

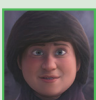


HOW COACHES, PARENTS, AND PEERS INFLUENCE MOTIVATION IN SPORT

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YOUNG REVIEWER:



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When you practice and compete in sport, there are other people involved who support you in some way: coaches, parents, friends, and opponents. These people can influence how you feel about playing sport, through their actions, reactions, emotional expressions, and language. Our motivation in sport is not as simple as “more-v-less,” but rather we experience a whole range of motivating/demotivating factors at the same time. Some motivators seem to feel natural and come from within us, while others seem to come from outside ourselves—like prizes, punishments, and peer pressure. We can be motivated toward an activity (“I want to do that!”), or away from it (“I do not want to do that!”). We can define success and failure in various ways, too. For example, we can compare ourselves to others (“Did I win?” “How did I rank?”), or we can strive for learning and improvement (“I finally did it, it worked!”). The motivational climate in sport refers to the way people around you influence these aspects of motivation.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine you join two sports teams at the start of a season because you really enjoy both sports and you are good at them. Your parents or guardians are supportive and there is plenty of time to fit in training and competitions around school and family time. It seems perfect. Over the first few months, however, you start to feel very differently about the two sports, and you start thinking about quitting one of them.

What has gone wrong? Perhaps you were not as good as you thought? Or perhaps the two motivational climates are different. In this article, we will explore what a motivational climate is, how motivational climates affect us, and how to get the most from our sports experiences. After reading this article, you may be able to recognize and choose a sports team, group, or class that best suits you. You may also be able to adapt yourself to specific settings and teams, which could improve your experience. We hope that what you learn will help you to enjoy sport more, so that you can receive all the health and happiness benefits that sport can bring.

WHAT IS A MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE IN SPORT?

Motivation usually refers to why we do what we do [1]. Whenever we engage in any activity, the reasons we do it represent our motivation. Those reasons could be good or bad, many or few. They can feel like they come from outside ourselves, like rewards or punishments—this is called an **extrinsic motivation**. Or our reasons can feel like they come from inside ourselves, such as enjoyment, curiosity or a sense of achievement: this called **intrinsic motivation** [2]. There can even be options in between, like “I feel I ought to.” In that case, we have accepted some external rules, and we apply them without needing to be reminded. Over time, our reasons can change as we get better, have setbacks, or overcome challenges. This means that our motivation can change quickly.

In any situation where humans gather and work together—including sport—we can influence each other’s motivation. For example, someone may set rules, someone may pick the teams, and someone may get more excited about winning than about simply being around friends. The other people involved will see how the rules are set, how teams are picked, and what is valued, and these things may affect their own motivation. The sum total of those influences—from coaches, other athletes, parents, organizations, and more—is called the **motivational climate** (Figure 1) [3].

To study motivational influences on a sport team, researchers typically ask athletes what they notice and think about the motivational climate. These thoughts can be unique to each person. For example, some athletes really enjoy a highly competitive setting, but others may

EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

When the forces driving our behavior feel like they come from external sources, such as prizes, trophies, punishments, or criticism.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

When doing an activity feels naturally rewarding, then the motivation seems to be “built in” to the task: it is “intrinsic.”

MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE

The sum total of other people’s influences on our motivation as experienced by the recipient. In sport these other people usually include coaches, other athletes, parents, and indeed clubs/organizations.

Figure 1

The messages that athletes hear within a sports context can affect their motivation. For example, the messages in orange may feel pressurizing, and even demotivating, whereas the messages in green may feel much more motivating to the athlete. In this article we discuss how feedback focusing on improvement, and supporting an athlete to make their own choices both lead to better motivation. We will also discuss how enforcing external expectations and fear-of-failure may harm athlete motivation.

ACHIEVEMENT CONTEXT

Any setting or activity where performance on tasks is frequently evaluated/tested. Examples may include sport and school.

MASTERY FOCUS

When someone in an achievement context defines success on a task as either becoming effective in generating desired results ("mastery") or improving at the task, this is a "mastery" focus.

PERFORMANCE FOCUS

When someone in an achievement context defines success through comparison: being the best, winning-vs-losing, or through competitive rankings (e.g., best-to-worst, high-vs-low).



Figure 1

dislike it. Although the motivational climate is part of the external environment, it can actually nurture and foster the feeling that an athlete's motivation comes from within [2]. Coaches and teachers can work together and engage with athletes to discover what those athletes want from sport, and then make sure training and competitions supports those things.

UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE

Motivational climate is important in certain types of situation. For example, an **achievement context** is a situation in which some of your abilities are tested, compared, developed, or improved [4]. If you are not competing against others or testing and evaluating yourself, you may not be in an achievement context. So watching TV, talking to friends, or doing chores at home may not count as achievement contexts, so the motivational climate is not as important. But sport and school are two settings in which evaluation and comparison often happen.

Within an achievement context, we can focus on what gives a person a sense of achievement within that task or activity. A person with a focus on **mastery** will gain satisfaction from improving at, and eventually mastering, a skill. For these people, just exerting the effort to improve is often satisfying. Alternatively, a person with a focus on **performance** will gain satisfaction from positive comparisons with others, for example winning or achieving a high rank. These people may also feel satisfaction when they perform at the same level as a competitor but exert less effort to do so.

While these two types of focus can be thought of as personality traits (for example, “I am just a very competitive person!”), they can also relate to the motivational climate. The motivational climate of a sport can be about effort, improvement, and mastery, or alternatively about winning. Of course, the day-to-day activities of any sport team will likely involve both mastery and performance. When we do our research with sport teams, we find that athletes can experience a range of these characteristics. They can be competitive and improvement-focused; they can be heavily competitive; they can be heavily improvement-focused; or they can be neither heavily competitive nor improvement-focused.

HOW DOES MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE AFFECT ATHLETES?

If we reconnect to what motivation is—the why behind human behavior—then we recall that the motivational climate can influence our motivation in sport. This helps us to see why motivational climate is important. If our motivational whys are positive, numerous, and intrinsic, we are more likely to have a good experience, so we may come back for more! If our motivational whys are too negative, too few, or heavily extrinsic, we can quickly find we are not enjoying ourselves and may want to quit the sport.

Research backs up these ideas [5]. Athletes who perceive a mastery climate generally experience better results, including confidence in their abilities, better performance, higher intrinsic motivation, more pleasant emotions, better problem-solving strategies, and more “fair play.” Athletes who perceive a performance climate more frequently experience extrinsic motivation, a lack of motivation, more unpleasant emotions, unhelpful problem-solving strategies like avoidance and complaining, and they will often cheat more or use negative tactics like trying to injure an opponent [6].

Based on those findings, it seems like helping athletes to better enjoy their sports should be as simple as creating a mastery climate! But the problem for scientists working in this area is that it can be quite difficult to dependably change coach, parent, or teammate behaviors in a way that helps everyone perceive a mastery climate [7]. All athletes bring different experiences and ideas with them to their sports. Recently, scientists have also started to look at other aspects of the motivational climate. For example, can a motivational climate make us feel connected to friends and valued or accepted? Can it help us to feel cared for and safe? How important are these things to your motivation? The question that first inspired me to become a researcher was whether a motivational climate can help athletes to seek desirable things (e.g., “I want to do this! It makes me feel happy!”) instead of simply avoiding undesirable ones (e.g., “I do

APPROACH-AVOIDANCE DISTINCTION

Motivation can also be understood as a difference between seeking-out desirable/pleasant experiences vs. avoiding unpleasant experiences. This distinction has existed in psychology for many decades.

not want that to happen. It would make me sad"). This is called the **approach-avoidance distinction**.

This approach-avoidance distinction is a very common theme throughout psychology—not just sports psychology. Can you picture the difference between an athlete or team that is playing to win (an approach mentality), vs. playing not to lose (an avoidance mentality)? The tactics and behaviors of these two groups could be very different, and they might even experience different levels of fun or stress. Asking these questions led me to realize that coaches, parents, teammates, and others influence our motivation in many ways—from tiny words of support to a large investment of time and effort into helping athletes enjoy their sports. What I found overall was that influencing motivation in sport can be very complicated... but that is ok [8]! We actually do have methods that allow us to understand how motivation is influenced in sport, even if it is "messy."

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE IN SPORTS

So, to go back to our initial example, what might be causing you to no longer enjoy one of your sports and want to quit? Is the team focused on developing skills when you really just want to win every game? Or are they too focused on winning when you just want to improve your skills? In either case, remember that it is what you perceive about the climate that actually affects how you feel and how you perform.

So, you may choose to reconnect to why you are playing, and what you want to get from it. Then you might choose to focus on examples of when the things that you value are supported by others. Remember that, in the long term, improving every day and winning tend to be closely linked. While research has taught us which coaching behaviors tend to create more positive experiences [9], it is important to remember that a lot of the power lies with you. You can choose to arrive at healthier *whys*, in any motivational climate, even if people around you are choosing the unhealthier ones.

Finally, consider that the second you enter a motivational climate, you are helping to create that climate—you can choose to emphasize learning and improvement over winning at all costs. You can steer the atmosphere toward nice vs. nasty, and choose to feel empowered vs. bossed around. So, now that you know about motivational climate, how will you try to influence the one you find yourself in the next time you play a sport?

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SUBMITTED: 31 March 2021; **ACCEPTED:** 07 September 2022;

PUBLISHED ONLINE: 30 September 2022.

EDITOR: Sam Nicholas Thrower, University of Roehampton London, United Kingdom

SCIENCE MENTOR: Vishal Shah

CITATION: Keegan RJ (2022) How Coaches, Parents, and Peers Influence Motivation in Sport. *Front. Young Minds* 10:685862. doi: 10.3389/frym.2022.685862

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I am a high school freshman student in Edmonton, Canada. I enjoy playing guitar, singing, and playing drums. Skiing and ice-hockey are my favorite sports! I like Science and I like to conduct various experiments. I am also a big fan of Star Wars!



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I work at the University of Canberra, Australia, specializing in sport and exercise psychology. I have worked as a psychologist in many sports, including rugby union, netball, swimming, gymnastics, football, officiating, winter sports, and motor sports. I earned my master's and doctoral degrees at Loughborough University, UK, and before that, a degree in psychology at the University of Bristol, UK. My research focuses on four key areas: motivational processes, physical literacy, how sport psychology is delivered in real life, and resilience (which means helping people deal with stress when trying to perform their best). I once played lots of rugby, but now I am over 40, I prefer going to the gym and walking my dogs. *richard.keegan@canberra.edu.au

