

“Fit” in Sports: Self-Regulation and Athletic Performances

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Although goals and self-regulation are prominent topics in sport psychology (Weinberg & Gould, 2003), most approaches within this area are based on rather old-fashioned conceptions of achievement motivation, for example, hope for success and fear of failure (Atkinson, 1957). Alternatively, we suggest regulatory focus theory as a viable model to improve sport performances (Higgins, 1997, 2000). According to this theory, there are two modes of self-regulation, a promotion focus (i.e., a focus on accomplishments and aspirations) and a prevention focus (i.e., a focus on safety and responsibilities). Regulatory fit results if there is a match between the affordances of a given situation and the individual’s motivational focus. Thus, a full theoretical analysis must include the situation’s affordances, the athlete’s motivational disposition, and finally, the framing of the athlete’s goals. Regulatory fit should then lead to improved performance and hedonic value. For example, holding everything else constant, a soccer player with a chronic prevention focus should perform better and have more fun playing as a defender than as a striker, just because the defenders’ situation “fits” the player’s motivational focus. We confirmed these basic predictions using data-bank analyses, questionnaire studies, and experimental manipulations across a range of sports, with a spotlight on soccer. Thus, regulatory focus theory indeed provides a good framework for improving sport performance by self-regulatory means.