

# Researchers advocate 'whole person' approach to understanding and developing elite athletes

May 26 2015, by Rob Payne

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“Crucially, we gain an insight of an athlete’s personality within the context of the actual events of their life,” Dr Gucciardi says. Credit: Sangudo

Exercise scientists from Australia and the USA are advocating a 'whole person' approach to understanding and developing elite athletes.

They say this approach—drawn from McAdams' Integrated Personality Framework—complements established research on traits and motivations by incorporating the aspect of personal narratives and evolving identities.

"Traits provide a broad sketch of personality and how someone typically behaves across situations and over time, but they can only take us so far in terms of understanding a person," Curtin University researcher Dr Daniel Gucciardi says.

"We can add knowledge of motives, goals and values, which provide valuable information on what the athlete is trying to achieve, and how they go about doing it.

"But the third piece of the puzzle, personal narrative, provides an understanding of how people make sense of their past, present and future self in ways largely anchored within the social and cultural features of their life.

"Crucially, we gain an insight of an athlete's personality within the context of the actual events of their life."

For example, while having the trait of 'risk-taking' might suggest an elite athlete is more prone to doping, this information alone is insufficient to predict they will.

Even having a sense of their motivation doesn't provide a clear picture, as [athletes](#) in similar situations often react differently.

## **Key in how athletes perceive themselves**

Dr Gucciardi says personal narrative provide a crucial step.

"Honing in on how a person constructs their identity as an elite sportsperson, we might discover that they see themselves as a person engaged in a struggle to live up to expectations," Dr Gucciardi says.

"These expectations might relate to fulfilling the potential placed on them since childhood by an overly dominant parent, or as a talented youngster whose ability was exaggerated.

"We may learn that winning acts as an antidote for deep-rooted anxieties where being unable to compete with the best signals a perception of weakness or a notion of being dominated by others.

"By exploring a person's personal narrative, we can gain an appreciation of how they see themselves fitting into a sporting world."

Dr Gucciardi says this was exemplified in Lance Armstrong's interview with Oprah, where his personal narrative included the culture of doping in cycling, his competitive drive and making sense of himself through his battle with testicular cancer.

The researchers say a holistic approach can help athletes better understand themselves and their behaviour, unlocking aspects of personality that might take them to the next level.

**More information:** "Personality in sport and exercise psychology: Integrating a whole person perspective." *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* [DOI: 10.1080/1612197X.2015.1016085](https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2015.1016085)

Provided by Science Network WA

Citation: Researchers advocate 'whole person' approach to understanding and developing elite

athletes (2015, May 26) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-05-advocate-person-approach-elite-athletes.html>

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