

Athlete Burnout: A Longitudinal Qualitative Study

Scott L. Cresswell

University of Western Australia

Robert C. Eklund

Florida State University

Athlete burnout has been a concern to sport organizations, the media, and researchers because of its association with negative welfare and performance outcomes (Gould, Udry, Tuffey, & Loehr, 1996; Smith, 1986). Conclusions drawn in existing cross-sectional studies (e.g., Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c; Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996) are limited because they are not based on data sensitive to the dynamic nature of athlete burnout. In the current study, professional New Zealand rugby players ($n = 9$) and members of team management ($n = 3$) were interviewed multiple times over a 12-month period in an effort to capture accounts reflecting the dynamic nature of their experiences. In these interviews, some players reported experiences consistent with multidimensional descriptions of burnout in the extant literature. During the course of the interviews players reported positive and negative changes within their experiences. Players' experiences and adaptations were interpreted using existing theoretical explanations.

Sport organizations, the media, and researchers have proposed that burnout is a problem in sport (e.g., Gould, Udry, et al., 1996). Within psychosocial conceptualizations, burnout is described as an experiential syndrome characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and sport devaluation (Raedeke, 1997; Raedeke & Smith, 2001). Theoretical explanations for the occurrence of athlete burnout include stress-based explanations (Smith, 1986), commitment-related explanations (Raedeke), and more recently, explanations based on self-determination theory (SDT; Cresswell & Eklund, 2006a). Common among all existing explanations is a process in which perceptions over time lead to the key characteristics of burnout. As such, longitudinal studies monitoring burnout across time are crucial to the development and assessment of existing theoretical explanations. In the past, athlete-burnout researchers have predominantly employed cross-sectional research designs (Cresswell & Eklund, 2005b, 2005c; Raedeke; Raedeke & Smith). More recent quantitative research indicates that changes in burnout over time can be detected using self-report measures (Cresswell & Eklund, 2005a, 2006b). The purpose of this study was to examine players' in-depth descriptions of their experiences and attributions across time through a series of interviews conducted over a 12-month period, encompassing the 11-month rugby season.

Cresswell is with the School of Human Movement and Exercise Science, University of Western Australia, Crawley, W.A. 6009 Australia. Eklund is with the Educational Psychology and Learning Systems, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306.

Early athlete-burnout researchers proposed that the enduring negative state was one potential outcome of chronic exposure to psychosocial stress (i.e., Smith, 1986). In line with Maslach's (1982) groundbreaking work on burnout in the helping professions, Smith (1986) proposed that athlete burnout results from a chronically perceived imbalance in demands and resources. In his cognitive-affective model, Smith (1986) suggested that, over a period of time, this perceived imbalance can lead to perceptions of low accomplishment, low perceived control, and, potentially, a state of learned helplessness. He believed that the behavioral result of burnout would involve "decreased efficiency and a psychological if not physical withdrawal from the activity" (p. 43). After conducting research with elite junior tennis players, Gould and colleagues (1996, 1997) argued that Smith's (1986) model provided the most comprehensive explanation for the occurrence of burnout among the theoretical accounts available at that time. Despite Gould and colleagues' endorsement, there remains a need to assess the utility of Smith's model in relation to how the burnout experience might manifest and change over time.

Building on observations that burnout might be more than a consequence of exposure to chronic stress, Raedeke (1997) forwarded a commitment-related explanation for the occurrence of burnout. In particular, Raedeke suggested that entrapped athletes might have an elevated risk of experiencing burnout. Athletes feel entrapped when they perceive that they *must* maintain their sport involvement, even though they no longer have any desire to continue participating. Raedeke's study of age-group swimmers supported this hypothesized relationship between entrapment and burnout. Because this research is correlational, more information is needed regarding how perceptions of entrapment might, over time, lead to burnout.

Researchers have recently applied SDT explanations of ill-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006a). In SDT, satisfaction of basic needs to feel autonomous, related, and competent is proposed to result in well-being and self-determined forms of motivation (e.g., intrinsic motivation). Chronic frustration of basic needs is proposed to result in ill-being and non-self-determined forms of motivation (e.g., external regulation; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Cresswell and Eklund (2006a) proposed that chronic frustration of basic needs might result in burnout. There is limited research evidence to support an SDT-based explanation of athlete burnout. To date, researchers have focused on associations between burnout and the different types of motivation an individual might have. Relationships between burnout and types of motivation were observed to vary depending on the level of self-determination, and hence need satisfaction, associated with each type of motivation (Cresswell & Eklund, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Gould, Udry, et al., 1996; Raedeke & Smith, 2001). This mode of investigation is somewhat indirect because it focuses on associations between burnout and motivational types, and hence two constructs proposed to be related to needs rather than a direct relationship between basic needs and burnout. Further research is needed to ascertain how the burnout experience might manifest over time in relation to the central needs outlined in SDT.

Currently, only a small number of longitudinal burnout studies have been conducted in any setting. As a result, limited information is available on the manner in which burnout evolves or changes over time (Van Dierendonck, Schaufeli, & Buunk, 2001). Although preliminary quantitative evidence suggests that athlete burnout might change over time (Cresswell & Eklund, 2005a, 2006b), the factors stimulating change and the associated underlying processes have yet to be identified. There are

a range of potential benefits associated with a longitudinal qualitative approach, such as describing attributions related to the manifestation of burnout, early warning signs, or possible positive and negative adaptations to demands. The purpose of the current study was to interview players about their experiences to better understand their beliefs about central factors (influences, antecedents, symptoms, and consequences), processes, and changes within the burnout syndrome. These empirical findings were interpreted to extend the evaluation of SDT (Cresswell & Eklund, 2005a, 2006b; Ryan & Deci, 2002), commitment-based explanations (Raedeke, 1997), and psychosocial stress models (e.g., Smith, 1986).

Method

Participants

Nine male professional New Zealand rugby-union players ranging in age from 22 to 30 years ($M = 25.33$, $SD = 2.83$) were purposefully selected to participate in this investigation. Six of the players were selected for further study from among a group of 109 players who had previously completed the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Raedeke & Smith, 2001) during preseason as part of a related study (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006b). Of these 6 players, 2 were selected because they had relatively low scores on all burnout subscales, and 4 other players were selected who had high scores on all burnout subscales. Another 3 players were selected based on interview data from a study conducted the previous year that suggested the experience of substantial burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c). At the time of the interviews, 8 of the participants were or had been involved in international teams at some point of their careers, including the New Zealand national team, also known as the “All Blacks” ($n = 7$), and the New Zealand seven-a-side team ($n = 1$). Although players competed for a number of different teams during the period of the investigation, 4 players were on the same international club team, and 7 were in the New Zealand national team (All Blacks).

Interviews were also conducted with 3 members of team support staff (either fitness trainers or medical staff) to provide triangulation data relative to objective events (e.g., hours and modes of training, injury management). These individuals were purposely selected because they had direct contact with the participants (i.e., that person was a participant’s trainer or physiotherapist). The selected support staff had between 6 and 8 years of experience working with professional rugby, and all had 4 or more years experience working with international rugby teams.

Procedure

After formal institutional ethical approval was granted for the study, all participants (i.e., players and support staff) were contacted via telephone and invited to participate in a series of face-to-face interviews. Of the 13 participants invited, 1 player declined. Arrangements were made to meet individual participants for interviews at a time and venue of their choice. Before conducting the initial interviews, institutional-review-board procedures were adhered to in obtaining informed consent. Arrangements for subsequent interviews were made with participants via phone 2–3 weeks in advance.

In-depth interviews were held with each participant at a minimum of three times during the season to build an account of their experiences at different points in the season. Interviews were conducted preseason, midseason (11–14 weeks after preseason), and at the end of the season (35–43 weeks after preseason).

A standardized interview guide was used to ensure that participants were all given the opportunity to respond to the same open-ended questions. The word *burnout* was purposefully avoided in the interview guide so a negative stigma would not be attached to an athlete labeled as experiencing burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c; Gould, Tuffey, et al., 1996). Each player was informed that the interviewer was interested in his experiences as a professional rugby player. Open-ended questions and probes were used to encourage players' descriptions of experiences (e.g., describe what you were feeling at this stage of the season). In an effort to preserve the anonymity of participants, questions relating to these specific players were not presented in support-staff interviews; rather open-ended questions and probes were used (e.g., describe what you were seeing in players at this stage of the season).

Analysis

Sparkes (1998) has recommended that qualitative researchers provide sufficient information on the methods and process of analysis to allow readers to make judgments about the validity of findings. Because the authors were the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, it is relevant to acknowledge our backgrounds.

We were commissioned to conduct this study by the NZRU as part of a 3-year project on player burnout. The first author conducted all interviews. He was raised in New Zealand, where rugby is the national game, and played rugby to a senior amateur level. As a result, he had a level of rugby understanding that helped facilitate conversation in the interviews. Rugby was not, however, his primary sporting engagement, and he never participated as a professional rugby player. As such, it would be appropriate to characterize the first author as an outsider to the professional-rugby environment. This meant that he was more likely to identify issues that might not have seemed important to a rugby insider. He was also able to adopt the role of learner seeking an understanding of the players' experiences. Nonetheless, his background experiences afforded greater ability to understand player responses than if he had not played any rugby. His longitudinal involvement with the players across the 3-year project facilitated the development of trust and rapport, despite his outsider status. Before conducting this research, the first author attained a master's degree in sport psychology and practiced as a sport psychology consultant and lecturer in NZ for 6 years.

The second author had substantial experience as an international competitor and coach in wrestling before receiving his PhD in sport psychology but has no particular knowledge of, or experience with, rugby. His primary roles in this study included assisting with the development of the interview guide and investigative strategy, as well as playing devil's advocate in the data-analysis and -reporting process. His involvement was, therefore, akin to what Sparkes and Partington (2003) have termed "a critical friend." For example, the second author acted as a sounding board to encourage exploration of alternative theoretical and conceptual

explanations and interpretations, while the first author was charged with reflecting on his categorization of themes. Together these different perspectives were used to construct an informed and theoretically sound argument (Sparkes & Partington).

Efforts to address the issues of credibility and transferability included thick description of the data. Method and source triangulation were also employed to enhance the credibility of the data. Using multiple sources created an opportunity to develop convergent lines of inquiry and provide more compelling evidence (Smith, 1988). In the current study, convergent lines of inquiry were developed through checks for consistency between players' descriptions, behavioral observations at training, and support-staff descriptions. Although it was not formally implemented, there was a degree of persistent observation in our approach. Specifically, we sustained observation and engagement with the participants over an extended period of time. Other techniques for establishing trustworthiness, such as member checking, also could have been used in addition to those described here. It was not possible to use member checking because the participants were also involved in related studies as part of the wider research project. As such, providing participants' feedback indicating we considered their experiences representative of burnout might have biased results in the related studies. Regardless, we thought source triangulation was well suited to exploring athlete burnout.

The player and support staff interviews (45–120 min in duration) were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes included behavioral observations recorded after interviews and during team trainings. These onsite observations were used to gain a better feel for the situational context, as well as being triangulated with participant perceptions and appraisals to help draw conclusions from the data (Smith, 1988). Specifically, objective events, as reported by support staff, provided important markers to assess how different players experienced the same events in different ways.

The data-analysis procedures were selected for the current study through consideration of the nature of the topic and the characteristics of participants' experiences (as advocated by Sparkes, 1998). This study occurred over the course of a single rugby season. During this season players were involved with multiple teams and multiple coaches. Eight of the study participants competed in four different league tournaments (i.e., Provincial Club League, National Club League, International Club League, and International Nations League) for a corresponding number of different teams, each having a different set of coaches. The 9th participant competed in three different league tournaments because he did not participate in the International Nations League.

Given changes in demands and support personnel over a season, accurate reporting and interpretation of rugby players' experiences required that players' descriptions be linked to time and context. For example, some players reported poor communication that was specific to one set of coaches but not others, highlighting the need to link player experiences with the context in which they occurred. The time period in which events occurred was also integral to understanding players' experiences. For example, players believed that single events were less crucial to their negative experiences than the cumulative effect of events over time. As a result, summaries of the analyses were employed to ensure that players' experiences remained contextualized within the time period and specific context in which they occurred. In these summary analyses, data relating to a specific context or

time period were content-analyzed separately from data relating to other contexts or time periods. Analyses from the different time periods and contexts were then grouped to form a logical chronological order of events so progression and change could be observed.

Both inductive and deductive processes were employed analytically to identify core themes in the data. The use of deductive and inductive processes in tandem ensured that the analysis was guided by both existing theory and the data. Data were analyzed on both case-by-case and nomothetic bases (Dale, 1996). Analytic attention was directed at both experiential commonalities and interesting uniquenesses across interviewees. Players' descriptions of their experiences were then interpreted against existing definitions and through theoretically based explanations for burnout.

Results

The results are reported in four sections. In the first section, a description and overview of the pre-, mid- and end-of-season time points are presented. The second section contains descriptions of participant reports interpreted as burnout related. Players' attributions relating to experiences judged to be burnout related are presented in the third section, along with player reports devoid of burnout. In the final section, three case studies are presented to illustrate how individuals' experiences changed over time.

Time Points

Across time points all players' perceptions varied with changes in objective events and reconsideration of past events. This variation was supported by support-staff descriptions. Even though individual differences were evident in the data, there was also some notable commonality in players' experiences across time (see Table 1).

Preseason. Among study participants, two distinct groups of players were identified preseason: those who had been involved in all regular preseason training (the majority of players) and those who joined training late (as a result of involvement in extra international competition or injury). Players who joined training late, regardless of the reason, perceived a higher level of pressure to perform because other players had engaged in more training. Both players and support staff reported that these latecomers often did extra training during their allocated rest period (before preseason training) or while participating in regular preseason training.

The substantial physical demands of preseason training appeared to be integral to players' reports. Preseason was typified by fitness testing and physical-conditioning training (strength and fitness), with decreasing amounts of conditioning training as rugby-specific training increased toward the start of competition. Many of the descriptions provided by players and support staff preseason indicated that players were mentally preparing for competitive games. For example, players commonly reported high expectations and a positive outlook.

Midseason. The midseason series of interviews was conducted between 11 and 14 weeks after the preseason interviews. At this time players were approximately

Table 1 Common Experiences and Feelings at Different Times of the Year

Common experiences preseason	Common experiences early season to midseason	Common experiences midseason to end of season
Transient exhaustion toughest part of the year continuous physical training frequent fitness testing monotony of physical training nonenduring Pressure to perform training during rest period only chance to prepare for entire year fitness tests and competition for selection Limited time for activities outside rugby restricted social activities as a result of recovery contract restrictions on recreational activities Expectations enthusiastic, positive, and excited nervous anticipation (World Cup year) eager to begin competitive games positive perceptions of team environment Perceived challenges concerned about maintaining of fitness and remaining injury free	Enduring exhaustion continuous playing demands decreased training loads contact and high-intensity games little chance to physically recover Pressure to perform competition for selection avoid nonselection gain higher selection Increased time for activities outside rugby more time available during the week professional development activities Game-related demands nonselection (out of starting team) negative nonselection cycle increased media attention injury — not playing playing while injured — poor performance travel — disruption to life outside rugby outlook — trepidation — long season	Enduring exhaustion cumulative playing and training demands further decreases in training load further contact and high-intensity games decreased levels of fitness difficult to maintain training because of soreness/contact Performance outcomes positive and negative focus from public/media Limited time for activities outside rugby logistic difficulties professional development minimal because of international travel Game-related demands nonselection (out of starting team) negative nonselection cycle increased media attention injury — not playing playing while injured — poor performance travel — disruption to life outside rugby relief at end of season

one third to halfway through the competitive season, depending on their specific playing commitments for the rest of the season (domestic vs. international). Selections were made for the New Zealand international team, the All Blacks, in the month after the midseason interviews. Selection into the All Blacks at this point was regarded as particularly important by players because of the upcoming 2003 Rugby World Cup tournament, regarded as the pinnacle of international professional rugby. Players reported wanting maximum game time in the lead-up to selection decisions for this tournament. The heightened importance of selection was also evident in support-staff interviews. Specifically, support staff commented that players who were not selected in the starting team at this time appeared more disappointed compared with what they observed at other times. In light of upcoming international games, players reported injury, selection, and pressure to perform as being central to their midseason experiences. Although players described a decreased training load during the midseason, extensive travel requirements often disrupted players' plans to participate in regular activities outside rugby.

Postseason. The postseason series of interviews was conducted 1–3 weeks after the players' last game of the season (between 35 and 43 weeks after the initial pre-season interviews). As a result, perceptions of performance outcomes were central to many players' reports. Eight of the 9 interviewed players had participated in international rugby in the second half of the season. As such, a heightened pressure to perform in games was a central aspect of many players' descriptions. The logistics of international competition again required extensive travel, and players reported that this often disrupted activities outside rugby.

Burnout

During the course of the season, a number of the interviewees reported chronic negative states that were judged to be representative of burnout, as described in the extant literature. Specifically, some players reported enduring feelings of exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and devaluation similar to previous research (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c). Some players also reported these characteristics in isolation and indicated that they negatively affected their performance or welfare.

Players generally attributed their chronic negative states to more than one rugby-related experience. There was large variation in the attributions players made about their burnout-related feelings. Although the list in Table 2 is designed to represent the attributions of the interviewed players, it is in no way an exhaustive list, nor can this list be generalized to represent all players.

Players Who Did Not Report Burnout

The experiences of players who did not report burnout provide contrast to players who were adjudged to have experienced burnout. These players reported some rugby-related situations that were objectively similar to those of other players (e.g., injury and nonselection). Despite encountering some similar events, these players reported positive feelings. "I'm really enjoying the rugby and enjoying quite a lot of other things outside of it, as well." Specifically, these players reported enjoying challenges, goal achievement, and valuing their rugby involvement. For example, 1 player described additional leadership roles as a welcome challenge: "It's good

Table 2 Players' Attributions About Their Negative Burnout Experiences

Heavy playing and training demands	Although all the players interviewed expected high training loads, some players reported struggling mentally and physically with the unrelenting nature of these demands.
Competitive transitions	Several of the interviewed players believed that the transitions between competitions (e.g., Super 12 to All Blacks) were the most stressful part of the season. These players felt physically, mentally, and emotionally fatigued with little or no time between the end of one competition and the start of the next.
Injury	Players reported that injuries and, in particular, frustration at repeated injuries contributed to their feelings of emotional exhaustion, reduced professional efficacy, and devaluation.
Pressure to comply with demands	Some players felt an obligation or pressure to meet all requirements placed on them (e.g., travel, playing while injured, training load) regardless of the impact this might have on their welfare. Players felt that they had to meet these obligations to be professional players and to contribute to their team.
Public profile and pressure/expectations	Despite being able to maintain perspective on many aspects of their public profiles, some players perceived inaccurate assessments and criticisms by the public and media to be an ongoing source of stress.
Pressure to perform	Players felt pressure to perform because they knew that their selection in teams largely depended on their performance.
Nonselection	Players concerned about nonselection (out of starting team) often felt caught in a negative cycle. Players believed selection was based on performance, and they were unable to perform unless selected and unable to gain selection unless they performed.
Position security	Players often felt insecure about their ability to maintain their positions.
Poor relationship with team management	Attributions in these instances related to player perceptions of an absence of openness and honesty, poor communication, and a lack of consultation.

to have different roles in the team; we had quite a bit to do with the coaches and the running of the team.”

These players believed that their positive experiences were related to a number of factors, such as perceptions of positive social support, open and free communication with their coaches and management team, and engagement in positive and flexible activities outside of their rugby involvement. One player reported that his activities outside rugby had developed over the past couple of years:

When I first came a professional I wasn't doing a lot outside of rugby, maybe just sitting there watching TV. Now I'm starting to open up to a lot of things outside rugby like property . . . just getting into different things and it has been interesting and exciting. I am learning from it and when it comes to rugby, I've got a lot of focus.

These players also perceived that they had low playing demands and few or flexible responsibilities outside sport. Overall, these attributions represented a perception of low demands, high competence, and trust in resources and support. These players reported transient feelings of tiredness and frustration when exhaustion would be the expected experiential state (e.g., immediately after a series of hard training sessions) that were subsequently relieved by routine recovery periods. As a result, these transient experiences were not regarded as representative of burnout.

Players' attributions about their positive experiences are as follows:

- Open and honest communication with their coach and management team
- Trust and confidence in the team's support personnel (e.g., physiotherapist, doctor, masseur)
- A belief that they had been dealt with fairly by team management and given opportunities to perform
- A perception of low playing demands
- A perception of positive momentum in life outside rugby (e.g., progressing with professional development activities, family, financial security)
- A belief that they were making progress in their rugby careers in regard to selection and onfield performance
- Flexible responsibilities outside rugby
- Significant social support, both inside and outside rugby

Changes in Players' Experiences—Case Studies

Conducting a series of interviews with the same players enabled us to observe positive and negative changes in individual players' experiences. As a result of space restrictions, we have chosen to present summaries of 3 players' experiences. These players (referred to by pseudonyms) were chosen because their experiences illustrated how burnout can manifest or how they attempted to deal with this enduring negative state.

Case Study 1: “Tim.” *The cumulative effect of demands and adaptation of skills.* Tim was first interviewed toward the end of the previous season for a different cross-sectional study that focused on his perception of demands and burnout

experience (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c). At that time, Tim reported enduring feelings of exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and devaluation. Along with other participants, he attributed his negative experiential state to, in part, the cumulative demands of training and playing (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c). Tim had completed two previous 11-month periods of professional rugby with a 4-week rest period between. He felt that in this 1-month break he was unable to recover from the cumulative demands of the previous season and rehabilitate injuries, as well as prepare adequately for the following season. At the time Tim was interviewed in the previous investigation, he believed that it would be detrimental to his World Cup prospects if he continued playing rugby in this same seasonal cycle. He feared being in even worse condition and performing poorly as a consequence. He commented:

I have played 12 months of footy, and the next 12 months from the NPC right round to World Cup time is identical to what's been. I'm going to be bloody useless because I'm going to be worse than this.

The national coach gave Tim the option to rest after this initial interview and before the interviews for the current study. Despite his negative feelings, Tim was reluctant to take a break. This reticence was fueled by his perception that his position on the team was not ensured. He was concerned that any break from playing (even for injury recovery) might result in the loss of his place on the team permanently. "I'm not letting any other player have a crack at my jersey. . . . All he needs to do is play well and he'll get my spot." Despite extensive consultation with the coach, Tim was unable to make the decision to rest:

I spoke to the coach and he said "we're looking at resting players and you're on the list" and I thought "I want to go, if I'm fit and available and you want me, I want to go." That's before I played again and then about three weeks later I was like "what's going on, I'm playing so bad I'm not even going to get picked." In the end, I said I can't make the decision and the coach said "well, you are not going," and the decision was made for me.

Despite having this decision made for him, and believing it was in his best interests at the time, Tim later reflected on this situation with a level of discomfort and believed it was too risky to do again.

I am not doing that again. Bugger that . . . the only reason that I made that decision last season was because there was so many of us [resting], like if there were only two or three of us, there was no way I was going to miss it.

These thoughts were generated not only by his own position insecurity but also the experiences of his teammates who did not gain reselection after taking the same rest (e.g., "you look at someone like, [player's name] never got back in").

Although Tim returned from his rest physically recuperated with increased motivation to regain international selection, he continued to be concerned about his position security, inaccurate media reports, and the cumulative demands of training and playing. Nonetheless, and despite encountering similar demands, Tim reported a more positive experience overall. Tim believed that several things contributed to his more positive experience, including a different physical training and playing schedule, increased skills to deal with negative experiences, better

communication, and positive experiences outside rugby. Tim believed that the different schedule helped him manage the demands of training and playing better because it was focused on peaking for the World Cup at the end of the season rather than several peaks within the season. As a result, he experienced fewer transitions between teams (hence fewer changes of coaches and trainers) and fewer competitions within the season.

Tim reported that, as a result of talking to experienced players and reassessing his past experiences, he was able to anticipate situations. "I was a lot better off for it this season because you sort of expect it." Tim believed that this reassessment also helped him maintain perspective and cope more effectively. Because of his increased experience and the encouragement of teammates, Tim also reported feeling better able to express concerns to team management. "I felt like I could say my piece; I felt I could ask them questions about things. . . . I actually sat down one on one with the coaches and I just said what I thought." As a result of these conversations, Tim believed that actions were taken to improve situations. Outside rugby, Tim had been participating in flexible and constructive activities for recreation and professional development. Tim believed participating in these activities provided him with positive experiences and a perception of accomplishment independent of his rugby performance. Overall, Tim believed that his more recent positive experiences resulted in his feeling confident to face further rugby.

Case Study 2: "Jack." Negative perceptions of the environment and a change in teams. Jack described experiences during preseason training that were not interpreted as reflecting a high level of burnout. He did, however, report ambivalent feelings about his relationship with team management for the first competition of the year. Specifically, Jack did not believe he was able to openly discuss issues with team management. When Jack did talk to the coaches, he believed his comments were ignored. "When we said something they would just say 'Oh yeah good point' and then totally ignore it." It was Jack's perception that the team was underperforming as a result of a poor relationship between coaches and players.

Our performance was poor; I didn't really feel like we were getting too much out of the coaches. We were working pretty hard, and sometimes maybe trying to do their job for them, and then they weren't fronting up. Not that they weren't working hard, but I don't think they were up to it.

As a result, Jack reported "Enjoyment is pretty low at the moment. . . . Mentally I'm feeling pretty drained and uninterested in rugby." At this midseason point, Jack's descriptions were interpreted as indicating a move toward the sorts of negative experiential states that characterize burnout. This, however, was the low point of the season for Jack.

At this midseason point, the first competition of the season finished, and Jack moved to a different team. He perceived this change in team management, coaches, and players to be positive. He commented, "I went into another group of guys, the majority who had a pretty successful season, and just got dragged up with them." Jack encountered some frustrations in this new environment, specifically consistent nonselection (i.e., not on starting team). "It's pretty frustrating because you get caught up in the whole hype of playing, and then you don't actually get to get on [the field], so you kind of feel a bit of a letdown."

Jack reported effectively coping with nonselection by employing a strategy referred to in sport psychology literature as cognitive restructuring. Cognitive restructuring involves identifying underlying ideas and beliefs that are self-defeating in nature and replacing them with cognitions that are more functional. Jack learned about cognitive restructuring, in part, through contact with a mentor (a trusted person with experience as an elite athlete and coach). “Sometimes when you’re thinking about the negatives, you can sort of just turn them around and he makes you sort of think about the positives a bit more and makes you feel a bit better about yourself.” He identified functional cognitions through reading the biographies of elite athletes and coaches.

You can’t keep everyone happy. . . . People have to sit on the bench because of me and then I go and sit on the bench for someone else. I sort of just had to say to myself, look, be thankful that you’re sort of on the bench rather than what [the player in the stands] is doing.

Jack implemented this strategy successfully without formal training. In his new team environment Jack also perceived better communication with team management, a factor that enhanced his ability to cope with nonselection in the starting team. “They were all pretty approachable. It’s good to be able to go and say look, what do I need to work on and why did you pick him over me?” Overall, Jack’s change in environment and new coping strategies contributed to a more positive experience.

Case Study 3: “James.” Injury, nonselection and a change in focus. Throughout the season, James experienced ongoing frustration with recurring injuries. “I had a battle with my body this year.” James’ injury frustration was compounded by nonselection (i.e., not in the starting team). “I had no control over that [selection] really, and it was frustrating when I was really trying.” In addition, James reported having a poor relationship with the coach, which further exacerbated these experiences. “You can’t talk to him. . . . I am not getting any feedback.” As a result of his poor relationship with the coach, James believed he was unable to obtain an accurate reason for his limited game time. For example, James commented,

I played probably the best I played . . . and he pulled me off after only half a game and said “I want you in A1 condition for the semifinal” [next week]. . . . How can you argue with that . . . and then I didn’t get a full game the next week.

James also reported disagreeing with team management regarding the best way to rehabilitate his injuries.

During the season, James described moments of wondering whether or not he was capable of rising to the challenges he was facing. When injured or not selected, James reported feeling like he had little control over the situation and distanced from the team. It was James’ belief that these feelings led to enduring periods during which he experienced the key characteristics of burnout. James also reported some negative feelings and events that he believed were consequences of his negative experiences, which we judged as reflecting burnout. For example, James described anxiety-filled restless nights before fitness assessments. “The night before the fitness test . . . I couldn’t sleep . . . it got till about 3 in the morning.” Instances of

nonselection also gave rise to a flood of negative emotions that James dealt with in ways he judged to be counterproductive to his welfare.

I have never been not selected for a game where I've been fit. . . . I wanted to play, and I really was keen and it hurt me you know . . . and I ended up getting on the booze . . . and having quite a big night.

To cope with these demands, James reported simultaneously attempting problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping strategies by adopting a positive outlook and trying to focus on aspects of the situation he could control.

I thought, I'm not going to be ruled by fear anymore. I don't want to be dictated to by bad feelings and . . . anxiety. I've done the running; I can just give it my best shot. I am going to put the best of what I can out there. . . . I just relaxed and it's just so much more enjoyable.

Despite adopting this focus, James reported that external expectations, such as pressure from the media and coaches, still had a negative effect on him. For example, after another instance of nonselection in the starting team, James commented,

I got bummed out from that and I let it effect me . . . it was just a bit gutting. . . . I was a little bit hurt, so probably drunk probably a bit more. . . . Just a knee-jerk reaction of mine I suppose.

Despite these negative experiences, James indicated a strong desire to remain involved in rugby, which was mainly a result of perceived social and financial constraints and loyalty to the team.

I've experienced things that I'd never experienced before this year. Getting dropped and getting subbed early and all these things that I took for granted before, all of a sudden I started understanding what these other players were feeling. I could actually support them a little bit more. Guys that aren't getting picked or aren't even getting a chance, that's much more frustrating than failing.

In addition, James perceived few attractive alternatives to support himself financially outside rugby.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to identify the central factors (influences, antecedents, symptoms, and consequences), processes, and changes in the burnout syndrome. In interviews, all players reported encountering objectively similar events (e.g., nonselection, continuous demands). At some time during the season, reports of 7 players were consistent with descriptions of burnout in the extant literature. These players' reports of reduced accomplishment, physical and emotional exhaustion, and sport devaluation were similar to those described as burnout in earlier interviews with rugby players (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c), as well as, to some extent, tennis players (Gould, Tuffey, et al., 1996) and individuals in human-care occupations (e.g., Maslach, 1982). Not all players' reports were judged to be representative of burnout. In particular, 2 participants associated positive perceptions

and experiences with events objectively similar to those of players who reported experiences reminiscent of burnout.

Regardless of whether players' experiences were regarded as burnout, changing perceptions were evident in their reports across the different time points (see Table 1). Typical changes included reports of preseason exhaustion, reflecting a peak in their physical training regime. In most cases, these preseason reports of exhaustion were transient because these feelings were relieved by routine recovery periods within training cycles and were recognized as such by players. In keeping with the extant literature (e.g., Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1997), these reports of exhaustion were not regarded as being indicative of the burnout syndrome because of their transient nature. Other typical changes included an increase in reported feelings of reduced accomplishment from pre- to midseason. Similar to previous research, players attributed this increase in feelings of reduced accomplishment to fears of missing selection for international teams, injury, and failure to meet performance goals (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c; Gould, Tuffey, et al., 1996). It is important to note that not all instances of unfulfilled expectations, injury, and performance frustrations reported by players resulted in enduring feelings of reduced accomplishment indicative of burnout. For example, in some instances nonselection resulted in transient feelings of reduced accomplishment, positive adaptation, renewed effort, and comparatively positive outcomes (see Case Study 2: "Jack").

Of central interest in the current study were changes in players' experiences. Across the season we observed negative changes in players' experiences that eventually resulted in a chronic negative experiential state that we interpreted as reflecting burnout. We also observed players who started in that same negative state but became more positive over the course of the season. These contextualized descriptions of change, regardless of the direction, might afford the opportunity to enhance understanding of the progression into burnout states and positive adaptation and resilience to this negative experiential state.

Players believed that the various aspects of the negative experiential state were interrelated. In players' reports, it was common for exhaustion or reduced accomplishment to be central early in their experience, whereas sport devaluation was the last characteristic they experienced. For example, some players described instances when feelings of insecurity about their professional contributions led them to work harder. Players who felt this way reported that these heightened efforts often served only to fuel their physical and mental exhaustion, which, in turn, exacerbated their sense of reduced accomplishment. Other players reported a sense that exhaustion led to feelings of reduced accomplishment because they were unable to perform as a result of their physically depleted state.

There is currently debate regarding the progression of the burnout experience (e.g., Van Dierendonck et al., 2001). It appears from data collected in these interviews and previous research (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c) that devaluation might emerge only *after* athletes experience enduring feelings of exhaustion and reduced accomplishment. Although speculative, it is possible that if rugby devaluation is the last burnout characteristic to emerge in the burnout developmental process, it might serve a protective function for the player's self-esteem. Specifically, devaluation might act to disengage self-worth from a valued activity that has become a source of frustrated accomplishment and chronic exhaustion—a mechanism previously

identified to protect self-esteem in achievement settings (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998). Future researchers are encouraged to consider wider implications when examining the progression of athlete burnout because these developmental relationships might have important implications for the prevention and management of the syndrome.

Instances of adaptation were closely related to players' perceptions of available situational and personal resources. For example, 1 player consulted an experienced coach and past international athlete for advice (see Case Study 2: "Jack"). Positive adaptations described by participants also included positive reappraisal, problem-focused coping, and infusing ordinary events with positive meaning identified in past research (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Negative adaptations, specifically counterproductive behaviors, typically resulted from avoidance strategies or relapse to previous habits. For example, in an attempt to cope with negative feelings, "James" (Case Study 3) reverted to bingeing on alcohol, a behavior he referred to as a "knee-jerk reaction" and "an old habit." Similarly, counterproductive behaviors have been linked to stress in past research with athletes (Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993). Overall, from data collected in these interviews it appears that adaptation mediates between players' perceptions and the extent to which they experience negative consequences associated with burnout. As a consequence, the results support a multidimensional model depicting these complexities. Specifically, interactions between appraisals and past experience are required to adequately explain coping and possible consequences related to burnout (Gould, Tuffey, et al., 1996; Terry, 1991).

To date, few studies in the sport setting have examined perceptions of threat, as well as challenge (Dugdale, Eklund, & Gordon, 2002). In the current study, descriptions from players who did not experience burnout have been used to contextualize the experiences of players who did. Given substantial individual differences among players who experienced burnout and those who did not, comparisons need to be made cautiously and interpreted circumspectly. A few observations warrant recognition despite this need for caution. Specifically, there were differences in the way players appraised situations and in the associated responses by the different players. When confronted with similar situations, players who did not experience burnout were more likely to appraise the situation positively (i.e., as a challenge), whereas players who did experience burnout were more likely to appraise the situation negatively (i.e., as a threat). If players who did not experience burnout appraised a situation negatively initially, they typically described efforts to reassess the situation in more positive terms, in a manner similar to that described by Folkman and Moskowitz (2000). Further research is needed to specifically examine differences related to perceptions of threat versus challenge and possible resultant outcomes (i.e., positive adaptations vs. burnout).

Closely related to these appraisals were players' attributions or causal beliefs for their experiences. Players attributed burnout-related experiences to, among other things, a heavy training and playing load, poor relationship with team management, injury, and nonselection (see Table 2). Players who did not experience burnout attributed their positive experiences to, among other things, perceptions of low playing demands, being treated fairly by team management, and feelings of positive momentum in and outside their rugby careers. The attributions of these contrasting groups are not relative to a common experience. Instead, some players

were describing causal beliefs about burnout-related experiential states, whereas the others were ascribing causes for their positive experiences. On the basis of these findings, we suggest that researchers examine attributions for both positive and negative events among athletes who have and have not experienced burnout. Comparisons between these groups might provide a detailed understanding of how appraisals of objectively similar demands differ among athletes who have and have not experienced burnout.

Theoretical Implications

Existing psychosocial models of stress (e.g., Smith, 1986), commitment-based explanations (i.e., Raedeke, 1997), and SDT-based explanations (Ryan & Deci, 2000) were all useful to some degree for interpreting participants' burnout-related experiences. All players who experienced burnout reported some enduring perceptions of stress, wherein stress refers to a perceived inability to meet demands given the resources available (McGrath, 1970). For example, some players perceived that media-related demands and the cumulative effects of training and playing were beyond their capabilities to handle. Players' perceptions of stress, if chronic, typically led to enduring feelings of exhaustion initially and then feelings of reduced accomplishment and devaluation. As such, the current research supports the role of processes such as a perception of overload, appraisal of resources, responses (i.e., coping-related behaviors), and implicated factors (i.e., motivation) in the burnout model outlined by Smith (1986).

Some players' attributions for their negative experiences were interpreted as being related to chronic frustration of basic needs, as outlined in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2002). For example, players who experienced injury, nonselection (out of starting team), or performance frustrations were unlikely to feel competent and often felt disconnected from the team (i.e., not related). As instances of injury and nonselection were typically perceived as beyond the players' control, it was common for players to also report low autonomy. Players typically reported that frustration of basic needs initially led to enduring feelings of reduced accomplishment, followed by exhaustion, often as a result of increased effort, and finally sport devaluation. Interpretations of these players' experiences under SDT supports researchers' suggestions that a chronic failure to meet basic needs might result in ill-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006a).

Similar to previous research (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c), perceptions of entrapment were also implicated in the occurrence of burnout in this study. Some of the main contributors to rugby players' feelings of entrapment involved social and financial constraints (Raedeke, 1997). For example, 1 player felt constrained from leaving his team by loyalty to his current teammates and because he perceived only financially unattractive options outside rugby. In these cases perceptions of entrapment contributed to the occurrence of burnout by motivating players to remain involved, despite their negative experiences.

Practical Recommendations

Although there is an obvious need for caution when generalizing findings based on a small sample, there are some practical implications from the current study worth

noting. Specifically, player attributions for their chronic negative states included demands and stressors related to injury, nonselection, performance frustration, and the team environment. Issues such as nonselection and injury are, to a certain extent, unavoidable in the competitive sporting environment. Regardless, efforts to enhance related processes (e.g., nonselection discussions and injury management) might reduce the potential for these experiences to contribute to burnout. In particular, the interviews highlighted that perceived inconsistencies in selection discussions can negatively affect a player's perceptions of competence. Players who did not report experiences indicative of burnout reported perceptions of open and honest communication regarding such issues. Meetings with coaches as part of the wider research project revealed that even though coaches recognized the importance of nonselection discussions at the time of this study, they did not receive any formal training in this area. Elite rugby players such as those interviewed in this study might benefit from an organization-level intervention on burnout prevention that includes formal training in nonselection processes for both coaches and athletes.

Instances of effective coping and positive adaptation were also apparent in player reports. For example, 1 player reported using cognitive restructuring to manage his negative perceptions relating to nonselection. This report supports the efficacy of these existing coping strategies when dealing with burnout experiences. In addition, the current study supported the idea that an SDT framework might form the basis of effective interventions. Specifically, strategies for intervention could be based on the extensive research on the promotion of self-determination, intrinsic motivation, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2002). For example, facilitating increased player input into decision making might help satisfy the need for autonomy, promote self-determined forms of motivation, and help prevent burnout.

Future Research

In this study we examined the experiences of a small, purposefully sampled group of New Zealand rugby players. As such, this study provides a partial insight into the experiences of some professional New Zealand rugby players. Although this approach has the advantage of providing in-depth detail, it limits the generalizability of these findings. Further research is needed to extend these results. We believe that, in part, this could be achieved by using more diverse forms of inquiry, as well as methods that allow wider generalizations.

The results of the current study reflect the dynamic and individual nature of the burnout experience and highlight the potential for further longitudinal research in this area. Among the participants who also completed interviews for a related study the previous season (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006c), there was some evidence that season-to-season variations in players' experiences might be of interest. As such, research conducted over longer time periods might provide further insight into the consequences and adaptations associated with burnout. Although theoretically based quantitative studies allow for generalization to a wider group of participants than the current study, other more diverse methods will likely result in rich in-depth descriptions and other benefits. For example, more diverse forms of inquiry, such as ethnographic studies, could offer valuable information regarding the dynamic nature of the burnout experience and enable researchers to contextualize player experiences in more depth than the current study. Furthermore,

information on how burnout is narratively constructed by players in different sports and different times of their lives might have important parallels to account-making models referred to in counseling psychology and applied to distressful reactions in athletes (Grove, Lavalley, Gordon, & Harvey, 1998). Account making refers to an individual's construction of a story to fit with or make sense of his or her experience (i.e., causes, resultant feelings, consequences). Researchers propose that account making is a central component of working through stressful or traumatic events (Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990). Account-making models might offer information regarding coping strategies for players experiencing burnout. This might be one fruitful avenue of investigation, but there are a variety of other possibilities, as well. We recommend that researchers primarily choose an approach that is suited to their research question, the characteristics of their participants, and, of course, the nature of athlete burnout.

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