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Adversity-Related Experiences *are* Essential for Olympic Success:

Additional Evidence and Considerations

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Abstract

1
2 Drawing on Hardy et al.'s study as the target article, in this commentary, we focus on the
3 adversity-related experiences and consequences of the Olympic and/or World champions that
4 they sampled. With this in mind, we divide the narrative into two main sections. In the first
5 section, we explore the association between adversity-related experiences and Olympic
6 success, and provide additional evidence in support of the notion that adversity-related
7 experiences *are* essential for success at the highest level of sport. In the second section, we
8 discuss the role of adversity-related experiences in Olympic success considering a series of
9 important psychosocial processes that are required for superior performance. In ending, we
10 reflect on the salient (contentious and ethical) issues in the study and practice of adversity-
11 related experiences and sport performance. We hope that our commentary adds to the extant
12 literature and is useful for future study and practice in performance sport.

13 *Keywords:* adversity, elite, excellence, psychosocial, sport performance.

1 Adversity-Related Experiences *are* Essential for Olympic Success:

2 Additional Evidence and Considerations

3 It is with pleasure that we comment on Hardy et al.'s study of British Olympic
4 athletes. Firstly, because we have for some time admired the work and contributions of the
5 authors to sport psychology and talent development. Secondly, because we have a
6 longstanding interest in the psychosocial aspects of Olympic champions (Fletcher, 2008;
7 Fletcher & Sarkar, 2010, 2012; Howells & Fletcher 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015). There is much
8 to commend about the study including its purposive sample, comparative design, and
9 comprehensive data. If we were to quibble, it could have been more explicit in places how the
10 findings (see also Rees et al., 2016) are situated in relation to previous research in this area,
11 and why some methodological-related procedures were conducted. That said, given the
12 wealth of findings reported, it is understandable why the authors focused their attention
13 largely on the results and their interpretation. Indeed, it is with this in mind that we focus on
14 the adversity-related experiences and consequences of the Olympic and/or World champions
15 that they sampled (cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Howells & Fletcher 2015; Morgan et al.,
16 2013, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015).

17 **Adversity-Related Experiences and Olympic Success**

18 As Hardy et al. recognized, the notion that the experience of adversity could be
19 important for sporting success has received increasing attention in recent years. In our 2012
20 study of Olympic champions, for example, we reported that “most of the participants argued
21 that if they had not experienced certain types of stressors at specific times, including highly
22 demanding adversities . . . they would not have won their gold medals” (Fletcher & Sarkar,
23 2012, p. 672). In a follow-up study designed to specifically explore this observation, we
24 found that these stressors related to both sport and non-sport (life) adversities that the
25 Olympic champions considered were essential for winning their gold medals, including

1 repeated non-selection, significant sporting failure, serious injury, political unrest, and the
2 death of a family member (Sarkar et al., 2015). A more comprehensive list of sport and non-
3 sport (life) adversities were identified in Howells and Fletcher's (2015) study of Olympic
4 swimming champions: developmental stressors (e.g., ADHD), external stressors (e.g., family
5 dysfunction), embodied states (e.g., injury), psychological states (e.g., depression), and
6 externalized behaviors (e.g., self-harm). Comparable adversities were reported in Hardy et
7 al.'s study with all of the Olympic and/or World champions sampled experiencing an early
8 life (i.e., non-sport) adversity and the majority experiencing a later career (sport or non-sport)
9 adversity. Thus, a convergence of evidence supports the notion that adversity-related
10 experiences *are* essential for success at the highest level of sport. Interestingly and
11 importantly, by explicitly distinguishing between early life and later career adversities, Hardy
12 et al. begin to unravel some of the temporal and contextual nuances underpinning the
13 association between adversity and achievement. More specifically, that early life (i.e., non-
14 sport) adversity is essential and that later career (sport or non-sport) adversity has the
15 potential to act as a developmental catalyst.

16 Another significant contribution that Hardy et al. make relates to the experience of the
17 early life adversity in close temporal proximity to a positive sport-related event. Howells and
18 Fletcher (2015) similarly observed that, following adversity, Olympic champion swimmers
19 used the pool as a sanctuary and searched for meaning in their lives. In their study, however,
20 Hardy et al. expand on these findings by suggesting that the positive sport-related event
21 involves finding a sport in which the individual felt that they could thrive, finding a
22 significant sport coach or mentor, and/or experiencing an inspirational sporting pathway
23 moment. However, although Hardy et al. argue that the positive nature of this event may
24 counter the negative mental health consequences that typically accompany childhood trauma,
25 we suggest that this positive event may only mask these undesirable outcomes with the

1 positive virtues commonly associated with and expressed by successful Olympic athletes.
2 Either way, the relationships between adversity, mental health, and performance represent a
3 fruitful area for future research.

4 **The Role of Adversity-Related Experiences in Olympic Success**

5 The experience of adversity is, of course, not enough on its own to guarantee Olympic
6 success. Coupled with a positive sport-related event (Hardy et al., 2017) and growth-related
7 transitional processes (Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015), there are a series of
8 important psychosocial processes that are required for superior performance. We concur with
9 Hardy et al.'s conclusion that trauma plays an influential role and have argued that
10 “[emotional] trauma stemming from adversity can leave an indelible impression on an
11 individual’s psyche and schema, to the extent that his or her *raison d’être* is established or
12 altered” (Sarkar et al., 2015, p. 478; see also Howells & Fletcher, 2015). There are
13 similarities between the “demonstration of high achievement and superiority becoming
14 fundamental psychological exigencies for that individual” (Sarkar et al. 2015, p. 478),
15 adversity-related traumas “acting as extreme motivational triggers” (Howells & Fletcher,
16 2015, p. 45) and fuelling ambition, effort, and application (Sarkar et al. 2015), and what
17 Hardy et al. term “a deep-seated need to succeed” (p. 65). Similarly, parallels can be drawn
18 between “a ‘dark side’ of core psychological processes” (Sarkar et al. 2015, p. 477-478),
19 including a “self-serving indifference and disturbing malevolence” (Sarkar et al. 2015, p.
20 478), “a single-minded, narcissistic desire to prove one’s worth” (Sarkar et al. 2015, p. 478),
21 “highly driven mindsets that bordered on the obsessional” (Howells & Fletcher, 2015, p. 45),
22 and what Hardy et al. describe as “*obsessive/perfectionistic*, and *ruthless/selfish*, attitudes to
23 sport” (p. 171). Perhaps the most significant advance that Hardy et al. make in these areas is
24 the profundity of both the relationships between and the role of these psychosocial
25 characteristics and Olympic success.

1 Some of the most novel and interesting interpretations of Hardy et al.'s work are, in
2 our opinion, the links they make with psychodynamic and attachment theories. We are not
3 aware of any previous research in Olympic sport that has examined these areas and Hardy et
4 al. draw some well-reasoned and intriguing conclusions based on the interface between their
5 original data and existing theory. As they suggest, future researchers would do well to reflect
6 on their observations and design studies to further explore related concepts in more detail.
7 Given previous research in this area and the nature of the reported data, we were somewhat
8 surprised that theories relating to adversarial growth (Howells & Fletcher 2015; Sarkar et al.,
9 2015), social support (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Howells & Fletcher 2015; Morgan et al.,
10 2013, 2015), and learning (Morgan et al., 2013, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015) did not feature and,
11 therefore, may also warrant future inquiry in Olympic sport. Another related worthwhile area
12 of research is the extent to which Olympic champions deceive themselves in terms of their
13 perceptions of adversity-related experiences and the role they play in their development and
14 performance (cf. Howells & Fletcher, 2016).

15 **Concluding Remarks**

16 In 2015, we recognized that “to add to our studies of superior Olympic performance,
17 researchers could compare in more depth the developmental journeys of serial gold medalists
18 . . . and those who underperformed, to better understand differences in their respective
19 adversity-related experiences...” (Sarkar et al., 2015, p. 478) so we were excited to see Hardy
20 et al.'s study – and we were not disappointed after reading it. Notwithstanding the advances
21 that their research makes, it is important to note that the topic of adversity-related experiences
22 and sport performance raises some contentious and ethical issues that require further
23 consideration, something that Hardy et al. acknowledge. In Table 1 we take this opportunity
24 to reflect on the salient issues that we have encountered following the presentation and
25 publication of our research in this area. We hope that our commentary adds to the extant

1 literature and is useful for future study and practice in performance sport.

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Table 1

Salient Issues in the Study and Practice of Adversity-Related Experiences and Sport Performance

| Issue | Reflections |
|--|--|
| Are adversity and trauma really essential for Olympic success? Do all Olympic champions experience adversity and trauma at some point in their lives? | The available evidence to date that has sampled Olympic champions and investigated adversity and trauma (viz. Hardy et al., 2017; Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015) has found that they have experienced adversity and trauma, and that they are perceived as playing an essential role in their success. |
| What about Olympic champions who have not experienced adversity and trauma? | To date, there is no evidence of any Olympic champions who have not experienced some adversity and trauma at some point in their lives. |
| If an athlete has not experienced adversity and trauma at some point in his or her life does that mean that he or she cannot be successful in Olympic sport? | The evidence suggests that he or she will not be successful at the highest levels (i.e., winning an Olympic gold medal and, in particular, winning gold medals across Olympic Games). |
| To be successful at Olympic level, should adversity and trauma be imposed on (aspiring) athletes? | No, that would be unethical and potentially abusive and harmful. Briefly, the main implications of the research are threefold: 1) if a child or athlete experiences adversity and trauma he or she may potentially grow and develop as a result of this experience, to the point that it enhances his or her sport performance (Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015), 2) that athletes should be exposed to relevant and progressively demanding stressors that, with appropriate support, become surmountable challenges (Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015), and 3) that athletes who grow from adversity and cope with stressors will, all things being equal, have a competitive advantage over those who do not (Hardy et al., 2017). |
| Should talent be identified and subsequently selected on the basis of experiencing adversity and trauma? | No, there are a multitude of psychosocial and non-psychosocial factors that are needed to grow from adversity and also to achieve at the highest levels of sport. |
| Should athletes be supported through adversity or challenged to cope with demanding stressors? | Both. The environment needs to balance and combine the support offered to and challenges imposed on athletes, depending on a wide range of contextual and developmental factors. |

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| <p>Is adversity and trauma all you need to be successful?</p> | <p>No. Most people who experience adversity and trauma are not successful at the highest levels. The evidence suggests that a positive sport-related event (Hardy et al., 2017) and growth-related transitional processes (Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015) are also essential features of the adversity-related experience, not to mention a multitude of other psychosocial and non-psychosocial factors that are needed to be successful.</p> |
| <p>Doesn't everyone experience adversity and trauma at some point in their life? But not everyone experiences Olympic success.</p> | <p>Probably, but most people do not also experience a positive sport-related event and growth-related transitional processes, together with developing a multitude of other psychosocial and non-psychosocial factors, and that is why they don't experience Olympic success.</p> |
| <p>Does adversity and trauma cause or produce Olympic success? Or rather do talented athletes need adversity and trauma to succeed?</p> | <p>Adversity and trauma do not cause or produce Olympic success (see previous page). Rather, the available evidence to date indicates that early life (i.e., non-sport) adversity is essential for the development of talent to the highest levels, <i>and</i> that later career (sport or non-sport) adversity has the potential to act as a developmental catalyst for talented athletes (Hardy et al., 2017; see also Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015).</p> |
| <p>Rather than adversity-related experiences being essential for Olympic success, isn't it the psychosocial skills that athletes already have and that are further developed as a consequence of the trauma that are essential?</p> | <p>Although the genetic and preexisting psychosocial characteristics that an individual has will contribute to how he or she responds to and potentially grows from adversity, the evidence indicates that it is the adversity-related experience that is essential in the emergence of <i>new</i> psychosocial characteristics (Hardy et al., 2017; Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015). The psychosocial skills that athletes already have or bring to the adversity and trauma will not be enough on their own (even if they are further developed) to achieve at the highest levels.</p> |
| <p>Life or non-sport adversity and trauma are not essential for Olympic success.</p> | <p>The available evidence to date that has sampled Olympic champions and investigated adversity and trauma indicates that early life (i.e., non-sport) adversity is essential for the development of talent to the highest levels (Hardy et al., 2017; Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015).</p> |

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| <p>What about the evidence that traumatic adversities in childhood are related to a number of undesirable mental health consequences?</p> | <p>Although it appears that adversity and trauma, together with a positive sport-related event (Hardy et al., 2017) and growth-related transitional processes (Howells & Fletcher, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2015) are important for Olympic success, it remains unclear if this counters or masks undesirable mental health consequences.</p> |
| <p>Is there conflict, or at least a tension, between sport psychologists' desire to enhance sport performance and their ethical obligation to optimize mental health, particularly at the highest levels of sport?</p> | <p>Probably. Practitioners will likely need to make difficult decisions relating to whether an intervention enhances sport performance but might compromise mental health, or improves mental health but limits sport performance.</p> |