Psychological burnout is a major problem confronting many high-level athletes and their coaches. Athletes, particularly female athletes, often retire from their sport during their midteens, long before they have reached their physical and psychological prime. The losses created by this early attrition rate are great in terms of unfulfilled human potential and a lowered quality of our national team programs. These losses are especially unfortunate because psychological burnout does not appear to be inevitable. Outstanding athletes have competed at high levels in virtually every sport until their skills have diminished with age, not psychological staleness.

This article will focus mainly, though not exclusively, on adolescent elite athletes, because their dropout rate is so high. Because of this focus, an important distinction should be made between young elite athletes and athletes in "youth sports." The latter phrase implies a less rigorous training regimen for athletes who are in the early stages of their athletic careers. This article is directed toward young athletes who are legitimately considered elite. Young elite athletes are more common in some sports than others. At the age of 15 or 16, many elite gymnasts, swimmers and divers (especially girls) have trained for nearly a decade. Elite athletes in other sports such as basketball, fencing and soccer are considerably older.

This paper has been divided into three parts. First, the concept of burnout will be defined, and the pattern of symptom development will be traced. Second, personality characteristics and behavioral patterns that increase an individual's susceptibility will be examined. Third, factors that can be classified as demotivators will be analyzed with emphasis on how those factors change or become more influential as the athlete matures.

Defining Burnout
Not everyone retires from a sport because of negative psychological factors. Often athletes move on to other sports and activities because they believe that...
they can achieve more or enjoy more. Such changes are more appropriately described as growth, not burnout. On the other hand, when athletes are more repelled by their former activities than attracted to new activities, the concept of burnout becomes more applicable, especially when those former activities had been a long-term source of joy, involvement and personal satisfaction.

The most systematic studies of burnout have come from researchers of job stress. Many of their findings appear to be directly applicable to burnout in young athletes. The circumstances of job stress and athletic stress show remarkable parallels, even when comparisons involve children as young as age 10. Sage and Leonard compared organized youth sports programs with bureaucratic management organizations and found many startling similarities including (1) hierarchical authority in both youth sport programs and bureaucracies, where authority is vested in an office or position rather than the personal competencies of a leader; (2) rational authority in which decisions are based on the premise that the organization or team has priority; (3) the impersonal application of rules, regardless of the person or circumstance; and (4) the division of labor, whereby jobs become specialized and routine so that individuals become trainable, standardized and replaceable. These similarities have a direct impact in sports, where, as Sage noted, one of the highest compliments that a coach can give an athlete is that he or she is a hard worker.

Burnout has been characterized as a "condition produced by working too hard for too long in a high-pressured situation," and it is accompanied by "a progressive loss of idealism, energy and purpose" that is often paralleled by a feeling of being locked into a routine. The individual displays a pattern of "physical and emotional exhaustion involving the development of negative self-concepts and negative attitudes towards work, life and other people."

Burnout appears to be a progressive disorder, although some symptoms may manifest themselves suddenly, particularly in the late stages. In the early stage the individual experiences a growing state of fatigue, increased irritability and a loss of enthusiasm. He or she shows physical distress, including minor body aches, stomach upsets, headaches, and overeating or undereating. The person has growing feelings of incompetence, fragmentation, alienation and an often unvoiced anger and frustration that things are not the way they should be.

By the intermediate stage the individual has become withdrawn and silent, even when directly spoken to. Answers, when given, are frequently sullen and angry. Often the athlete belittles the belief that he or she could be successful. Physical symptoms include prolonged colds, shortness of breath, shallow breathing patterns, severe fatigue, and weight gains or losses produced by excessive eating behaviors.

The advanced stage of burnout is evidenced by the athlete becoming convinced that he or she is just not good enough. Cynicism, alienation and withdrawal have become so incisive that the individual often becomes obsessional to others. Escapist behavior is common, and the individual has an almost total lack of energy regarding the perceived demands of the tasks. At this stage it is not uncommon for the athlete to undergo sudden and dramatic changes in values and beliefs. The Olympic goal for which one has trained for years suddenly is seen as attainable only with the right coach and the right team and influential judges or officials.

Susceptible Personalities

Not everyone who works long and hard under pressure experiences burnout. Solutions lie, in part, in early recognition of people who are particularly susceptible. Shank identified several characteristics and behaviors that distinguish people who are likely to develop burnout from those who are not.

The first cluster of traits relate to perfectionism. Perfectionists set high (sometimes unrealistic) standards for themselves and others and generally are overachievers who invest more time and effort than necessary. Susceptible individuals are often guided by a strong internalized set of "shoulds" and "oughts." They often express a strong need to be in control of a situation, not so much because of a need to dominate others but more because of an attitude that says, "If I want it done right, I'll have to do it myself." Coupled with this perfectionism is a high energy level. The individual is always active, often attacking several tasks at once. This person rarely sets priorities concerning these tasks and thus lacks a mechanism for rationing and allocating energy among tasks.

High-risk individuals tend to be other-centered. They have a strong need to be liked and admired and are often extremely sensitive to criticism. They are often generous to everyone but themselves. They frequently overidentify with and internalize the hurts of others. They often take on a rescuer role, offering help where it has not been requested. These other-oriented people frequently are motivated by social and interpersonal rewards rather than by impersonal external reinforcers such as money or material possessions.

Finally, susceptible burnout victims lack assertive interpersonal skills. Such individuals often find it difficult to say no or express negative feelings—especially anger—without experiencing strong feelings of guilt. They may actually be quite articulate but are reluctant to act assertively because they confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness.

Ironically, these quiet, concerned, energetic perfectionists exhibit characteristics that coaches often find most desirable. As Shank points out, the essential point is not to persuade these people to curtail their intense involvement, "but rather to incorporate balance and perspective into living." While dedication to a sport is essential for high-level success, if one's focus is too narrow, too intense, or too prolonged at too early an age, the likelihood of burnout increases dramatically.

Combatting Demotivators

Burnout is more than an internal fire that consumes the athlete's motivation. Often burnout can be traced to specific environmental roadblocks or demotivators that develop as a result of intense participation. Many of these demotivators occur predictably, and as awareness of these factors grows, practical steps can be taken to sustain and nurture the athlete's motivation. Several sources of demotivation are relevant to high-level athletes: the changing nature of feedback; the increasing need for autonomy; and the increasing aware-
ness of the physical, competitive and social consequences of intense participation.

**Feedback and the Law of Diminishing Returns.** Perhaps the most potent source of demotivation is the changed nature of the feedback that advanced athletes receive about performance. Young intermediate athletes experience obvious improvements after moderate investments of training time and effort, but at higher skill levels this feedback changes in both quantity and quality. Learning proceeds in smaller, less obvious steps, often coming only after substantial effort on the part of the elite athlete (Figure 1). Furthermore, elite athletes often work at improving consistency and making detailed, fine improvements of previously learned skills rather than learning new skills. Feedback about such gradual improvement is often subtle, providing less excitement and awareness that learning is, in fact, occurring. These subtle improvements are essential for the athlete to compete at the elite level. However, if the athlete perceives that little is being learned, boredom and loss of enthusiasm will follow.

How can this inevitable problem of diminishing returns be combated? One way is to heighten the athlete’s awareness of subtle improvements. For example, consistency charts can be used to make certain that the athlete notes that improvements have occurred. Second, the coach can acknowledge that those improvements are important and praiseworthy. The athlete’s name can be placed on a record board, or the coach can praise the accomplishment the same way he praises the learning of a new skill. Third, and perhaps most important, the coach and the athlete should jointly agree that such detailed improvements are, in fact, clearly stated and mutually acceptable goals. To perform an already-learned skill in a higher, better, faster or more consistent manner when such a small improvement is a specified, mutually agreed-on goal, is an extremely effective technique to increase the athlete’s awareness of significant progress.

But one should be careful. The coach knows that performing higher and faster is a major goal, but the athlete may not have the same goal. What the coach perceives as progress may be sheer drudgery to the athlete unless those goals have been mutually emphasized and agreed on. This relates closely to the next major area of concern.

**Increased Need for Self-Determinism.**

With increased maturity comes the need for increased autonomy. With the teenage years, but by no means restricted to this period, comes the desire to make decisions for oneself. The sensitive adult can gradually help an athlete develop more control by involving him or her in the decision-making process.

The traditional coaching model has the coach as leader and the athlete as follower with little or no intermingling of the two roles. Today such a model is no longer desirable, acceptable or workable. I think that coaches who systematically develop a sense of independence and responsibility in their athletes are most likely to counteract psychological burnout of both their athletes and themselves. Motivation is highest and sustained longest when the individual has substantial input and control over determining goals and the procedures for attaining them. This does not mean that the coach relinquishes all control. (The coach’s motivation must be nurtured also.) Coaches must use their experience, wisdom and perspectives to help athletes make informed choices that lead to those mutually agreed-on goals.

Understanding and responding to an athlete’s need for self-determinism does not deny that athletes often need and even seek an authority model. Sometimes an athlete works through adversity because of the demands of a tough, unyielding coach. At times, conflict and confrontation bring out the best in an athlete. However, coaches who adhere inflexibly to harsh techniques should understand that many athletes succeed in spite of such authoritarian approaches, not because of them.

Strictness and demands are not the defining characteristics of authoritarianism; inflexibility is what sets authoritarianism apart from authority and discipline. I strongly believe that the inflexible use of authoritarian methods is a major contributor to psychological burnout. Successful elite coaches can vary their coaching style depending on the demands of a situation; they are sensitive to the implications of each coaching style for the behaviors and motivations of their athletes.

**Increased Awareness of the Physical Consequences of Participation.** With increasing years of participation comes an increased awareness of the physical consequences of participation.

At a more subtle level, the constant
Burnout

Athletes who are going through psychological burnout are often depressed, antagonistic, and tend to withdraw from the team's social structure. Recognizing these conditions before they ruin a career is critical.

physical aches and pains endured at the elite level are substantially harsher than those experienced during the first few years of an athlete's career, when the skills were easier and the training less demanding. Continued training in the face of pain, especially pain from overuse syndromes, can do much to demotivate athletes. The joy of sport can be replaced by the daily grind when everything hurts.

The locker room slogan "No pain, no gain" has just enough truth in it to be dangerously misinterpreted by both coaches and athletes. Such an attitude can be used to justify continued training in spite of painful warning signals of impending problems or injuries that need rest for recuperation. Driving oneself through cardiovascular conditioning or strength drills may be beneficial, but working on a partially sprained ankle or ignoring the symptoms of tendinitis is harmful.

Perhaps a lesson can be learned from the experiences of elite marathoners. Originally, coaches and runners believed that the best way to endure a marathon was to dissociate one's awareness from the pain and stress of running long distances. Ignoring the pain by focusing on something else was advocated as a good psychological technique. However, interviews with successful marathoners indicated that the best runners did just the opposite. These runners heightened their awareness of their bodies' responses to stress and closely monitored their physical sensations so that they could constantly readjust their pace and running styles to cope with the immense stresses of the marathon. The idea is not to develop a hypochondriac-like attitude but rather to sensitize the athletes to warning signals so that they can make adjustments before minor problems become chronic or major because of neglect or lack of awareness.

Furthermore, coaches should seriously reevaluate whether they overwork advanced and elite athletes. Training four to seven hours a day may positively affect skill acquisition in the short run but undermine the athlete's enjoyment of participating. It is possible that reducing the number of hours of training a day might lead to higher performance levels if it prolongs the athletes' careers by years.

Increased Awareness of the Competitive Consequences of Participation. With increasing experience and skill come an ability to more realistically evaluate the likelihood for success in competition. Since success is relative to one's goals, the coach and the athlete must be aware of the interactions between goal setting and motivation. Establishing clear, focused goals is important for directing and sustaining motivation. However, if those goals are too narrowly defined or too few in
number, serious long-term demotivating effects can result.

Competition indicates that some athletes will not make the Olympic or national teams. Their youthful, naive enthusiasm to be in the Olympics is replaced by a realistic awareness of who is likely to make the team. If they find that they are unlikely to make it, their enthusiasm is likely to wane in direct proportion to the degree to which that goal is the only goal. This enthusiasm cannot be rekindled by the coach’s encouragement alone. When goals are extremely high and narrow, motivation will increase if the athlete believes there is a realistic chance to achieve those goals in the foreseeable future. For example, in gymnastics, 3,163 gymnasts compete at the advanced and elite levels (personal communication with C. Grace, National Director of US Gymnastics Federation, April 1983); thus, the probability of being one of the seven gymnasts who make the Olympic team is 0.0022 (7/3,163).

However, even making the team does not seem to enhance the likelihood that an athlete will continue to participate. For example, the attrition rate for the Women’s National Gymnastics Team after international competition is phenomenally high; it averages 53 percent across the four-year Olympiad and 77 percent across the year between the Pan American Games and the Olympics. The dimension of achieving vs. failing at the goal does not seem to have as much impact on continued participation as does the narrowness of the goal.

Broader goals, coupled with more focus on the participation process, might blunt the demotivating effect of goals that are too narrow. Some alternative goals are obvious and concrete: earning a college scholarship, competing in meets that provide the opportunity to travel and representing the high school team. More abstract goals include enjoying the act of performing, providing a model for younger athletes and developing self-confidence and poise. Coaches often view these latter goals as a means to an end rather than an end in themselves. I believe that if coaches could counsel their athletes to perceive the process as part of their personal goals, the athletes’ enjoyment of the sport could be enhanced. Again, mutual goal setting could define and emphasize goals to which the athletes might otherwise be oblivious.

Another aspect of the increased awareness of competitive consequences is the “looking over your shoulder” syndrome. Even during the midteens a genuine generation gap can exist in skill levels. Older athletes often see younger athletes progressing faster than they did. This awareness is demotivating. Furthermore, the generation gap may be exaggerated if the older competitor has been sidelined because of injury or illness.

Several strategies can minimize these potential threats. Whenever possible, avoid direct comparisons or competition within the training situation. If comparisons must be made, place a premium on maturity skills and use the older athletes as an example of correct body position, consistency or whatever is applicable. Second, the older athletes can assist in areas where experience is an asset: coping with fear, dealing with peer pressures, preparing for competition, team morale. Third, all athletes can be taught to avoid making comparisons in which their weaknesses are compared with the strengths of others. This type of self-defeating comparison is characteristic of perfectionists and high achievers. Finally, acknowledge that there are certain times when the older athletes have earned the right to be privileged. For example, they can be given key roles in meets and they may not have to compete in head-to-head competitions with younger teammates for a place on the traveling squad.

Increased Awareness of the Social Consequences of Participation. With increasing age and maturity, athletes develop an increased awareness of other social activities. Their interests become more complex and diversified, and conflicts may develop between their desire to train and the desire to participate in other activities.

There are two aspects — objective and subjective — of the restrictions placed on the social involvements of athletes training in high-level programs. For example, the objective restrictions of time limitations and scheduling conflicts are a substantial problem when an athlete trains four to seven hours a day five to six days a week on a year-round schedule. Socializing with friends after school may be almost eliminated by such an intense training regimen. Even athletic friends may be left behind as the elite athlete progresses at a more rapid rate. Close friendships with other
elite athletes are often difficult to maintain because by definition they are few and far between.

Objective restrictions can be partially dealt with by rearranging training schedules. For example, in one elite program the older athletes train in the early afternoon and the younger children train later on Fridays. This frees Friday evenings for other activities for the older athletes. Since the younger athletes have no school on the next day, the latter hours on a Friday are not too demanding. Social occasions can also be given a higher priority when few competitions are scheduled.

Subjective restrictions are sometimes more difficult to resolve. The perception that one is somehow losing out on what others can have may be demotivating. What you cannot have often becomes even more desirable. One approach to this problem is to combat the perception that elite-level sport and an enjoyable social life are mutually exclusive. Although restrictions exist, the choice is rarely all or none. The attitude that success requires dedication to the point of sacrificing everything else is a stereotype. The fact that some athletes perceive involvement in sports as leading to a better social life and more friends attests to the fact that the problem may be more of attitude than actual restrictions.

Conclusion

Psychological burnout is a major factor in the attrition of high-level athletes, but it need not be an inevitable consequence of intense participation. Early diagnosis of the symptoms, accurate identification of susceptible individuals and increased awareness of demotivating environmental influences can lead to effective prevention and correction of this disorder. This can save athletes who would otherwise be driven from the sports they love long before they achieve their full potential.

References