words, there was a significant and direct correlation between direct coping, avoidance, escape-avoidance, continence, and total emotion-focused strategy with athletic burnout. This finding is consistent with the results of Danielle, et al., (2006); Hanton, et al., (2008); Chen, et al., (2008); and Khezerlou's (2013) study (Chen & Cunradi, 2008; Danielle Iuliano, Speizer, Santelli, & Kendall,

2006; Hanton et al., 2008; Khezerlou, 2013). The direct effect of the burnout variable can be one of the causes for the explanation of this finding. Burnout is a type of response to chronic and continuous stress and as a result of stress in trainings, competitive environment of sports, and competitions that it can have a direct effect on the rate of football players' burnout that this condition impairs mental cohesion and increases emotional distress and athletic burnout. Therefore, sports anxiety increases because the athlete cannot properly manage sports stress in response to environmental conditions and anxiety of training and competitions and the consequence is the weakening of emotion-focused strategies and the increase of football players' burnout. Perfectionism and coping strategies are good predictors of changes in football players' athletic burnout.

Regression test showed that the regression model was able to predict 0.56% of the variance of athletic burnout in football players. Reported beta coefficients indicate that the best predictors of athletic burnout are positive perfectionism, problem-oriented strategy, and negative perfectionism, and emotion-focused strategy, respectively. This finding is consistent with the results of Swider and Zimmerman (2010); and Rice and Dellwo's (2002) study (Rice & Dellwo, 2002; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). The athlete can better identify the source of stress and the source of stress control by the increase of problem-oriented strategies. In general, athlete can easily manage sports stress on the other hand, athletic burnout increases with the increase of emotion-focused strategy because burnout is associated with athlete's avoidance and passivity. Athletes who use positive perfectionism are more rational and realistic than negative perfectionists due to their goals and expectations and they bear less stress psychologically. The result is a reduction in burnout in football players who are in a normal position in terms of perfectionism. According to the relationship between football players' perfectionism and sports burnout, it is suggested that football players' athletic burnout can be reduced through the creation of cognitive-behavioral intervention, the reduction of negative perfectionism, and the increase of positive perfectionism. Football players' athletic burnout can also be reduced through using stress coping strategic approaches, the reduction of the emotion-focused strategy, and the increase of the problem-oriented strategy.

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