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A Systematic Review of Self-Compassion Correlates in Competitive Sports

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Background: Compassion refers to the sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it. It is linked to one's emotions, motives and competencies to be supportive, kind, helpful and understanding. To date, researchers have considered various benefits in athletes by adopting a self-compassionate mind, such as adaptive psychophysiological responses to stress, greater mental well-being, and superior coping under challenging performance scenarios. However, barriers exist when incorporating compassion in competitive sport (e.g. fear of losing personal standards), and there is a lack of synthesis of what influences athletes' self-compassion (SC) and what SC can facilitate athletes in competitive sport. Therefore, we systematically gathered quantitative evidence about correlates of SC for an up-to-date review of SC in competitive sport.

Method: We identified 108 research articles via a systematic search of databases (Web of Science, n = 31; Scopus, n = 38; SPORTDiscus, n = 14; Psychinfo, n = 25). 24 duplicates were removed, whilst a further 39 studies were excluded based on abstract and title screening. The 48 remainings with full-text articles were further assessed for eligibility, of which 30 papers were removed based on the set exclusion criteria (i.e., qualitative research, n = 7; irrelevant population, n = 9; irrelevant context, n = 11, not passing the quality assessment, n = 3). We retained 18 published research for the final review, which involves 14 cross-sectional survey studies, 2 laboratory-based studies, and 3 longitudinal survey studies.

Results: Greater self-esteem (strong correlations), mindfulness (moderate to strong correlations), lower-level sense of inadequate self (strong correlations), fewer concerns over mistakes (moderate to strong correlations), and lower self-criticism (moderate to strong correlations) were key predictors of SC in competitive athletes. Reduced sport-specific stress and internalised shame, mitigated fear of failure, and enhanced self-regulation (all strong correlations) were key outcomes associated with SC in competitive sport. Furthermore, SC manifested indirect effects on decreased grit, enhanced self-regulation, superior goal progress, and more positive affect under various sport situations. It also underpinned the mindfulness-burnout and the mental toughness-menatal health relationships, as well as moderating (mitigating) negative effects of threat appraisal, masculinity, and sport-specific daily stress on various outcomes facilitative to competitive athletes.

Conclusion: SC is associated with a variety of facilitative psycho-behavioural factors in athletes and plays a vital role in competitive sport. Researchers and practitioners would do well to disseminate the benefits of SC to competitive athletes and deliver interventions to promote the use of compassion and overcome its related fears. Future research should establish more evidence on the performance effect.

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