

Rethinking Narcissism in Sports: Advantageous or Detrimental to a Team's Success?

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Abstract

Drawing on literature from personality and social psychology, the role of narcissism continues to be one of the most controversial constructs in sport. Reviewing a broad array of empirical research, this paper aimed at unravelling the effects of narcissism in various sporting elements: the players, the coaches, and the fans. Exploring both the benefits and drawbacks of narcissism, research reveals that narcissism can be valued as either advantageous or detrimental, depending on the component of the game. Reflecting upon the players aspect, narcissistic athletes might be best suited for individual sports as they provide the greatest opportunity for self-enhancement. Simultaneously, while narcissistic players often create major problems for a team, teams must not steer clear of all narcissistic athletes as they seem to be the most dependable performers during “big” games. Shifting towards coaches, research finds that those who exhibit moderate levels of narcissism, maximize leadership effectiveness such as communicating goals successfully with others. Yet, while these ideal levels may contribute to team success, research continues to find that narcissistic coaches severely impact team well-being as they are unable to put the needs of the team above theirs. Finally, despite the aggressiveness expressed by highly identified fans, the benefits of collective narcissism certainly prevail as their powerful presence leads their team to more successful outcomes.

Personality has a major impact in the sports world. While innate talent and physical strengths are essential to an athlete's success, their success is also dependent on personality traits. High levels of conscientiousness, emotional stability, and extraversion seem to characterize high performance athletes (Khan et al., 2016). Aside from the outcomes of these “Big Five” dispositions, the influence of other key traits, like narcissism, continue to be well-debated. Narcissists are relatively “dominant, extraverted, exhibitionistic, aggressive, impulsive, self-centered, subjectively self-satisfied, self-indulgent, and nonconforming” (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Considering research from opposing perspectives, it seems that the trait narcissism and its influence on sport is not as definite as once believed. This paper intends to investigate narcissism in sport by examining its positive and negative effects on three core aspects: the players, the coaches, and the fans.

Beginning with the negative viewpoint, the behaviours of a narcissistic athlete can be quite damaging to the team's overall atmosphere. Labelled as a “problematic player,” Leggat et al. (2020) revealed that narcissistic athletes lower team cohesion as their excessive pursuit for self-appreciation severely undermines and disregards teammates' abilities and emotions. In other words, narcissists only care about themselves. Problematic players also tend to shift the blame of their mistakes onto teammates, creating a divisive impact on the team (Leggat et al., 2020). This selfish manipulation enables narcissistic athletes to maintain their inflated sense of self by masking their imperfections. Furthermore, the negative conduct of the problematic player

also corrupts team morale, as their behaviour becomes contagious amongst other teammates (Leggat et al., 2020). Continuing with unfavourable outcomes, being that narcissistic athletes crave opportunities for self-enhancement, they tend to be selective in the situations to which they are willing to devote their efforts (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). A major finding of Woodman et al.'s (2011) cyclist study revealed that narcissists' increase in effort was associated with increases in evaluative performance. Reflecting upon their desire for admiration, they discovered that narcissists performed poorly when there was no opportunity for self-enhancement (Woodman et al., 2011). Acknowledging that not every sport event is going to involve an audience, this selectivity in effort can be incredibly detrimental for a team. For instance, a narcissistic individual who invests little effort in practice will hinder not only the quality and intensity of the training session, but also team objectives such as coordination on attacking patterns. With the belief that they are the best player on the team, narcissistic athletes have no need to prove their superiority when performance is unidentifiable. Due to their lack of energy, team harmony is certainly impacted as teammates associate feelings of contempt towards the problematic player. Grijalva et al. (2020) also investigated the interference of team performance caused by players' narcissism using game statistics from past National Basketball Association (NBA) seasons. Their results demonstrated that teams with higher levels of narcissism had poorer coordination, or fewer passes that lead directly to a field goal, than teams with lower levels (Grijalva et al., 2020). They concluded that narcissism prevented "good" things from happening, such as establishing familiarity with one another, which interconnects with team coordination and success (Grijalva et al., 2020). Talented but disruptive, the mere presence of narcissistic players seems to lead to negative consequences experienced by the team.

Conversely, although the behaviours of a narcissist take its toll in a group dynamic, the trait of narcissism has its benefits for the athlete themselves. Wallace and Baumeister's (2002) four experiments demonstrated that a narcissist's performance significantly improved when self-enhancement opportunity was highest. While this positive association certainly serves great value, it is important to understand and identify what tasks or situations are considered self-enhancing. It was revealed that narcissists perceived self-enhancing opportunity when tasks were greater in difficulty, performance pressure was induced, and there was presence of an evaluative audience (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). When these factors were present, the narcissistic athlete reached optimal levels of performance (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). This has incredible implications as it suggests that trait of narcissism can serve as a protective mechanism in terms of not "choking under pressure." This is a term commonly used when a high-calibre team or a superstar athlete fails to rise to the expected performance of a big game. Being that narcissists are primarily motivated by self-enhancement, and thus will invest maximum effort to achieve that goal, narcissists will thrive when faced with a challenging opposition where stakes are highest, and the crowds are loudest. With that, it could also be inferred those narcissists do not crumble under pressure because they are extremely confident in their ability to achieve the outcome they desire. Even when faced with setbacks, they continue to persevere in any challenge that threatens their status. Roberts et al. (2019) confirmed that narcissistic athletes clearly performed better under pressure because they "try harder" when opportunities for personal glory were apparent. However, it has been argued that in

addition to trying harder, narcissists perhaps also “try smarter.” Roberts et al. (2018) entertained this idea in considering that narcissists are more adept at exerting the ideal amount of effort at the right time, making them more efficient. They concluded that low anxious performers can better regulate effort for maintaining or enhancing performance, in comparison to highly anxious performers (Roberts et al., 2018). This is supported by Bray et al. (2008) who demonstrated through a muscular endurance task, that self-regulatory depletion had a detrimental effect on performance. Individuals who were psychologically depleted required greater muscle motor unit activation to maintain the same amount of force in performance, in comparison to those not depleted (Bray et al., 2008). Being that self-regulatory depletion can be provoked by anxiety, narcissistic athletes are able to experience these efficiency advantages because their poise warrants lower levels of anxiety. In addition to biology, research also proposed psychological benefits for narcissistic athletes. Manley et al. (2019) revealed that narcissistic admiration, that is the self-enhancement of uniqueness and dominance, is positively associated with experiences of mental toughness. In sport, mental toughness is the foundation for success. Mental toughness cultivates perseverance, tenacity, and moxie in an athlete. Consequently, a mentally tough athlete embraces any challenge that confronts them, doing whatever it takes to achieve their desired outcome.

Continuing with the benefits and drawbacks of trait narcissism, it is important to also deliberate its effects with coaches. Sport organizations are always looking for the “right” coach that can bring about the greatest success. This search for the perfect coach is a very difficult process as ideal qualities and interpersonal styles desired in a coach are quite subjective. The daring concern is whether coach narcissism is an adaptive or maladaptive attribute. Research overwhelmingly suggests that narcissistic coaches tend to contribute to a team’s failure. Matosic et al. (2020) assessed the attributes in 210 coaches regarding controlling coach behaviours, controlling interpersonal style beliefs, and moral disengagement. Controlling coach behaviors characterizes coaches who possess a coercive and authoritarian interpersonal style that is believed to be beneficial for the players (e.g. using threats as motivation, public humiliation) (Matosic et al., 2020). Moral disengagement refers to the process in which individuals rationalise their inappropriate behaviour based on the eight psychosocial mechanisms (e.g. moral justification, displacement of responsibility) (Bandura, 2002). They revealed that narcissism was positively associated with controlling coaching behaviors, which was positively associated with moral disengagement (Matosic et al., 2020). These findings give rise to various interpretations of the meaning behind a controlling coach. One reasoning suggests that controlling coaches engage in moral disengagement to establish superiority over athletes, gaining self-enhancement benefits (Matosic et al., 2020). Another interpretation could be that coaches conduct themselves in this controlling manner in times of self-threat, when they feel that athletes are competing for equivalent admiration and glory. Recognizing that narcissists crave admiration, a coach can simply resort to yelling and guilt-inducement tactics to successfully belittle athletes and neutralize their threat. Nevertheless, these behaviors exhibited by a coach create a destructive environment. In direct comparison of autonomy-supportive coaching styles and controlling coaching styles, Hodge and Lonsdale (2011) found that a controlling-coaching style was positively associated with antisocial behavior towards teammates and opponents. Conversely, an autonomy-supportive coaching style fostered prosocial behavior

towards others (Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011). Reflecting upon coach narcissism and its association with a controlling style, this further reveals that team well-being and cohesion is severely impacted based on the prevalence of antisocial conduct. Athletes who perceived their coach as controlling, instead of autonomy-supportive, also reported higher levels of controlled motivation (Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011). Controlled motivation is linked with negative experiences, in comparison to autonomous motivation, as it involves greater pressure, tension, and a more negative, rigid emotional atmosphere (Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011). Undoubtedly, narcissistic coaches account for numerous adverse outcomes encountered by a sports team.

Contrasting the drawbacks of coach narcissism, one study suggests that there is a bright side of narcissism in terms of subordinates' objective and subjective career success (Volmer et al., 2016). They found that subordinates experienced greater personal career success, in terms of salary and promotions, when they rated their leaders high in narcissism (Volmer et al., 2016). This is quite fascinating as it suggests that by promoting those lower in status, narcissistic leaders attempt to continue receiving admiration from these loyal subordinates (Volmer et al., 2016). These results certainly translate into the sports context, as narcissistic coaches may alter decisions to favour players who affirm their own self-esteem. For example, an athlete who satisfies the admiration needs of the coach has a greater likelihood of increased game time compared to players who do not convey equivalent admiration. Depending on the degree of admiration, a player may be even awarded a position on the starting line-up. Regardless, these promotions given to players ensures loyalty and contentment towards the narcissistic coach. Another advantage associated with narcissistic coaches is that they make effective leaders when their narcissism is portrayed in moderation. A meta-analysis conducted by Grijalva et al. (2015) found that the relationship between narcissism and leadership takes the form of an inverted U-shape. This characterization of leadership narcissism revealed that low and high levels of narcissism were linked to greater leadership dysfunction, while moderate levels of narcissism maximized leadership effectiveness (Grijalva et al., 2015). Leadership effectiveness involves components like executing the organization's vision, communicating goals successfully with others, and adjusting leadership to resolve forecasted problems. In sport, effective leadership goes beyond passion and knowledge of the game. It is about the ability to achieve desired goals, regardless of the challenges or pressures encountered. In competitive environments, coaches with ideal levels of narcissism may be best suited to preserve and ensure a successful outcome.

Lastly, extending the scope of individualistic narcissism to collective narcissism, it is important to evaluate whether narcissism in fans is advantageous or detrimental to sport. Collective narcissism is "an ingroup identification tied to an emotional investment in an unrealistic belief about the unparalleled greatness of an ingroup" (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009, p. 1074). Collective narcissists view their ingroup as an extension of themselves. As a result, they are strongly invested in maintaining this perceived superiority of their ingroup. Research conducted across four different countries revealed that collective narcissism predicted aggressiveness and support for violence in intergroup relations (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Collective narcissists also tended to perceive threat from outgroups and were unwilling to forgive outgroups for wrongs done in the past (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). In sports, fans

have an extensive history of being unrealistic, oversensitive, and aggressive to the opposing team and officials, especially in response to losses and criticism. Examining the roles between team identification and collective narcissism, Larkin and Fink (2019) explored whether highly identified fans, possessing higher levels of collective narcissism, would account for more of these negative behaviors. Highly identified fans are individuals who not only see themselves as part of the team, but also believe that their role as a team fan is indispensable (Larkin & Fink, 2019). In other words, the fan's behavior is leveraged by their perceived significance of their role. Evaluating the tendencies of hundreds of sport fans, they confirmed that fan dysfunction and aggression displayed at sport venues and bars was indeed rooted in collective narcissism (Larkin & Fink, 2019). Fan dysfunction and aggression can include actions like yelling at the referees, excessive drinking during games, and travelling to away games to initiate trouble with the opposition. Wann et al. (1999) disclosed that highly identified sport fans were willing to admit they would do whatever it takes to increase their team's chances of success, even if that meant injuring the opposition by throwing objects at them. It is important to clarify that these fans do not possess an overall high level of trait aggression, rather their willingness to be aggressive exists in the sport context where their team's performances have relevance to their self-concept (Wann et al., 1999).

Although collective narcissism greatly contributes to the occurrence of negative conduct, there are advantages for having highly identified sport fans. Unkelbach and Memmert (2010) demonstrated that teams performing "at home" do indeed have higher success rates due to the presence of their fans. Evaluating the crowd influence in soccer, they found that crowd density and fan noise significantly influenced the referee decisions, with the official awarding more yellow cards and fouls to the away team (Unkelbach & Memmert, 2010). The accumulation of these favourable decisions drastically changes the outcome of a game. Furthermore, another study concluded that crowd support was the most important factor for executing a team's home advantage (Wolfson et al., 2005). From their survey, 93% of fans agreed that the more supportive the crowd, the better the team will play (Wolfson et al., 2005). This popular belief that fans embrace, regarding their key role in a team's success, dramatically boosts their heightened arousal during competition. Recalling that narcissists will do whatever it takes to achieve their desired outcome, collective narcissism inspires fans to take extravagant measures to ensure that their role is successfully carried out. Their support can take many forms, like painting themselves with their team's colours, cheering with instruments, and distracting opponents with taunts. Courneya and Carron (1992) asserted that an active and loud crowd benefited players' psychological states, with 97% of competitors feeling like they performed better, 76% feeling more confident, and 89% feeling more motivated in their home stadium. Without question, fans characterized with collective narcissism certainly contribute to the positive outcomes experienced by a team.

Ultimately, after review of the above literature, the role of narcissism has led me to multiple conclusions. Weighing both the benefits and negatives at an individual level, narcissistic athletes might be best suited for individual sports. Individual sports undoubtedly offer the greatest opportunity for self-enhancement, as all the attention must be drawn towards them during competition. With that, they would have no teammates to deflect their anger

towards, thus preventing any potential weakening in team cohesion. Simultaneously, in the context of team sports, a team should not completely steer clear of narcissistic athletes as they are the most reliable performers in competitive environments. Every team needs that one player who can step up and score on a penalty shot or hit that perfect buzzer beater. Therefore, it would be beneficial for a team to be mindful of their players' dispositions, while ensuring that the presence of narcissism does not profoundly affect the overall team. Even then, it would be advantageous if a coach invested additional attention to that narcissistic athlete to satisfy their need for admiration and reduce their negative tendencies. In response to coach narcissism, those who are characterized with extreme levels are detrimental to a team's success. A narcissistic coach bears too many conflicting interests, as they are unable to put the needs of the team above their own. A team functions best when coaches and teammates can openly communicate, cooperate, and act together in efforts of reaching their shared goals. This prosocial behavior includes standing up for other teammates, challenging each other's abilities in a positive manner, and establishing team trust. Unfortunately, narcissistic coaches are unable to cultivate these key features. However, as noted in the literature, if a coach can sustain their narcissism in moderation, then there is potential value in this leadership style. Lastly, reflecting upon sport fans, the benefits of collective narcissism expressed by fans surely outweigh the drawbacks. Although highly identified fans are known to act in an aggressive manner, causing all forms of trouble, the effectiveness of their support cannot go unnoticed. Influencing the decisions of referees, increasing the motivation and performance of players, and leading the team to more successful results at home, the extreme passion embodied by an ingroup proves that the "home advantage" phenomenon certainly does exist. In efforts to untangle the controversies regarding narcissism in sport, it is evident that there is not a simple answer. Narcissism can be valued as either advantageous or detrimental to a team's success, depending on the component of the game. Reflecting upon the players, coaches, and fans, the most critical part of its effects seems to be rooted in the amount and severity of narcissism. With an ideal presence of the trait, where the positives primarily transpire, it can be concluded that narcissism may be necessary for overall team success.

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