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A Three Stage Adversity Coping Model for Chinese Athletes

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Abstract

In this article, the authors discussed the development of a three stage model of adversity coping in which Chinese athletes were categorized into three stages: climb, plateau, and enlightened stage. Specific, stage-related, sport psychology services are recommended in this model. Particularly, sport psychology practitioners are encouraged to assist climb stage athletes with mental skills and achievement motivation, and help coaches establish an empowering motivational climate. Rational emotive behavioral therapy (REBT) and acceptance and mindfulness skills are recommended to help plateau stage athletes overcome irrational and negative beliefs and habits. Finally, sport psychology services provided to enlightened stage athletes should focus on developing an appreciation of the meaning and value of a sporting career, as well as enhancing work-life balance.

Key words: career transition; coping with adversity; socio-cultural environments; psychological services; sport system

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Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters.

But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters.

- *Ch'uan Teng Lu*, 22 (Watts, 1951, p.126)

The above quotation is a famous Zen saying to help people to understand the process of learning Zen or Buddhism. For example, we see everything as it appears to be from the very beginning, and we think we know the truth when we see the literal forms of things. However, we begin to doubt the truth we thought we knew when we know more, and wonder what the truth is. Are mountains still mountains? If not, what are they? Eventually, we are no longer distracted by mere surface details but are able to comprehend the essential mechanics of things when we become more spiritually mature and enlightened; then we become more capable of understanding why things appear to us in a certain way. This Zen saying will be illustrated in sporting contexts as the authors introduce this model for sport psychology services in this article: the three stage adversity coping model for Chinese Athletes (Si, 2008).

Adversity is abundant in a sporting career, and considering the competitive nature of elite sports, athletes may potentially cope with more adversity than the average person (Si, 2006). We can divide the athlete's journey into three stages when taking into consideration the physical and spiritual reality of being an athlete. Firstly, the climb stage refers to a stage when athletes begin to experience the beauty and the cruelty of sport. Secondly, the plateau stage refers to the struggle that begins with performance. Athletes may begin to question the meaning of being an

athlete at this stage. Finally, the enlightened stage refers to fighting to achieve outstanding performances but at the same time appreciating their achievements with peaceful minds. The taxonomy of these three stages is based on the second author's applied service and observation of more than 25 years (Si, 2006, 2008), yet most importantly, these stages are also a reflection of the Chinese socio-cultural environment within the Whole-Nation sport system. Athletes from each stage may have distinctive mindsets, and may have also dealt with various types of adversity, and as such possess many coping strategies. We suggest that mental training or sport psychology services should target athletes' individual mindsets, the types of adversity they face, and consider their stage of adversity coping development: climb, the plateau or the enlightened.

Chinese Sport System

The Chinese socio-cultural environment in which an athlete works, may have a significant impact on career development (Ge et al., in press; Si, Duan, Li, & Jiang, 2011). Chinese athletes train and compete in a semi-closed environment under the Whole-Nation sport system from city teams, to provincial and national teams. Chinese athletes live collectively and train together in a training center where they have limited direct access to the outside world after training, which affects their social interactions. The majority of elite Chinese athletes live together in athlete residences in training centers where they comply with a strict schedule of training over six days a week with a break every Sunday, similar to the living and training environments of Buddhist monks. Additionally, athletes engage in primary and secondary education at the training centers. Chinese athletes may also experience adversity in the form of complicated intrapersonal relationships that occur as a result of training declines, injuries, coach-athlete relationships, selection results, performance, and so on (Si et al., 2011).

Three Adversity Coping Stages

Athletes' career transitions should be viewed within the broader socio-cultural and historical context, thus establishing normative stages of athletic career transitions will enable athletes to be better prepared for impending demands and possible crises (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Career transitions for Chinese athletes under the Whole-Nation sport system differ from their Western counterparts in terms of years of professional training, adversity, as well as the journey towards and particular methods of achieving their best performances. For example, Chinese athletes are involved in early selection, specialized training from an early age, they live and train collectively, and prioritize collective over individual interests. We propose that the adversity coping-related career transition of Chinese athletes can be divided into three stages, namely, the climb, plateau and enlightened stages, based on their best performances, duration of professional training, and adversity coping mentality (Zhang, Chung, & Si, 2012).

We suggest that, in terms of performance ranking, athletes at the enlightened stage are those who are ranked first to fourth in major national competitions (e.g., National Championship), and other major international competitions (e.g., Olympic Games). Athletes at the plateau stage are those who have been ranked fifth to eighth and have not yet advanced to the next level. Athletes at the climb stage are those who have not yet secured titles from major competitions. We also suggest that, in terms of training experience, athletes at the enlightened stage have accrued at least 8 years, plateau stage athletes have trained between 5 and 8 years, and climb stage athletes have trained from 1 to 4 years as fulltime athletes. These training experience categories are based on two previous studies with elite Chinese athletes that focused on the amount of time required to achieve elite status (see Chen & Tian, 1994; Wang, 2006).

Our recent thinking regarding the allocation of athletes into the three different stages, should be primarily based on athletes' cognitive processing of scenarios of common difficulties they may have encountered (e.g., skill difficulties, injuries, relationship conflicts), instead of solely relying on performance and training experience. Athletes will therefore be required to listen to taped vignettes and to participate in semi-structured interviews which give them the opportunity them to describe their thoughts and views about the vignette content. Two independent coders will be trained to judge the mental maturity of athletes. Additionally, the opinion of the coaches should also be considered (Zhang et al., 2012).

Climb Stage

Athletes at the climb stage are those who are pursuing achievement, developing their reputation and have a strong desire to succeed. This stage mainly consists of junior elite athletes who may possess a single mindedness which results in them having clear and specific goals, namely, to achieve outstanding performances, yet, at this stage they are not required to face performance or career related issues in the same way as higher level athletes. Athletes at the climb stage can therefore take advantage of this single mindedness to pursue stellar performances to take them to the next level, however, difficulties for these stage athletes will come mainly from outside factors including the environment, opponents, and competitive conditions.

Athletes at the climb stage will experience gradual improvements as their experience develops over time, although they also desire to perform well. Key factors for athletes at this stage are sport-specific skills, quality training, and the development of adaptive personalities in order to advance smoothly to the plateau stage. Climb stage athletes are still able to transit to the plateau stage even if advancement has been thwarted, although they may struggle at the plateau stage for a longer period of time due to potential accumulated difficulties (e.g., defective skills),

irrational beliefs (e.g., I will fail every competition), or other issues (e.g., difficult relationships with coaches).

Athletes at the climb stage may not always have clear goals, even if they aim to achieve at the highest level, which may be explained by the fact that climb stage athletes have not yet fully developed their professional understanding, and are therefore, unable to form clear long term goals underpinned by short-term objectives and associated action plans. Another explanation could be that the majority of the climb stage athletes are from city and provincial teams, and as such they may not have a sufficiently broad career vision. Climb stage athletes may also be limited by their age which may indicate immature mindsets and cognitive abilities. Athletes at this stage have the potential to improve their understanding about themselves and their career, and this will develop as their experience develops as well as with guidance from coaches. Experience and guidance will result in athletes being able to generate specific goals for elite performance. In China, resources are centralized and targeted towards top-level athletes and teams who are known to be capable of winning gold medals for the provincial training institutes and the country due to the medal orientated strategy of the Whole Nation system. Accordingly, there is a lack of focused attention and guidance from coaches of climb stage athletes, and as a result, an empowering environment in which autonomy is supported and encouraged is required to improve this situation (Zhang et al., 2012).

Sport psychology services provided to climb stage athletes should be specific and tailor made (Si, 2008). Specifically, such services should provide the development of the following: achievement motivation, psychological skills, coping strategies, and other psychological knowledge which would support acceptance of the concept that 'adversity is normal'. Given that skill acquisition is one of the foundations for climb stage athletes to successfully progress to the next level, it is

important that they are effectively guided to ensure mastery of these skills. For example, we suggest sport psychologists apply mindfulness training with athletes to develop climb stage athletes' attentional focus and awareness (e.g., Mattes, 2016; Zhang et al., 2016). Moreover, climb stage athletes' health and well-being can be enriched by autonomy supportive climates (Zhang et al., 2012), however, training traditions within the Chinese sport system are not typically autonomy supportive climates. Educating coaches to understand and develop empowering climates is necessary to fulfill athletes' basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence and relatedness; Deci & Ryan, 2000) which are ultimately required for human motivation and to develop and grow in a positive way. The first step in educating coaches might be to challenge perceptions around the importance of cultivating autonomy-supportive environments for climb stage athletes (e.g., Appleton & Duda, 2016; Stenling, Lindwall, & Hassmén, 2015).

The first author of this paper worked in an applied context with a climb stage diving athlete eight years ago at a city training center. The athlete was promoted to a provincial diving team around six years ago and recently he became a national champion in the highest national competitions. The first author worked with the athlete's coaches during their eight month working relationship, and worked with the athlete to develop his understanding related to the 'adversity is normal' concept, and to maintain his achievement motivation through goal setting and mental simulation at the same time. The first author conducted interviews with the athlete and his comments indicated a clear purpose of achieving excellent performance as well as demonstrating a positive attitude toward his coach's instructions. Contrastingly, interviews conducted with the athlete's teammates indicated that they did not like their coach's coaching style, they felt they could not do much about their skills, and they did not enjoy training. Most of the athlete's peers have now retired after

remaining in the provincial team for a period of time or having failed to make it into the provincial team. The first author believes that the climb stage characteristics, which include clear goals, positive attitudes, and determination, supported the diving athlete whilst progressing in his career despite him having only mediocre talent in the view of his coach.

Plateau Stage

Athletes at the plateau stage may be struggling with difficulties in their careers and this stage mainly consists of athletes based in national and provincial teams. Athletes at this stage may be struggling as the result of negative experiences that have led them to doubt the effects of their training programs, and as such they may begin to cultivate passive training habits (Si, 2008). Concurrently, plateau stage athletes may be seeking to balance the pays and the gains of a sporting career and may be attempting to persuade themselves to continue in their careers. Yet, it should be noted that accumulated injuries, stagnant performances, interpersonal conflicts, as well as irrational beliefs caused by adversity may hinder their progress to the next level. The primary aim of the plateau stage athletes is to develop rational thinking skills when facing multiple difficulties (e.g., coach-athletes conflicts) and to cultivate determination to achieve their goals.

The adversity faced by plateau stage athletes is caused partly by the centralized, executive-led and medal-orientated structure of the Whole-Nation system. This Whole-Nation system prioritizes the collective interest by sacrificing personal interests (Ge et al., 2016; Si et al., 2011), as such the personal interests of plateau stage athletes are often unavoidably violated to give way to the collective interest. Interpersonal disorder and disputes between athletes and their coaches are other key factors that may lead to disempowering motivational climates under the Whole-Nation sport system (Si et al., 2011). Accordingly, the basic psychological needs of

plateau stage athletes are thwarted resulting in difficulties and irrational thinking. Typical adversities faced by plateau stage athletes include passive training, training aversion, training avoidance, communication problems and conflicts with coaches (Zhang et al., 2012).

Plateau stage athletes, compared to the climb stage athletes, may have experienced additional years of professional training and as such may have experienced a greater number of negative situations compared to positive feedback. We suggest that sport psychology services should focus on helping plateau stage athletes view adversity and irrational beliefs more rationally. Enhanced rational thinking may unearth athletic potential, and encourage athletes to seek new opportunities to develop (Si, 2008). Mental and behavioral training such as rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT; Turner & Barker, 2014) and acceptance and mindfulness approaches (Si, Lo, & Zhang, 2016) are recommended to re-establish improved thinking and behavioral patterns. Our recent thinking, in line with Ellis (2005), is that REBT and acceptance and mindfulness approaches can be integrated, despite the fact that the philosophies behind these approaches differ. REBT is used to help plateau stage athletes identify irrational beliefs and subsequently, instead of trying to change or replace irrational beliefs, provide the opportunity to develop awareness and acceptance of irrational beliefs. Mood and training quality is another important area to focus on in athletes' daily practice, as due to long hours of training, plateau stage athletes can experience boredom and a loss of passion for their sport.

Si, Lo, and Zhang (2016) discussed a case study which included six elite, plateau stage, synchronized swimming athletes. Acceptance and mindfulness approaches were applied to help the athletes cope with inconsistent training performance. The coaches of the synchronized swimming athletes believed that the inconsistent performance was related to movement quality during training caused by

the pressure of major competition. However, it was discovered that the performance problems stemmed from coach-athlete conflicts through several in-depth group discussions later on. The same six synchronized swimming athletes generated many irrational beliefs that the coach's instructions were ineffective as the athletes' felt them to be meaningless, boring, and monotonous, which caused them to ignore the coach's instructions and resort to passive train as described by Si et al. (2011). An 18-week long mindfulness intervention was conducted which comprised of a three-week baseline monitoring phase, a seven-week intervention phase, and a five-week post-intervention phase (Si et al., 2016). The team went on to win a major competition in China.

Enlightened Stage

Athletes at the enlightened stage, compared to the plateau stage athletes, deal with adversity in a more rational manner. The goal of most enlightened stage athletes is very clear, that is, to become the best athlete in their sport. In other words, they proactively seek self-improvement, self-cultivation, and self-sublimation. Enlightened-stage athletes could be called sports "yogi", due to their ability to 'self-refine' their spiritual states, and importantly athletes at this stage make the best out of opportunities that arise. Typically, enlightened stage athletes have already achieved major honors (e.g., gold medal of Olympic, Asian, or other major National Games), and consistently secure major titles through their continued involvement in major competitions. Additionally, there are several enlightened stage athletes whose skill level has peaked although they may not yet have had success in major competitions.

We suggest that sport psychology services for these athletes should focus on helping them develop their understanding of what exactly is the ultimate goal in their sporting career and to actively understand and develop their methods of coexisting with adversity, a philosophy rooted in Chinese Zen. It is believed that athletes can

gain new information and insight after many years of coping with adversity. Yet, one of the biggest obstacles for enlightened stage athletes is that many of them have accumulated multiple injuries over many years of training, resulting in a deterioration of their physical condition which may negatively influence overall success. Moreover, many such accumulated injuries are irreversible suggesting that they can be managed but not cured. Hence, enlightened stage athletes need to learn to cope with accumulated injuries and a decline in physical condition.

Enlightened-stage athletes typically have rational, cooperative, and accepting mindsets and are capable of taking a proactive approach to adjusting to social-oriented values within the Whole-Nation sport system in terms of following executive orders and prioritizing individual over collective interests. Enlightened stage athletes are also active and strong communicators, being able to effectively exchange concerns and ideas with their coaches. Ultimately, athletes at this stage have accepted and understood the 'adversity is normal' philosophy, and can therefore overcome internal and external difficulties by relying on their developed coping abilities and proactively seeking external support when required (Zhang et al., 2012).

We propose that sport psychology services for these athletes include the exploration of Buddhist philosophy to achieve a state of 'non-self' and 'non-attachment' so that they are free from relying on achievement to demonstrate their personal worth. In doing so, they are less likely to become 'addicted' to winning. Scholars from the U.S. (e.g., Haberl, 2007) have also started to explore Buddhist philosophy with regards to helping athletes. More specifically, we believe that it is important for sport psychologists to help enlightened stage athletes refine their understanding of the meaning of their elite careers and personal value to become clearer about how their personal values sit within the collective interest.

We further suggest that sport psychology services for enlightened stage athletes

should go beyond achievement motivation, conflict management, and rational thinking, and focus on assisting these athletes about the direction they wish to take. Examples of Buddhist sayings can be used to educate and exchange ideas as opposed to direct instruction. Given that the doctrines of Confucianism and Taoism are rooted in the minds of Chinese athletes, the principles of proactivity and the Confucian Taoist ideals and principles around mental flexibility could be used to help Chinese enlightened stage athletes (Si et al., 2011).

A recent example is demonstrated by an interview with an Olympian who participated in the Rio Olympic Games. The second author had a long-term working relationship with her prior to the Olympic Games and viewed her as an enlightened stage athlete. The sport in which this athlete participated is scored by judges rather than through objective performance indicators (e.g., completion time). The athlete failed to win gold but instead won the bronze medal, despite an excellent performance. She said during the interview: "Actually, I feel that I am doing a thing that makes me happy. It is a great job and I didn't feel the pain for losing the champion title; what I experienced is happiness". She also replied with a rational statement during a discussion about the issue of biased judging: "I feel happy and lucky to be able to stand on the final competition of Olympic Games and I did a perfect job. Although the judges didn't award me with a gold medal, the support and applause from the audience generously give me the recognition I need, I know I did an excellent job, why should I feel unsatisfied? "

Conclusion

In conclusion, the three-stage adversity coping model provides theoretical guidance for Chinese sport psychology practitioners who assist Chinese athletes in promoting competence and developing coping skills to deal with adversity that may arise as a result of the Whole-Nation sport system (Si, 2008). Importantly, sport

psychology practitioners can provide targeted and individualized services to athletes who cope with a range of difficulties with various coping methods. For example, we can increase the chances of plateau stage athletes secure major competition titles if targeted and stage-appropriate sport psychology services are provided. Most importantly, we suggest that resources should be utilized in a manner that will assist coaches and sport teams to enable healthy athlete progression from one career stage to the next.

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