

## CHAPTER 21

### *Athlete Burnout: An Individual and Organizational Phenomenon*

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“No kid should have to go through what she went through,” said Kenny, a past president of the American Volleyball Coaches Association. “Adults need to pay attention. It’s a problem in youth sports. These kids are burned out. From 12 to 18, I bet Elena can count on her hands the amount of weekends she didn’t have anything to do related to sport. She’s missed the opportunity to be a kid.”

Regarding Elena Delle Donne – former burnout case and current WNBA player  
Jeré Longman (2008) – New York Times

Athlete burnout can be perplexing and frustrating for coaches, sport psychology practitioners, and athletes alike due to the wide range of meanings for the term in popular culture, the negative impact it has on athletes, and the complexity in understanding what causes it (Eklund & Cresswell, 2007; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). The vast array of potential individual and environmental contributors to burnout, along with the consequences associated with it, can be difficult to digest and ultimately address with interventions. Thus, unsurprisingly it can be a challenge for practitioners to address this phenomenon. Understanding what burnout is (and is not) as well as its key psychosocial antecedents is important for those who wish to combat this maladaptive athlete experience and to safeguard athlete performance and enhance well-being.

In this chapter we provide an overview of the athlete burnout knowledge base to inform evidence-based practice. Specifically, we summarize existing theory and research on athlete burnout with an emphasis on how theory can inform practice. We also illustrate how individual

and organizational factors together are central to the development of athlete burnout. Successful prevention and treatment of athlete burnout requires multifaceted strategies. We strive to arm sport psychology practitioners with the knowledge to pursue evidence-based athlete burnout interventions that consider both the individual and the organization.

### ***What is Athlete Burnout?***

Before gaining empirical interest in sport, Freudenberger (1974) first described burnout among highly dedicated individuals working in free health clinics who became exhausted due to the chronic strain associated with their role. Around the same time, Maslach (1976; 1978) recognized a similar phenomenon in healthcare professionals and in 1982 operationalized burnout as a multidimensional psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment among individuals who work in human service settings (e.g., social workers, nurses, teachers). Because sport is a highly effort-driven activity and was a source of anecdotal accounts of burnout in the media, sport scientists recognized the need to systematically understand and address this phenomenon in competitive sport (Dale & Weinberg, 1990; Fender, 1989).

To understand athlete burnout a clear operational definition was needed. Adapting Maslach's (1982) framework to sport, Raedeke (1997; Raedeke & Smith, 2001; 2009) defined athlete burnout as a multidimensional, cognitive-affective syndrome characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation. Definitions and symptoms for these dimensions are found in Table 21-1. Physical exhaustion was added to Maslach's definition of worker burnout to account for the physical demands of sport participation and depersonalization was adapted to devaluation because the athlete-sport (rather than the worker-patient) connection is of principal interest in competitive sport. Raedeke's

definition addressed the multifaceted nature of athlete burnout and enabled researchers to best coordinate their efforts to measure and understand this maladaptive athlete experience.

Table 21-1.

Athlete Burnout Dimensions, Definitions, and Symptoms

Dimension	Definition	Symptoms
Emotional & Physical Exhaustion	Emotional and physical fatigue stemming from the psychological and physical demands associated with training and competing	Excessively tired or lethargic
		Emotionally “drained”
		Unable to perform non-sport activities due to fatigue
Reduced Sense of Accomplishment	Inefficacy and a tendency to evaluate oneself negatively in terms of sport performance and accomplishments	Decreased feelings of sport achievement
		Performing below personal standards
		Consistent negative self-evaluation
Sport Devaluation	Negative, detached attitude toward sport reflected by lack of concern for sport and performance quality	Reduced concern for sport and performance quality
		Question the value/meaning of sport
		Resentful attitude toward sport

Determining the prevalence of athlete burnout is challenging, allowing only for very tentative estimates ranging from approximately 1% to 10% of athletes (see Eklund & Cresswell, 2007; Gustafsson, Kenttä, Hassmén, & Lundqvist, 2007; Raedeke & Smith, 2009). The lack of consistent diagnostic criteria is a key limitation of efforts to assess athlete burnout prevalence. Notwithstanding this limitation, even the most conservative estimates suggest that burnout can take a toll on the performance and well-being of numerous athletes worldwide. The negative impact of burnout on athletes includes performance decrements, decreased motivation, potential dropout, and troubled social relations that negatively impact team climate. Burnout also can negatively impact mental (anxiety, depression, eating disorders) and physical (illness susceptibility, substance abuse) health (Gustafsson, Hassmén, Kenttä, & Johansson, 2008). Sports medicine physicians describe athlete burnout as an important issue addressed with their patients (Brenner, 2007; Mann, Grana, Indelicato, O'Neill, & George, 2007). Altogether, this suggests that burnout is of epidemiological significance and that continued athlete burnout education, research, and practice efforts are warranted.

### ***What is Not Athlete Burnout?***

Athlete burnout is distinct from depression and sport dropout. Confusion between the psychological outcomes of burnout and depression is not surprising as both represent negative affective experiences (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006a). However, carefully designed research has shown these two maladaptive outcomes to be related yet distinct psychological constructs (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006b; Raedeke, Arce, de Francisco, Seoane, & Ferraces, in press). Depression is distinguished from burnout by its more pervasive affective symptomology, as opposed to burnout's central (but not sole) link to the sport experience (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006b). Drawing from longitudinal research in organizational psychology athletes suffering from

burnout may be at risk for experiencing depression (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012). Thus, it is important to consider the potential existence of depressive symptoms (see chapter 19) when assessing and treating burnout in athletes.

Though some early burnout conceptualizations confound burnout and dropout, they represent distinct potential outcomes of chronic sport involvement (Smith, 1986). Burnout causes some athletes to quit sport, but not all athletes (Raedeke, 1997). Moreover, sport dropout can result from reasons other than burnout. These reasons include time constraints, personal choice, switching sports or pursuing alternative activities. Accordingly, differentiating athlete burnout and sport dropout is important for practitioners, as burned-out athletes may not outwardly manifest behaviors or attitudes that suggest a desire to leave sport.

In sum, it is crucial to distinguish athlete burnout from other maladaptive athlete experiences (depression) and participatory decisions (dropout). Distinguishing athlete burnout from its potential consequences helps researchers, practitioners, and athletes best understand when burnout may be occurring and best tailor prevention and treatment efforts.

### ***Why Does Burnout Occur? A Review of Theoretically Informed Burnout Antecedents***

Understanding what causes burnout is necessary to develop effective prevention and treatment strategies. Burnout is considered a reaction to chronic stress and therefore has been explained within overtraining and psychosocial stress perspectives. Burnout is also considered a motivational phenomenon and has been examined within self-determination and entrapment frameworks. A brief review of these prominent conceptualizations highlights key antecedents of athlete burnout (Eklund & Cresswell, 2007; Gould & Whitley, 2009). Notably, such a review points to both individual and organizational contributors to this maladaptive syndrome.

## **Overtraining**

The simplest explanation for athlete burnout may be that it is a maladaptive psychophysiological response to high training loads, especially in conditioning intensive sports. In other words, burnout may result from overtraining. Overtraining is commonly viewed as an imbalance between training and recovery, often combined with other training and non-training stressors. Within the overtraining perspective, athletes are considered to be in a state of **overreaching** when they experience elevated fatigue and performance decrements that they can recover from within days to a few weeks. Overreaching can be intentional as part of training periodization. However, when not carefully planned or when athletes respond to performance plateaus caused by overreaching with intensified training, the overtraining syndrome can develop. The **overtraining syndrome** is characterized by performance decrements and exhaustion that fail to improve even with rest or reduced training and represents the repeated failure of the body's adaptive mechanisms to cope with chronic training stress (for reviews see Fry, Morton, & Keast, 1991; Kuipers, 1998; Kuipers & Keizer, 1988; Meeusen et al., 2013; Raglin & Wilson, 2000). The overtraining syndrome can take months to years to recover from and presently there is no evidence that the overtraining syndrome can be treated aside from prolonged rest and taking time away from sport (Meeusen et al., 2013). Although conceptually distinct, the overtraining syndrome and burnout share considerable overlap in that both are chronic states and that athletes are exhausted, have lowered motivation, and report negative feelings about sport. One pathway to burnout is through high training demands that result in the development of the overtraining syndrome.

Although coaches and athletes focus much attention on training loads, recovery processes are often overlooked. **Recovery** is integral to training periodization and represents the mechanism by

which a higher level of function is achieved following intense training by reducing fatigue and regaining vitality (Kenttä & Hassmén, 2002). It is important for athletes and coaches to maintain a balance between rest and training stress in sport. In fact, some scholars highlight that underrecovery, rather than excessive training per se, results in the overtraining syndrome (Budgett, 1998; Kellmann, 2002). Thus, it is important to monitor not only training loads, but also recovery and what athletes do to recover. Although the most common forms of recovery are passive activities like rest, recovery is multifaceted and involves more than passive rest and time away from sport. It also involves more active strategies including light activity, proper nutrition, hydration, quality sleep, mental and physical relaxation, stretching, and warm-down. Recovery can also involve activities such as interacting with supportive others (e.g., peers, family members) or engaging experiences (e.g., spending time in nature, hobbies) that bring life balance, increase feelings of vitality, and provide a mental break from sport (Kenttä & Hassmén, 2002; Kellmann, 2002).

Beyond excessive training stress and inadequate recovery, life stress outside of sport can potentially impact how athletes respond to intense training according to the overtraining perspective. Athletes who experience high amounts of stress outside of sport are less able to handle high training volumes compared to those experiencing less outside stress (Tenenbaum, Jones, Kitsantas, Sacks, & Berwick, 2003). Collectively, the key variables of training volume, recovery, and life stress are important considerations when seeking to address burnout.

### **Psychosocial Sport Stress**

Although overtraining can be a contributor, burnout is also thought to be a reaction to chronic sport-based psychosocial stressors (Smith, 1986). **Psychosocial stress** occurs when athletes perceive an imbalance between sport demands and their ability to meet those demands. Athletes with high sport demands yet insufficient resources to meet those demands experience elevated

stress and are more susceptible to burnout. Supporting this perspective, a systematic review of the burnout literature found perceived stress to consistently and positively associate with athlete burnout perceptions (Goodger, Gorely, Lavallee, & Harwood, 2007).

Many potential sources of athlete stress have been described in interviews with coaches and athletes, including high training and competitive demands and the time requirements of sport participation (Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1997; Raedeke, Lunney, & Venables, 2002). Stress can also stem from interpersonal sources such as social interactions and the performance emphasis of sport (e.g., pressure from coaches/teammates, family dynamics surrounding sport). Indeed, research supports an association between negative sport-based social interactions and athlete burnout (Smith, Gustafsson, & Hassmén, 2010; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey, 1997). In addition to negative interactions, social influences can be more subtle such as when parents are supportive but family dynamics revolve excessively around sport (Raedeke et al., 2002).

Beyond outside sources, high demands can come from internal sources. Dispositional factors including self-esteem based on performance accomplishments, trait anxiety, dispositional negative affect, and perfectionism (i.e., overly high performance expectations, concerns about others' evaluations, and critical self-evaluations) can contribute to athlete burnout perceptions (DeFreese, 2012; Goodger et al., 2007; Hall, Hill, & Appleton, 2012). Importantly, these dispositional factors create potential psychological vulnerability whereas more adaptive athlete traits (e.g., dispositional optimism, hope, resiliency) can reduce vulnerability and, therefore, help athletes combat stress and burnout.

Finally, this perspective asserts the importance of sport-based resources in decreasing stress and alleviating burnout. For example, coping resources including lifestyle management (e.g., proper nutrition, adequate sleep; Raedeke & Smith, 2004) as well as social support (e.g., from



teammates, parents, coaches; Cresswell, 2009; DeFreese & Smith, 2013b) are negatively associated with athlete burnout perceptions. This suggests that beyond lowering sport-based demands, increasing resources can be effective in deterring athlete burnout.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Although athlete burnout is a reaction to chronic sport stress, also it is tied to athlete motivation. **Self-determination theory** (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) is a prominent theory of human motivation that has been used to understand athlete burnout. According to SDT, psychological outcomes are influenced by the nature of one's motivation. The most adaptive motivation is self-determined in nature, resulting predominantly from individual choice rather than internal pressures (e.g., guilt, obligation) or external pressures (e.g., rewards, punishments, expectations of others). More self-determined motivation is associated with lower burnout risk whereas less self-determined motivation is associated with greater burnout risk. SDT further posits that motivation is influenced by the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

- Autonomy – feelings of personal choice or control
- Competence – sense of success and being effective in one's environment
- Relatedness – social connection to others reflected by feelings of acceptance and belonging

When needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met by the social environment of sport, more self-determined motivation is expected. This yields the most adaptive outcomes for athletes. Athletes who do not feel autonomous, competent, or related with others in sport will be motivated for less self-determined reasons and more prone to experiencing burnout perceptions.

Research on athlete burnout has supported the tenets of SDT (see Li, Wang, Pyun, & Kee, 2013). Burnout-related perceptions have been shown to positively associate with less self-

determined forms of sport motivation and/or negatively associate with more self-determined motivation (e.g., Cresswell & Eklund, 2005; Curran, Appleton, Hill, & Hall, 2011; Lemyre, Roberts, & Stray-Gundersen, 2007; Lonsdale, Hodge, & Rose, 2009). Additionally, in a longitudinal study of elite swimmers, Lemyre, Treasure, and Roberts (2006) found that shifts from more to less self-determined forms of motivation across a season predicted elevated burnout perceptions. Thus, changes in athlete motivation may precede burnout development. Also consistent with SDT, athlete autonomy, competence, and relatedness perceptions are negatively associated with burnout (e.g., Amorose, Anderson-Butcher, & Cooper, 2009; Hodge, Lonsdale, & Ng, 2008; Perreault, Gaudreau, Lapointe, & Lacroix, 2007; Qusted & Duda, 2011). Research has also at least partially supported models specifying a sequence whereby psychological needs predict self-determined motivation for sport, which in turn predicts burnout-related perceptions in athletes (Lonsdale et al., 2009). This highlights the importance of understanding athlete need satisfaction and motivation in tandem as contributors to burnout.

Overall, burnout research within an SDT framework suggests that structuring sport to support satisfaction of psychological needs and increase self-determined motivation for athletes is helpful for burnout prevention. A variety of social-contextual factors including the team motivational climate, organizational structure, and coach and parent behaviors are important as they impact need satisfaction and motivation. For that reason, they warrant specific attention in burnout prevention efforts (Isoard-Gauthier, Guillet-Descas, & Lemyre, 2012).

### **Sport Entrapment**

Reflecting that burnout is both stress and motivation related, a common belief is that burnout only occurs when highly motivated individuals become disillusioned with their involvement (e.g., Pines, 1993). Expanding on this idea, Schmidt and Stein (1991) and Coakley (1992) offer

complementary perspectives emphasizing that burnout occurs when individuals feel trapped into the role of being an athlete in part because of the social structure of sport.

Schmidt and Stein (1991) characterized two faces of commitment. Adaptive commitment is when athletes maintain sport involvement because of passion and intrinsic motivation. These athletes are committed because they want to be an athlete and report high enjoyment and concomitantly high benefits (positives of being an athlete) and low costs (negatives of being an athlete) connected to sport. They also invest a great deal of time and energy into sport because they enjoy it and feel sport is more attractive than other alternatives they could pursue. The other face of commitment is maladaptive and characterized by athletes who feel entrapped by sport and that they “have to” maintain involvement. This occurs when they have decreasing sport attraction corresponding with decreasing benefits and increasing costs. Nonetheless, they maintain involvement because they have too much invested to quit (e.g., potential scholarship), perceive high social constraints (e.g., not wanting to disappoint significant others), and see few, if any, attractive alternatives to being an athlete. From a commitment perspective, burnout occurs when athletes experience **sport entrapment** and maintain involvement not because they *want to*, but because they feel they *have to*, remain in sport.

From a sociological perspective, Coakley (1992) concurs that burnout arises when highly motivated athletes begin to question the value of sport and feel trapped in the role of being an athlete. Athletes believe they are missing out on life opportunities due to the social structure of sport, yet still feel they have to stay in sport. As an integral part of normal adolescent development, young people sample a variety of activities and roles and through that process develop multi-faceted identities. However, the social structure of sport may discourage athletes from this exploration and foster unidimensional identities centered on athletics. As a result,

athletes feel trapped in their athletic role. Additionally, adolescence is a developmental period in which athletes seek autonomy and control of their lives. Although athletes may have initially decided to participate in sport, the social structure of sport limits their autonomy because much of their sport experience is controlled by others. From Coakley's perspective, the development of a unidimensional identity combined with low autonomy results in feelings of sport entrapment when athletes begin to question the value of sport in their lives and ultimately results in burnout.

Though few investigators have examined them, entrapment-based perspectives have received empirical support (e.g., Black & Smith, 2007; Raedeke, 1997). For example, Raedeke (1997) examined athlete burnout via the integration of Schmidt and Stein's (1991) commitment model and Coakley's (1992) sociological perspective. In competitive age-group swimmers, Raedeke found that athletes endorsing entrapment profiles of sport commitment exhibited higher burnout compared to those experiencing more adaptive or low sport commitment profiles. Entrapment-based perspectives highlight that athlete burnout experiences are most appropriately considered within the sport structures that contribute to their occurrence.

### ***Integrating the Burnout Knowledge Base: How the Individual and Organization Fit***

The extant theoretical perspectives applied to athlete burnout highlight several well-studied antecedents to consider when establishing evidence-based guidelines for athlete burnout recognition, prevention, and treatment. Table 21-2 summarizes important burnout antecedent variables from the perspectives reviewed in this chapter. The table also includes example intervention strategies that tie to these variables and that are well suited for athlete populations. Efficacious interventions will be multi-faceted in nature and address a range of antecedents from the aforementioned perspectives. They will also be designed in consideration of the highly individualized nature of athlete burnout (Gould et al., 1997; Gustafsson, Kenttä, Hassmén,

Lundqvist, & Durand-Bush, 2007). Finally, given the chronic nature of burnout, the most effective interventions will have a prevention, rather than treatment focus. Within such a multi-faceted intervention strategy, individual and organizational antecedents should jointly be considered for each case. Indeed, adopting a framework of individual-organization fit may be especially fruitful for the prevention of burnout and the promotion of the more adaptive psychosocial outcomes in athletes.

Table 21-2.

Athlete Burnout Perspectives, Key Variables, and Intervention Strategies

Perspective	Key Variables	Intervention Strategies
<i>Overtraining</i>	Training Volume	Ensure developmentally appropriate training loads based on athlete age, physical maturity, and skill level.
		Continuously monitor individual athlete training responses and feeling states. Prolonged fatigue and mood disturbance are warning signs.
		Avoid a “one size fits all” approach to the design of athlete training programs.
	Recovery	Reduce training loads after a period of intense training or if athletes are experiencing prolonged fatigue.
Educate athletes about maladaptive responses to training and emphasize the		

		importance of recovery.
		Ensure that athletes receive adequate recovery, including passive rest and more active forms of recovery.
		Ensure that athletes engage in pursuits outside of sport that increase vitality.
	Nonsport Stress	Provide resources and training in strategies to cope with sources of stress beyond sport (e.g., schoolwork, family life, romantic relationships).
		Do not increase training loads when non-sport stressors levels are on the rise.
<i>Psychosocial Sport Stress</i>	Demands	Identify key stressors and develop a plan for dealing effectively with them.
		Adopt a positive coaching style and help parents maintain realistic expectations and positive support of their children.
		Emphasize that skill development is a continuous process with highs and lows.
	Resources	Increase coping resources such as through effective lifestyle management.
		Encourage athletes to form strong social support networks.

		Build self-regulation skills through mental skills training
<i>Self-Determination Theory</i>	Self-Determined Motivation	Promote a stimulating sport climate that emphasizes effort, learning, accomplishment, and enjoyment of the sport.
		Autonomy
	Allow athletes choices in their practice, competition, and treatment plans.	
	Provide a rationale for decisions so athletes understand why they are doing things a certain way.	
	Employ democratic coaching that involves group decisions when appropriate.	
	Competence	Structure sport so athletes have opportunities to succeed with effort.
		Aid athletes in focusing on successes as well as areas in need of improvement.
Establish effective goal setting strategies.		

		Continuously develop fundamental physical and mental sport skills by reinforcing effort, learning, and improvement as well as treating mistakes as part of the learning process.
	Relatedness	Foster productive and supportive coach-athlete relationship as well as positive relationships between athletes.
		Provide pre- and during-season programming that builds teammate relationships and supports positive social interactions.
		Incorporate team building activities within the practice structure and encourage outside social activities.
<i>Sport Entrapment</i>	Benefits	Help athletes recognize the benefits of their sport involvement that may not be evident to them or that they overlook.
		Assess what makes sport rewarding to athletes and incorporate those elements into the sport experience.
	Costs	Acknowledge personal costs of sport involvement and help athletes develop



		strategies for managing them effectively.
		Explore alternatives for athletes in dysfunctional training or competition environments.
	Enjoyment	Ensure practice variety and limit the monotony of training.
		Structure sport to be exciting and to foster competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Refer to self-determination theory in above section of the table.
	Investments	While recognizing the time and energy required by sport, encourage athletes to maintain non-sport interests and hobbies so they do not feel that they are missing out on important other life opportunities.
	Social Constraints	Promote athlete social relationships with both sport and non-sport associates.
		Ensure that coaches, parents, and peers are sources of support and not pressure.
	Attractiveness of Alternative Activities	Support athlete exploration of other sport and non-sport activities as a means of personal exploration and validation of

		sport involvement.
		Encourage athletes to reflect on the meaning and value of sport in their lives, including what they would miss if not an athlete
	Athletic Identity	Communicate that one can strongly identify with multiple roles (e.g., athlete, student, responsible citizen).
		Encourage athletes to develop other aspects of their lives beyond sport and support their doing so.
		Help athletes put sport performance into proper life perspective.
	Sport Control	Refer to autonomy in above section of the table.

Ultimately, the experience of burnout is neither the sole result of an individual problem nor exclusively charged to the organizational (or team) environment surrounding the individual. The fit of these elements is important for understanding burnout development. Much contemporary research on worker burnout has been framed within the job-person fit model of burnout and engagement (see Maslach & Leiter, 1997; 1999; Leiter & Maslach, 2004). This model emphasizes individual perceptions of the six areas of worklife described below:

- Workload – demands relative to one’s personal limits and resources

- Control – ability to influence decisions, autonomy, and access to the resources necessary for performance
- Reward – incentives (monetary, social, intrinsic) consistent with expectations
- Community – social interaction in the form of conflict, closeness, and teamwork
- Fairness – fairness and respectfulness of decisions and treatment
- Values – correspondence between personal and organizational goals and behavioral expectations

According to the model, the perceived congruence of individual needs and organizational resources couched within these six domains is critical to well-being. With less congruence, a greater likelihood of experiencing burnout is expected. Conversely, with greater congruence on these variables, the likelihood of experiencing engagement is increased.

Engagement represents a distinct positive response in contrast to burnout. Specifically, **engagement** is a positive psychological experience characterized by (a) confidence in contrast to a reduced sense of accomplishment, (b) dedication in contrast to devaluation, and (c) vigor and enthusiasm in contrast to exhaustion (Lonsdale, Hodge, & Jackson, 2007). Creating sport experiences that foster engagement will not only prevent burnout but will also result in positive benefits for athletes including enhanced motivation, performance, and well-being.

Investigation of the areas of worklife and engagement in sport is in its infancy. Adopting a positive psychology approach (Gould, 2002; Seligman, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), DeFreese and Smith (2013a) examined the areas of worklife as they relate to athlete burnout and engagement in a sample of collegiate athletes. Consistent with theoretical expectations, athlete endorsement of athlete–team congruence on the variables of workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values was positively associated with athlete engagement and

negatively associated with athlete burnout. Thus, striving to foster athlete–team congruence in these domains appears to be a promising approach that is innovative and comprehensive for enhancing engagement as well as preventing burnout.

### ***Preventing Athlete Burnout: Individual and Organizational Intervention Strategies***

Previous sections reviewed theory and research on athlete burnout. In spite of the wealth of information on potential burnout antecedents, an important question remains for the practitioner: How can all of this information be used to recognize, prevent, and treat burnout in competitive athletes? We recommend an evidence-based approach that targets both individual and organizational burnout antecedents (see Table 21-2) as well as considers the fit between the individual (athlete) and organization (team or club). Specific antecedents and issues of fit will be more or less relevant to individual athlete cases. Therefore, rather than suggesting a “one size fits all” approach to athlete burnout intervention, we offer a guiding framework designed to help practitioners appropriately tailor prevention and/or treatment strategies.

**Step 1: Assess the situation.** It is important to establish whether burnout may be occurring or has the potential to develop. Evaluate whether potential symptoms of burnout exist. Gathering as much information as possible about the individual athlete and the organizational context will aid in understanding of whether preventative or treatment strategies are necessary.

**Step 2: Determine what individual and organizational factors are important.** Extant theory showcases burnout as a complex maladaptive outcome associated with a combination of individual and organizational antecedents. Determining the specific individual and organizational factors that are currently impacting an athlete’s

burnout-related perceptions or that may create risk for future burnout is crucial for the design of effective intervention strategies.

**Step 3: Design an intervention plan.** The intervention plan should be multifaceted and target salient factors grounded in motivation and stress theory. Based on the concept of athlete-organization fit, the congruence of individual characteristics with organizational structures impacting demands and resources should be targeted. Additionally, burnout may be stigmatized or considered an individual athlete flaw by some athletes and coaches. Therefore, an educational component that clearly describes and explains burnout to athletes, coaches, and significant others in user-friendly terms may be beneficial.

**Step 4: Evaluate intervention effectiveness.** Consistent with best practice, intervention strategies should be continuously evaluated to ensure their effectiveness. In the event specific strategies are unsuccessful or undesirable, they should be altered or new strategies (potentially targeting different burnout factors) should be implemented.

Based on the many ways individual burnout cases develop, a variety of individual and organizational options for burnout diagnosis, treatment, and prevention exist. In addition to being multifaceted, effective interventions will likely involve not only the athletes, but also parents, coaches, and sports medicine staff. We provide case studies below in order to help practitioners develop their skill in planning effective interventions through further study, discussion, and integration of the burnout knowledge base.

### **Case Studies as a Training Tool for Practitioners**

The following case studies are fictional scenarios designed to simulate situations in which sport psychology practitioners may encounter burnout when working with athletes. We challenge

you to work through these scenarios using the four-step evidence-based approach outlined above. First, **assess the situation** to establish whether burnout is occurring or has the potential to develop. Second, **determine what individual and organizational factors are important** in the given scenario. Third, **design an intervention plan** that addresses these targeted factors. Finally, consider how you will **evaluate intervention effectiveness** and make modifications if your initial intervention strategies are ineffective.

In each case, some symptoms of burnout are presented and many potential factors could be considered as contributing to burnout. A wide variety of potential interventions strategies exist that could be used. We offer progressively less guidance across the cases, encouraging you to frame the evaluation and discussion of them. In the first case you are left to consider the symptoms of burnout, but we highlight some important individual and organizational factors and present a few potential solutions. You are encouraged to consider other potential factors and solutions that could have bearing on the case as ours are not comprehensive. In the second case we highlight a few important individual and organizational factors and do not suggest potentially effective intervention strategies. In the third case we neither identify factors that could be targeted in intervention design nor do we provide sample solutions. This weaning of guidance on potential analysis and solutions supports the use of your expertise and creativity as well as your learning of the four-step evidenced-based approach to burnout intervention. In brainstorming intervention strategies, we encourage you to recall each theory and the concept of individual-organization fit and to develop a multifaceted intervention that targets the athlete as well as others (e.g., coaches, parents, organization). Initially, do not evaluate the quality of the intervention ideas—simply devise as many solutions as possible. Then, carefully evaluate each potential intervention idea to ensure both feasibility and effectiveness. We hope that these case

studies foster helpful pedagogical discussion among coaches, sport psychology practitioners, and others interested in addressing athlete burnout.

### **Case Study 1 – Mia**

You are a sport psychologist consulting with a university athletics program. Mia is a first-year university soccer player referred to you by the athletic training staff (she has knee tendonitis) because she is struggling with her motivation. She is the first “blue chip” recruit of the soccer program, which was formed three years ago, and has a full scholarship. It is early October, and therefore Mia has been on campus about six weeks. Preseason and early season conditioning has been rigorous, and the competition schedule will soon heat up as the team plays conference opponents. Mia’s performance has been subpar for her as she is not playing to the level expected nor is she improving. She tells you at your first meeting with her that she is “completely fried” from soccer. She also says that she is “going nowhere” with her soccer and that she can’t imagine surviving the season let alone her entire four years. Mia’s drive for soccer is not the same as it once was. Although the coach is disappointed with this, given the high expectations held for her, Mia overall feels the coach and other individuals linked to the team (e.g., administrators, training staff) are largely supportive of her. They are primarily concerned with improving her “attitude” and soccer experience this season. From working with this team and coach in the past, you have a very positive outlook on the way athletes are treated regarding training and as individuals. How will you proceed?

#### Possible Case Study 1 Solutions

- As the team environment appears positive, potential intervention strategies will primarily address modifiable individual factors to promote an optimal individual-organization fit.

- Key individual burnout factors for Mia may include overtraining, pressure associated with being a “blue chip” recruit, lack of recognition of sport benefits, low levels of self-determined (i.e., intrinsic) motivation for sport, and transitioning to college.
- Suggest Mia take some time off from soccer to focus on injury rehabilitation and participate in activities that promote psychological recovery. The benefits of this break will likely outweigh any performance/conditioning decrements. These decisions should be made in collaboration with coaches and sports medicine staff.
- Provide Mia with training on the use of relaxation techniques (e.g., deep breath, progressive muscle relaxation). This will aid in her ability to cope with sport stress (see Chapter 13). Additionally, Mia should identify specific sport and nonsport stressors and construct a plan for dealing with them. This will help her manage the pressures of being a student-athlete.
- Initiate Mia creating a list of the benefits of her current sport involvement. This list should be exhaustive so as to showcase benefits she may not currently be considering.
- Mia’s self-determined motivation for soccer will be increased by promoting feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (see Chapter 4). Review past successful performances, particularly those in the collegiate environment, to build her sport competence. Also, help Mia realize that plateaus are a natural part of the training process and are normal when making the transition to a new environment.
- Initiate team-building activities such as a mentoring program to provide opportunities for Mia to develop relatedness with her teammates and to help make the transition to college.

### **Case Study 2 - Cal**

Cal is an elite 12-year-old youth basketball player referred to you by his parents, who are extremely concerned with improving his performance. Cal is a gifted player for his age and was



selected to be the “star” player on an elite travel basketball team which competes in tournaments all over the country. Cal performed extremely well at the team’s initial tryout and pre-tournament practices, but his performance has declined to the point that he no longer is receiving playing time in important tournaments. His inability to compete at a high level has contributed to his team losing. Cal’s parents feel that he is “mentally weak” and believe he would benefit from working with a sport psychologist to improve his mental toughness and ultimately his performance. During your initial meeting with Cal, he talks about how much he used to love the sport of basketball before joining this particular team. He very much enjoyed playing for his school team and practicing for hours on his own outside of the team environment. However, since joining the travel team things have changed. The team practices 4 days/week and travels nearly every weekend to play in tournaments across the country. Cal says he feels “drained” and can’t keep up mentally or physically with his coach’s high standards. He has become so tired that he is behind on schoolwork and has trouble memorizing the team’s plays. Cal says he is beginning to “hate basketball”. He no longer practices by himself for fun because “he just doesn’t see the point” if he will continue to perform poorly. He confides that he has also considered quitting because the sport he once loved now “makes him sad” and is causing friction with his parents. As a consultant hired by Cal’s parents, how will you proceed?

#### Possible Case Study 2 Factors

- Considering Cal’s enduring positive attitude and relatively young age, potential intervention strategies may target modifiable organization factors to enhance individual-organization fit.
- Key organizational burnout factors may include parental and coach contributions to Cal’s decreased basketball enjoyment, external sport control, unidimensional athletic identity, and insufficient recovery as well as nonsport stressors such as rigorous academic demands.

### Case Study 3 – Judy

Judy is a competitive high school and club swimmer. She is visiting with you in compliance with her team requirement that all athletes meet with the club's sport psychology consultant (with the primary goal of performance enhancement) at least one time during the competitive season. In your initial meeting Judy commented that she specialized at swimming at a young age where two-a-day practices and near year-round training were common. Although she believes that swimming prevents her from having a normal social life, she used to feel swimming success was worth the sacrifices. Now she is less sure of that. She also hints that she is extremely perfectionistic as well as singularly focused on winning. Even now others are describing her as the next Olympic hopeful. Because of that she feels pressure. She does not want to disappoint her coaches or parents as they have done a lot for her swimming career. Judy states that she continuously gets in extra workouts before and after practice, even when coaches insist that the athletes rest in order to best respond to a designed training taper. Despite her high level of focus and commitment, Judy also mentions that she is feeling much more lethargic than normal and does not seem to be performing as well as she did in previous seasons or even earlier in the present one. Further, she states that she often evaluates herself negatively, while simultaneously maintaining an image of confidence and positivity to her coach, teammates, and parents. Overall, your impression is that swimming is not really something that Judy enjoys, but rather is an activity she views as means to avoid disappointing others, gain recognition/approval, and maybe a college scholarship. From your knowledge of the training environment, you are aware that this particular club team has a very demanding regimen. This has allowed some athletes to excel and reach their goals of swimming in national competitions and receiving college scholarships. However, for others dropout and maladaptive psychological outcomes (e.g., burnout) are common. The coach states that she has a "survival of the fittest" approach to training. She guards

her training regimens closely and does not “alter them for any athlete.” Judy’s parents were both former collegiate athletes and are personal friends with this coach. They believe that pushing Judy hard in swimming will benefit her character as well as help financially by landing her a college scholarship. You work regularly with this team to employ mental skills training for performance enhancement. How will you proceed?

### Chapter Summary

This chapter aims to provide sport psychology practitioners with clarity regarding the complex (and sometimes frustrating) phenomenon of athlete burnout. This multidimensional cognitive-affective syndrome is distinct from depression and dropout and is explained by several sport-based burnout theories. Accordingly, overtraining, psychosocial stress, motivation, and, sport entrapment perspectives on burnout highlight key antecedents which inform evidence-based strategies for burnout treatment and prevention. Further, the host of burnout factors emphasized within these perspectives can be integrated within an individual-organization fit framework in sport.

As burnout is a multifaceted and individualized experience, the design and implementation of effective intervention strategies should be tailored accordingly. To facilitate best practice, we suggest a four-step evidence-based approach to burnout intervention that considers the fit between the athlete and the team on theoretically-specified individual and organizational factors important to the athlete’s burnout experience. Practitioners should 1) assess the situation, 2) determine what individual and organizational factors are important, 3) design an intervention, and 4) evaluate intervention effectiveness. We hope that this chapter aids sport psychologists in conceptualizing how to prevent and treat athlete burnout, which in turn enables athletes to achieve optimal performance and psychological health.

### Study Questions

1. How is athlete burnout defined? What are its three dimensions?
2. How is burnout distinct from depression and sport dropout?
3. A coach mentions that burnout does not seem to be a very important issue in sport given its potentially low prevalence. How would you respond?
4. What key burnout antecedents are highlighted by an overtraining perspective? Can an athlete experience burnout without being overtrained? Why or why not?
5. How does a psychosocial sport stress perspective differ from an overtraining perspective on the causes of burnout?
6. What three psychological needs are showcased in self-determination theory? Describe an example athlete burnout intervention strategy tied to each of these three needs.
7. How does a sport entrapment perspective describe the development of burnout in athletes? Why don't "burned-out" athletes just leave sport altogether?
8. What is individual-organization fit? How can lack of congruence between the athlete and the team promote burnout and prevent engagement in sport?
9. What four steps should sport psychology practitioners consider when designing and implementing burnout prevention or treatment interventions?
10. A coach you are working with believes that burnout is a sign of weakness in an athlete. How would you respond to this coach? What information could you provide her?
11. Your initial intervention program for an adolescent track athlete experiencing burnout does not seem to be working well. You originally suggested a brief (2-week) break from training and competition. However, after returning from this break he is still feeling "burned-out". What will you recommend next? What non-training factors could be playing a role?

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