

Lesson 2.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAITS OF SUCCESSFUL ATHLETES

Aim

Identify psychological traits found in successful athletes.

In order to not only become successful, but also remain successful, an athlete must not only have the appropriate physical skills and condition, but must also possess appropriate mental skills and condition; and maintain all of these at an optimum level.

In the 1970s attempts were made to determine a psychological profile which was common to elite athletes. Coaches were enthusiastic about applying such findings in their selection of players – but successful application was not achieved, and in due course, the problem proved to be inappropriate application of the results from testing and research.

So is there a relationship between sports preference and personality type? Do certain personality types prefer individual sports above team sports?

Personality traits are different to Psychological disposition

Personality is more specific or narrower than disposition. An understanding of personality gives a more precise tool for predicting performance than an understanding of disposition does. Personality traits are usually seen as characteristics that dispose a person to react in a certain way in certain types of situations. Disposition is a broader, pervasive way in which a person relates to a particular type of situation or person. As such, sports psychologists are more interested in determining personality traits (than disposition). Personality should not be seen as being made up of negatives and positives. A trait that is a disadvantage in one situation may be an advantage in a different situation. A **Personality Inventory** is often conducted in order to create a list of Personality traits...it should not however, be judgemental.

So what is a personality?

“Personality is the sum total of an individual’s characteristics which make him or her unique”.
(Gill, 1977)

“Personality is the more or less stable and enduring organisation of a person’s character, temperament, intellect and physique, which determines the unique adjustment the individual makes to the environment” (Eysenck, 1968)

So basically, a personality is –

- Enduring
- Stable
- Unique
- Individual

Our personality determines how we respond to the environment around us.

Personality Traits

What is a personality trait?

A trait is a characteristic we inherit at birth.

It tends to be stable and enduring over time and a range of situations.

Traits cause us to act in certain ways.

For example, if someone is “friendly” it is likely they will be friendly to most people, in most situations. In contrast, if someone is “shy” it is likely that they will be more quiet and timid towards most people, in most situations.

To identify a personality trait, it must be observed across different situations and different times to gauge the “strength” of the trait. People’s behaviour can change depending on a number of different factors, e.g. mood, feelings, illness, external factors, so to assume a personality trait from one observation is invalid.

For example, If someone is feeling very stressed because they have just had some bad news, they may behave in a way that is not consistent with how they would usually act. You cannot make an assumption of an inherent personality trait from observing them on this one behaviour.

People can have varying degrees of a particular trait. For example someone who was very shy may be shy across all situation with all people, whereas someone who is a bit shy may only be shy around new people, or in new situations.

Some personality traits can be better predictors of success than others.

Personality Types

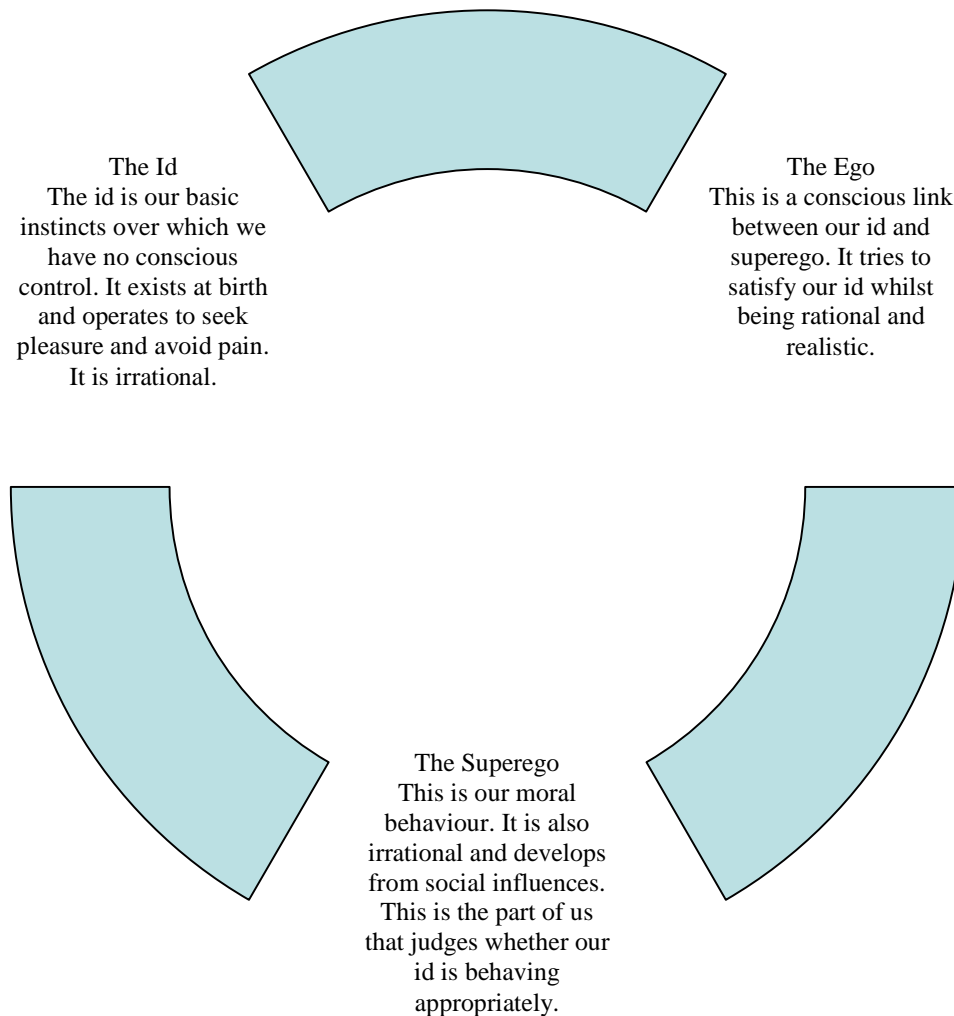
Trait theory recognises two types of personality – Type A and type B.

Type A Personality	Type B Personality
Highly competitive Strong desire to succeed Suffers from stress Works fast Likes to be in control	Unambitious Non-competitive Relaxes easily Works at a slower pace Does not enjoy control

Historically, personality theories considered personality traits to be static and rigid characteristics, however in modern times a more dynamic, flexible approach that recognises that individual behaviour changes across time and situation.

Freud's Psychodynamic Theory of Personality (1933)

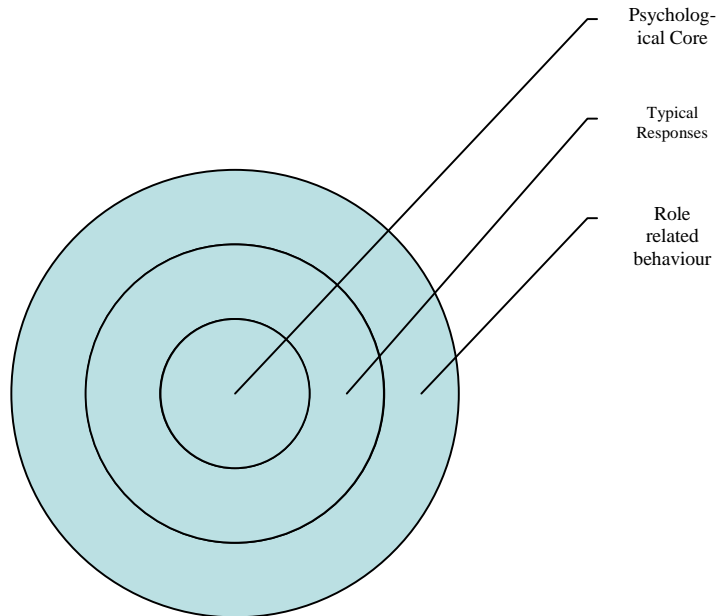
Freud argued that there were three aspects to our personality – the id, ego and superego.



The 3 parts are frequently in conflict as their needs are opposing.

In sports, the ego tries to balance the moral influences of the superego, with the aggressive tendencies of the id. In contact sports, the moral restraints of the superego are relaxed as aggression is more socially acceptable in this arena, which allows the balance to tip in the favour of the id's aggressive tendencies. This theory represents a good explanation for aggression in sports, but does not consider the role of nurture in the development of a sporting personality.

Hollander's Personality Structure



Psychological Core – Your psychological core is the “real you”. That is, the private you that is not revealed through questioning. It is primarily developed through early interactions with the social environment, and includes your fundamental likes, dislikes, values, attitudes and memories. Because this is the core of your character, it is the most difficult to change.

Typical Responses – This is the way we have learned to respond to our environment. The responses we have learned and stored. Our responses will give some indication of what lies in our psychological core. That is, how we respond to situations will indicate to others something about the “real you”, but not always. Our responses are more controllable than how we feel in our core.

Role Related Behaviour – This is behaviour that is determined by how we perceive the environment at any given time. This form of behaviour can change at any time. This form of behaviour may not be our typical response, but may be most appropriate for the situation. It may be uncharacteristic of our usual behaviour. For example a sports person would behave differently on the field or at a post-competition party than at a media interview or a sponsorship meeting.

Drive Theory

Drive theory is a behavioural theory, and is concerned with understanding what motivates different behaviour, and how to predict behaviour. Drive theory assumes that behaviour is a combination of habit strength (the probability of exhibiting a particular response) and drive (a physiological tension that provides motivation to act in a particular way). In the sports arena, drive theory suggests that the higher the habit strength is, and the stronger the motivation to perform the habit, the better the performance.

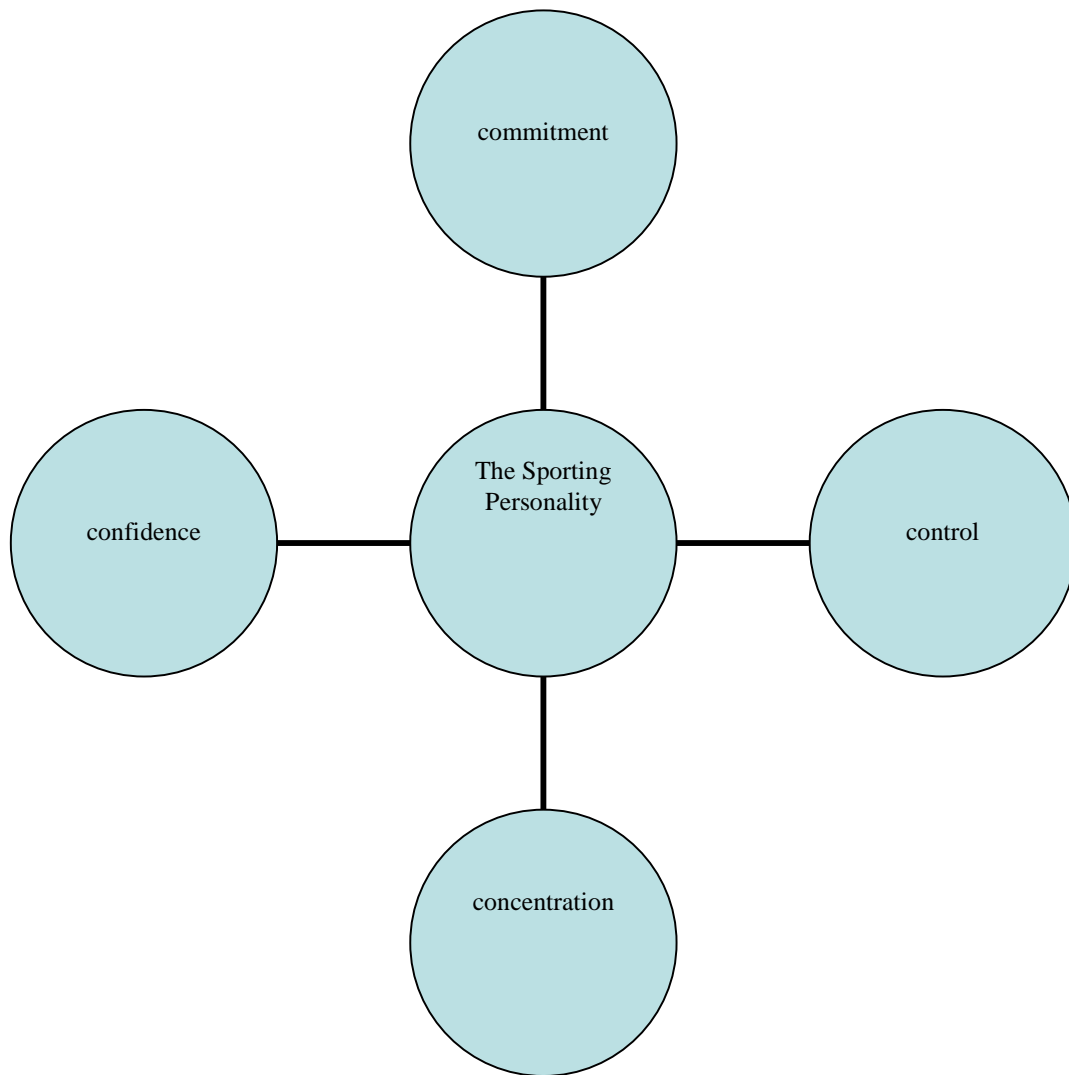
For example, if a golfer practices a particular swing over and over again, so it becomes a strongly ingrained habit, and they are in a competition where the winner gets \$1million dollars, both the habit strength and the drive are high, so it is likely they will be successful. If however the prize was only \$1, the golfer's performance may not be as high.

Coaches can use this to develop a habit for performing a preferable response, so in a high-drive situation, the preferable response is more likely to be elicited than a less desirable response. To develop a habit the athlete will go through 3 stages:

- *Cognitive Stage*: The first stage of the learning experience where the athlete will mentally rehearse performing the skill.
- *Associative Stage*: The athlete physically rehearses the skill repeatedly until they master the skill.
- *Autonomous Stage*: The skill is performed automatically. It is the dominant response and is performed with minimal conscious processing.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISPOSITIONS
The Sporting Personality

The 4 Cs –



The 4 Cs are generally considered important characteristics for the successful athlete.

Concentration	Able to maintain focus
Confidence	Belief in our own abilities
Control	Able to maintain our emotional control, ignoring distraction.
Commitment	The ability to continue to strive towards agreed goals.

Concentration - This is the mental ability that enables us to focus on the current task. If a sportsperson lacks concentration, then they will not effectively and efficiently apply their athletic abilities to the task at hand. There are two main types of attention –

Broad/Narrow spectrum – For example, the athlete is able to focus on a large or small number of stimuli.

Internal/External spectrum – For example, the athlete can focus on external stimuli, such as the ball, or internal stimuli, such as their feelings.

The level and type of concentration required varies from sport to sport. For example –

Sustained concentration may be required for cycling, long distance running etc.

Short concentration bursts may be required for golf, shooting etc.

Intense concentration may be required for skiing or sprinting etc.

Distractions :

- Mistakes
- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Weather
- Coach
- Opponent
- Manager
- The crowd
- Public announcements
- Negative thoughts
- Low self-esteem
- Pain
- Etc....

The following dispositions are broad characteristics that are often associated with elite sports persons:

Risk Taking - Risk takers may include mountaineers, parachutists, who tend to be very confident that they can manage the risks that might be involved. They are willing to take physical risks to trigger their fight and flight response. So sporting risk takers are intentionally provoking this fight or flight response, as they may experience this high level of arousal in an exciting rather than fearful way.

Stimulus Seeking – associated with craving “experiences” or sensations. In sports, participants may seek the experience of fun, adrenalin, camaraderie, anticipation. Some studies have found athletes to be higher in stimulus, or sensation seeking than non-athletes.
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Competitiveness – Can be motivation to drive an athlete to perform their best. A strong desire to win can give a participant an edge over other participants.

Self-Confidence – In sports this is to do with the amount of certainty an athlete has that they can be successful. This is recognised as an important factor in the enjoyment and success in sports.
Self-Discipline – is the ability to give up immediate gratification to work towards long-term rewards and goals. Self-disciplined athletes can motivate themselves to work long and hard for a potential future gain.
Rapid Cognition (make decisions quickly) – important for sports requiring split-second responses, e.g. tennis, basketball, soccer.
Positive outlook – always expect the best. Having a positive outlook can boost their performance levels. Negative affect such as depression, anger, anxiety and tension can reduce performance.
Good Stress Management – Athletes that can control their emotions and have emotional stability can help them to be more successful, by focusing on the task at hand, recovering from success or failure and not getting caught up by stress.

Teams tend to show predictable personality profiles. So by understanding their psyche, their performance can be improved, as well as communication between players and the coach. It can also be used to make use of their personal strengths and work in other areas to identify their personality and learning styles.

Certain personality types will succeed more in certain sports and the more coaches know about the personality of athlete the more successful they will be.

Psychological Attributes can predict Success

Kuchenbecker et al (1999) looked at the psychological and physical characteristics in developing young athletes. They found that psychological factors were very important in achieving athletic success. Also, too much pressure and criticism were most harmful to young athlete's development.

The most important quality, according to coaches, was the desire to play the sport, followed by having a positive attitude, being coachable, self motivated and being a team player. Coaches should create winners by emphasising positive personal development.

The physical skills that were rated as most important were natural physical athlete, coordinated for age and good hand-eye coordination.

Personality Theories – An Overview

Personality theories are useful to consider and categorise personalities. BUT –

- They do not take nurture into account. How we are brought up and encouraged as a child affects how we grow and develop.
- They do not take into account personal experiences and personal development.
- They tend to be an unreliable predictor of behaviour.
- They can represent only a narrow band of personality.
- They do not take the environment or situation into account.

Let us briefly look at **Social Learning Theory**. Social learning theorist such as Bandura (1963) argue that behaviour changes with our situation. They argue that we are not born with characteristics, but learn our behaviour through observation of those we hold in high esteem. They would therefore argue that we cannot predict behaviour, so would not be able to predict who would be a good sportsperson, for example.

They argue that we learn by –

- Observation
- Social reinforcement

However, there are also problems with this approach – it does not take inherited behaviours into account.

The Interactionist Approach

The Interactionist Approach to personality formation considers that all behaviour is a mixture of nature and nurture. We inherit our behaviours, but the way that they evolve and show themselves in our personality is affected by the way we are brought up. It is also affected by the situation that we are in.

For example, a sportsperson might be loud, brash, competitive and dominating on the football field, but quietly spoken and uncompetitive in a home situation. This is because the situations require different behaviours.

Stress and Stressors

Before going on to discuss personality traits further, it is important to consider stress and stressors.

Stress is a medical term for stimuli, psychological and physiological, that cause a physiological response called the general adaptation syndrome.

Selye (1936) identified physical effects of stress from other symptoms suffered by his patients. He noticed that these physical effects were not directly caused by their medical condition. He described the general adaptation syndrome as having three stages –

- Alarm reaction – the body detects an external stimulus.
- Adaptation – the body engages defensive countermeasures against the stressor.
- Exhaustion – the body runs out of defences.

There are two types of stress –

- Eustress – positive stress
- Distress – negative stress

Both types can result from positive and negative events. E.g. If a person wins the lottery and someone dies on the same day, we may experience eustress and distress as both are stressful events. However, what one person experiences as eustress, another may experience as distress. E.g. A new job to some people may be a positive challenge (eustress), whilst to others it may be upsetting.

Stress can lead directly and indirectly to disorders of the mind and body. It can raise adrenaline and corticosterone in the body, increasing heart rate and so on. Long term stress can contribute to heart disease, high blood pressure, strokes and more.

The fight or flight response is also known as the acute stress response. When we react to stress, there is a discharge of the sympathetic nervous system, which regulates our stress options. Simply put, when faced with danger, humans and other animals can either run (flight) or face the threat (fight). The stress response has specific physiological actions e.g. Releasing epinephrine/adrenaline and releasing acetylcholine and other hormones, which lead to increased heart rate and breathing, constricting the blood vessels to some parts of the body, tightening muscles and so on.

Stressors are events or context that triggers a stress response as it throws the body out of balance forcing it to respond. Stressors include –

- Daily stressful events e.g. Lost keys, traffic
- Life changes e.g. Bereavement, having a baby, divorce
- Workplace stressors e.g. Loss of control, role strain
- Environmental stressors e.g. Noise, too much/little light, overcrowding and so on.....

Sportsmen and women will also have the added stressors of –

- The need to win
- The need to achieve
- Financial implications e.g. Some athletes do not receive state funding and may have to work as well as training, or they may have to try to raise sponsor money through firms, general public and so on.
- What if they lose?
- How their poor performance may affect others, e.g. Team members, coach, possible sponsorship deals with advertisers.
- Time implications involved in training. This may affect their relationships outside the sports arena e.g. Family, friendships, marriages etc.
- Top sportsmen and women may be in the public eye and may have media intrusion which can influence their lives.

Each individual athlete will experience other stressors to this, which will affect them in varying ways.

Kobasa carried out research on illness and stress and found that those who avoided illness tended to perceive stressors as challenges rather than threats and aimed to maintain control over events. She called this the personality characteristic of hardiness. Kobasa suggested that hardiness had three elements –

- Challenge – ability to grow and develop, rather than remain the same, view change as the norm, rather than stability.
- Commitment – refusal to give up easily.
- Control – ability to exert influence rather than experience helplessness.

Recent research has looked at the idea of hardiness within sport. Cockerill (2002) looked at mental toughness in relation to sport. They found that mental toughness was related to performance and cognitive appraisal. They found that participants had either low or high mental toughness. At higher levels of exertion, those who were classified as mentally “tough” were thought to perceive themselves as having more control over the situation and saw the higher exertion as a challenge rather than a threat.

Cockerill and his team added another C to Kobasa’s work. They felt that **confidence** was as important as **control, commitment and challenge**.

You may remember the 4 Cs from above – on the important characteristics for athletes. Notice the similarities.

Stress-inoculation training has been found to help in situations where people have learned helplessness. The stress response is gradually diminished as exposure to a stressful situation becomes less threatening and the person feels more control.

Self-esteem and improved involvement in physical activity

Martin Hagger (2005) studied how high self-esteem can improve health. He found that high self-esteem in young people lead to increased participation in sports activities. But low self-esteem is linked to greater participation in dieting behaviours. He studied nearly 3000 school pupils between 12 and 14 years old and found that their average levels of physical conditioning, sports ability and perceived body attractiveness decreased as their age increased. At this age, there may be decreases in activity, leading to increases in levels of obesity and fatness. Therefore, self-esteem may be important in avoiding activity in increasing age.

He also found that the higher the person’s self esteem, the more likely they were to be involved in some form of physical activity, but low levels of physical self-esteem was linked to dieting behaviour e.g. Skipping meals, eating smaller portions, avoiding high sugar/high fat meals, which could eventually lead to maladaptive behaviours e.g. Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa. Dr Hagger felt that people were more likely to engage in sports – a public activity – if they had higher self-esteem. He argues that professionals involved in sports should take self-esteem into account when designing healthy eating and physical activity programmes.

Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness is a well-established principle in psychology. The theory was developed by Seligman with research starting in 1965. Seligman was used as a model to explain human depression, where apathy and submission cause the individual to rely fully on others for help. This can happen when their life circumstances cause the individual to experience their life choices as irrelevant. For example, in environments when the individuals feels that they have no control over their life. Some people do not become depressed in situations where they feel they have no control, but Seligman argued that people with learned helplessness will view problems as –

- Personal – they see themselves as the problem i.e. They individualise their problems.
- Permanent – they see the problem as unchangeable.
- Pervasive – they see the problem as affecting all aspects of their life.

So over the course of their life, a depressed person has learned that they have no control over their life. Let's relate this to sports.

You have an important tennis match. You lose. Do you think?

- I'm rubbish at everything.
- I'm bad at tennis.
- It was a bad day to play, it was Friday 13th.
- The referee was prejudiced.
- The referee was too hard on me.
- I felt ill.
- The match was very hard.
- I didn't have time to practice
- Etc.

Some of these statements are internal e.g. I'm rubbish at everything, but this is personal, permanent and pervasive e.g. I'm rubbish at everything, not just that I didn't do very well in this match today. If they won the match, a depressive might say "I was lucky that day" discounting any skill and tennis ability they may have. So instead of attributing their success to their skill, their ability and other external factors, they feel that they were just lucky (for a change). This type of learned helplessness can obviously have a great impact on sports men and women.

Setbacks can affect the self-esteem and self-belief of sportsmen and women. In some, it can be a catalyst encouraging them to do better and better. In others, it can start to affect their performance.


Psychological strength is an important factor for athletes, but psychological weakness can also determine how a person performs on the day. Being underprepared can affect their ability and cause stress.

Many top athletes and coaches believe that psychological factors have a crucial role in sport, as important as physical attributes and sporting skills. Mental strength is not enough to compensate for lack of skill, but if physical skills are matched, the athlete with the strongest control over their own mind will usually be the winner. Some people are more naturally strong minded than others, but some can be given mental toughness with training. So what is a mentally tough athlete likely to be like?

- They will consistently achieve good performances whatever the situation.
- They can tolerate pain and discomfort.
- Be persistent when it is hard going.
- Bounceback after disappointments
- Be optimistic and resilient
- Deal with distractions without letting them interfere with their performance.


So what are the benefits of understanding the personality profile of athletes?

- It can help coaches in team building and management of the team.
- It can help assess whether the person is suitable for the sport and where within a team they would fit.
- It can help athletes and coaches to value their strengths and areas where they need to develop more.
- Where there is a strained relationship between athletes and the coach, it can help them to discover the source of the conflict and develop strategies to overcome it.
- It can be useful in terms of life planning, self management (e.g. Stress management), interpersonal skills and so on.

	SELF ASSESSMENT Perform the self assessment test titled 'Self Assessment test 2.1.' If you answer incorrectly, review the notes and try the test again.
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SET TASKS

1. Carry out library or internet research into how successful athletes stay motivated. Take notes.
2. Choose two top sports persons and make notes about how you would describe their personality.

	ASSIGNMENT Download and do the assignment called 'Lesson 2 assignment'.
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