

Young soccer players show signs of burnout

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Young elite players at professional soccer clubs are at risk of burnout before they leave school because of the perfectionist standards they feel coaches, parents and team members demand of them, according to a new study.

Dr Andrew Hill, lecturer in sports and exercise science in the University of Leeds' School of [Biomedical Sciences](#), said some youngsters are showing signs of [chronic stress](#), exhaustion, and disillusion with their sport at a young age.

Researchers studied the relationship between different types of perfectionism and [burnout](#) among 167 junior male soccer players in eight academies and centres of excellence attached to English professional clubs.

They found that up to a quarter of the boys reported sometimes experiencing symptoms of burnout, while about one percent experienced certain symptoms frequently.

Players who reported perceived pressures from others, a fear of making mistakes, and other [external pressures](#) were at the most risk from burnout. Non-perfectionists and players who displayed perfectionism driven by their own high standards were significantly less vulnerable.

"What we see among the athletes showing symptoms of burnout is emotional and physical exhaustion, a sense that they are not achieving and a sense of devaluation of the sport. Even though they might

originally enjoy their sport and be emotionally invested in it, they eventually become disaffected. Participation can be very stressful," Dr Hill said.

Many professional soccer clubs' youth structures recruit children as young as 8-years-old and cut unwanted players annually until they reach 12. Youngsters then sign two-year registrations and must survive "culls" at the age of 14 and 16 before getting a three-year contract.

"It can be harsh. At its worst, we are talking about an environment that can develop, foster and maintain a mindset where athletes are wholly invested into the idea of being the next David Beckham. In fact, of the estimated 10,000 athletes involved in youth football at any one time, less than one per cent is thought to make it as a professional soccer player.

"[Perfectionism](#) can be a potent energising force but can also carry significant costs for athletes when things don't go well. Reports of psychological difficulties and interpersonal problems, for example, are not uncommon among athletes who describe themselves as perfectionists. [The British athletes] Victoria Pendleton, Ronnie O'Sullivan, and Jonny Wilkinson are all high-profile examples," he added.

"We need sport to be a positive experience for all participants," Dr Hill said. "Sport can be used as a vehicle to develop life skills, a sense of self-esteem and quality relationships with others, but we know it can lead to disaffection, poor moral decision making and make people feel miserable about themselves. There is nothing necessarily positive about sport. It is about the environment that is created."

He added: "Perfectionists are stuck in a self-defeating cycle. They are overly dependent on personal accomplishment as a means of establishing a sense of self-esteem but are always dissatisfied with their efforts. Even

success can be problematic because they simply become more demanding until they inevitably experience failure."

More information: Andrew P. Hill, 'Perfectionism and Burnout in Junior Soccer Players: A Test of the 2 x 2 Model of Dispositional Perfectionism,' *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 2013.

Provided by University of Leeds

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