

Elite athletes under stress to lose weight

November 20 2014, by David Ellis

Psychology researchers at the University of Adelaide say modern day elite athletes are under so much pressure to lose and maintain weight that they can also lose a sense of self.

Researchers in the University's School of Psychology have been studying the daily routines of elite sportsmen and women to gain a deeper understanding of the stress they experience and how they handle it.

"Most people in the broader community struggle with their [weight](#), but for elite athletes it is an ongoing and precisely measured part of their daily working lives," says research leader Associate Professor Amanda Lecouteur.

"For example, having their skin folds measured is an important part of the day-to-day routine and a very big issue for many [elite athletes](#). Their bodies are measured daily and they are under constant surveillance from their coaches.

"If athletes gain weight when they shouldn't, they have a moral accountability for that [weight gain](#). You need to be able to control yourself all the time. To a certain extent, this means that 'you are your weight' – the personal sense of self can be lost to the business or the competitive emphasis of their work," she says.

Associate Professor Lecouteur says the modern day professionalism of sport brings many pressures to bear on athletes, ranging from footballers to gymnasts, boxers and jockeys.

"It's a very different job being an athlete – most of us are not used to that level of scrutiny in our daily lives. Sports people are continually measured by their performance statistics, by their weight, by the media and by the public.

"For some sports people this can contribute to depression, while others thrive in that environment," she says.

"Gaining a better understanding of this aspect of athletes' lives is important because their psychological state is crucial to their sporting performance. We hope to provide new insights so that sports psychologists, coaches and counsellors can better assist athletes in maintaining their psychological well-being while achieving their professional goals."

Associate Professor Lecouteur says much of the sports research conducted in the School of Psychology in recent years has been a deliberate attempt to "get out of the lab".

"Our researchers have been in the field – or in this case, in the locker rooms – gathering real-world evidence. It makes our work more directly relevant to what is happening in sport today," she says.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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