

## **Ironic effects of performance are worse for neurotics**

Barlow, M.D.; Woodman, Tim; Gorgulu, R.; Voyzey, R.M.

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Ironic effects of performance are worse for neurotics

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12 Matthew Barlow<sup>1</sup>, Tim Woodman<sup>1</sup>, Recep Gorgulu<sup>1,2</sup>, Rob Voyzey<sup>1</sup>

13

<sup>1</sup> Bangor University, UK

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<sup>2</sup> Uludag University, Turkey

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:

19

Matthew Barlow, Institute for the Psychology of Elite Performance, Bangor University,

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Gwynedd, LL57 2DG, UK. e-mail: m.barlow@bangor.ac.uk.

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## 1 **Abstract**

2           *Objectives:* To conduct the first examination of neuroticism as a predictor of (1) the  
3 incidence of what Wegner (1989, 2009) terms *ironic processes of mental control* and (2) the  
4 precision of ironic performance errors under high- and low-anxiety conditions.

5           *Design:* Across two studies we employed a repeated-measures design.

6           *Method:* In a football penalty-shooting task (Study 1) and a dart-throwing (Study 2)  
7 task, under high-anxiety and low-anxiety conditions, participants gained maximum points for  
8 hitting a *target zone* and fewer points for hitting a designated *non-ironic* error zone.  
9 Additionally, we instructed participants to be particularly careful *not* to hit a designated  
10 *ironic* error zone, because such hits would score minimum points.

11           *Results:* Across both studies within-subjects moderation analyses revealed a  
12 consistent moderating effect of neuroticism on the incidence of ironic errors in the high-  
13 anxiety condition. Specifically, when anxious, neurotics displayed a significant increase in  
14 *ironic* performance error and a significant decrease in *target* hits. Importantly, *non-ironic*  
15 error did not differ across anxiety conditions. Additionally, Study 2 results revealed that  
16 neuroticism moderated the *precision* of ironic errors when anxious. Specifically, when  
17 anxious, neurotics' ironic error zone hits were significantly farther from the target zone and  
18 significantly farther into the ironic error zone than their relatively emotionally stable  
19 counterparts' errors.

20           *Conclusion:* We provide the first evidence that neuroticism moderates both the  
21 *incidence* and *precision* of ironic performance errors. These results will enable practitioners  
22 in coaching environments to make evidence-based predictions and interventions regarding  
23 which individuals are most prone to ironic performance breakdown when anxious.

24

25           **Keywords:** anxiety, ironic error, neuroticism, football, darts, stress.



1 logically arise due to the nature of mental control” (Wegner, 1994, p. 34). Specifically,  
2 foundational to Wegner’s theory is the premise that mental control requires two processes in  
3 order to work effectively. First, the cyclical *operating* process carries out intentional, effortful  
4 regulation by consciously searching for, and directing the individual toward, mental contents  
5 that will yield a desired outcome or intended emotional state; known as the desired state. It is  
6 through active engagement in this mentally demanding search that regulation will most likely  
7 be maintained and the desired state will be reached. Second, the *monitoring* process  
8 subconsciously searches for mental contents that indicate a failure to achieve the desired  
9 state. If this *monitor* identifies any such failures it reactivates the *operating* process with the  
10 aim of filling the mind with mental contents that are relevant to the desired state, and thus  
11 reestablishing a regulated mind. Both processes work within one control system and operate  
12 together as part of a feedback loop that, under normal circumstances, provides effective  
13 mental control (Wegner, 1994).

14         Wegner (1994) suggested that these very processes that enable an individual to  
15 exercise mental control are also, under certain conditions, responsible for undermining  
16 intentional mental control. Specifically, under conditions of mental load (e.g., anxiety), some  
17 of the cognitive space that is required for the effortful operating process to operate effectively  
18 is consumed by the mental load. As such, the operating process becomes less effective at  
19 introducing the desired content into awareness. Conversely, the functioning of the monitoring  
20 process – because it is both unconscious and not easily interrupted – remains largely  
21 unaffected under mental load. Thus, under mental load the monitoring process becomes more  
22 salient and the search for thoughts or sensations that conflict with the desired state are enough  
23 to bring them into consciousness and thereby undermine the intended control (Wegner, Erber,  
24 & Zanakos, 1993). This is *ironic* because the (monitoring) process that normally ensures that  
25 the to-be-avoided state is kept at bay is the very process that increases an individual’s

1 awareness of – and thus likelihood of bringing about – the to-be-avoided state (Woodman,  
2 Barlow, & Gorgulu, 2015). The result is that one is more likely to do specifically what one  
3 intends not to do, when one least wants to do it.

4         Several studies have provided evidence in support Wegner’s theory (e.g., Binsch,  
5 Oudejans, Bakker & Savelsbergh, 2009; Dugdale & Eklund, 2003; Wegner, Ansfield, &  
6 Pilloff, 1998; Woodman et al., 2015). For example, in a dart throwing task, Oudejans, Binsch,  
7 and Bakker (2013) demonstrated that the combination of negatively worded instructions (“Be  
8 careful not to hit...”) and induced anxiety (participants threw their darts whilst positioned  
9 high on a climbing wall) significantly increased the proportion of darts landing in the  
10 specifically to-be-avoided zone when compared to negatively worded instructions under  
11 conditions of low-anxiety (participants threw their darts whilst positioned at a low-level on a  
12 climbing wall). However, manipulating height-off-the-ground is clearly not an ecologically  
13 valid stressor in a dart-throwing task. Interestingly, other studies have failed to demonstrate  
14 effects consistent with Wegner’s postulate. Indeed, across two studies, using a golf putting  
15 task, de la Peña, Murray and Janelle (2008) revealed findings that were seemingly counter to  
16 Wegner’s theory. Specifically, when instructed ‘not to putt long’ or ‘not to putt short’  
17 participants compensated by putting significantly *shorter* or *longer* respectively. To explain  
18 their results, which are in direct contrast to the prediction from Wegner’s theory, de la Peña et  
19 al. (2008) proposed the *implicit overcompensation* hypothesis (see also Russell & Greal, 2010;  
20 Toner, Moran, & Jackson, 2013). de la Peña et al. (2008) argued that the negatively  
21 worded self-instruction “don’t putt it short” subconsciously exaggerates the negative  
22 connotation (i.e., “leaving the putt short is a failure”) thus activating an overriding *implicit*  
23 counter message (i.e., “to avoid failure, it is better to err on the side of putting too long”).  
24 This implicit counter message generates an implicit command that guides movement  
25 execution under the notion that, in this example, it is better to overshoot the hole.

1           Researchers have suggested that such equivocal results regarding the incidence, or  
2 not, of ironic performance effects may be attributed to a failure to manipulate anxiety (e.g.,  
3 de la Peña et al., 2008; Woodman et al., 2015). Additionally, a failure to differentiate clearly  
4 between ironic and non-ironic error (e.g., Dugdale & Eklund, 2002; Wegner, Ansfield &  
5 Pilloff, 1998) has hampered the research examining ironic processes in performance settings:  
6 a limitation that has only recently been addressed by Woodman et al. (2015).

7           It is also worth considering factors beyond methodological limitations that may lead  
8 to such equivocal findings. Indeed, a growing body of evidence indicates that under specific  
9 environmental conditions (e.g., anxiety), personality may exert differential effects on  
10 performance (see Roberts & Woodman, 2015). Thus, it is a theoretical shortcoming that  
11 previous research in this area has failed to consider personality as a potential moderating  
12 factor on the incidence of ironic performance errors. Since Wegner proposes that ironic errors  
13 occur when cognitive load occupies the critical mental capacity required to maintain the  
14 salience of the operating process, examining personality traits that are associated with  
15 elevated cognitive load is theoretically the most natural starting point for this line of  
16 investigation.

17           In this regard neuroticism is a personality trait that is worthy of research attention  
18 regarding its potential moderating role in the incidence of ironic performance errors (cf.  
19 Roberts & Woodman, 2015; Woodman et al., 2015). Neuroticism is a broad dimension of  
20 personality – appearing in both the Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 1987) and Giant 3 (Eysenck  
21 & Eysenck, 1985) – characterized by the tendency to experience negative, distressing  
22 emotions (Costa & McCrae, 1987), anxiety (Watson & Clark, 1984), and a lack of emotional  
23 stability (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). Research suggests that neurotic individuals experience  
24 stress and anxiety more frequently (Bolger & Schilling, 1991), demonstrate greater sensitivity  
25 to criticism and negative stimuli (O’Sullivan, Zuckerman, & Kraft, 1998; Tellegen, 1985),

1 have lower self-confidence (Bandura, 1977), and have larger negative reactions to anxiety  
2 (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Ormel & Wohlfarth, 1991). Indeed, research has shown  
3 neuroticism to be an undesirable trait in relation to successful performance in sport (Davis &  
4 Mogk, 1994; Silva, Shultz, Haslam, Martin, & Murray, 1985).

5         The neurotic individual's emotional experience in everyday life is such that cognitive  
6 space is consumed by generalized worries and concerns (cf. John & Srivastava, 1999). The  
7 chronic negative affective state of the neurotic may itself act as a mental load, soaking up  
8 some of the mental resources necessary to maintain mental control (cf. Dalgleish et al., 2009).  
9 Despite this, under normative conditions – that is with no additional load of anxiety – we  
10 argue that the neurotic individual will have sufficient cognitive space for the operating  
11 process to work effectively. However, under anxiety-provoking conditions – in which the  
12 neurotic individual's experience of distressing emotions is increased and less cognitive space  
13 remains for the operating process to operate effectively – the neurotic individual's monitoring  
14 process will become salient and ironically bring into consciousness the specifically to-be-  
15 avoided state. In contrast, the cognitive resources of the emotionally stable (i.e., low neurotic)  
16 individual are not consumed by generalized concerns and worries. Thus, in line with  
17 Wegner's postulate, we argue that even under conditions of high-anxiety, emotionally stable  
18 individuals will have the requisite cognitive resources to maintain the salience of the  
19 operating process. In this way, for emotionally stable individuals, the specifically to-be-  
20 avoided state will not be brought into consciousness.

21         Despite such a strong theoretical basis for examining potential personality moderators  
22 of ironic performance errors, only Woodman and Davis (2008) have to date taken up this  
23 mantle. Woodman and Davis (2008) explored individual anxiety coping styles as a moderator  
24 of ironic performance errors. They revealed that *repressors* were significantly more prone to  
25 suffer from ironic performance errors when compared to both low- and high-anxious *non-*



1 *repressors*. In line with the present theoretical rationale, Woodman and Davis (2008)  
2 concluded that the additional mental load that repressors experience by denying their anxiety  
3 undermines the operating process. The Woodman and Davis (2008) investigation provides  
4 promising initial evidence that the extent to which individuals invest (mental) effort in self-  
5 and emotion-regulation moderates their susceptibility to producing ironic performance errors  
6 when anxious. However, the Woodman and Davis (2008) investigation was limited by its  
7 lack of differentiation between *ironic* and *non-ironic* performance error (Woodman et al.,  
8 2015). Indeed, Woodman et al. (2015) noted that there are two main shortcomings of the  
9 previous limited research on ironic performance error: (1) the failure to differentiate *ironic*  
10 and *non-ironic* error; and (2) a reliance on working memory tasks (as opposed to anxiety) to  
11 increase cognitive load. Consequently, in the present studies we clearly differentiate *ironic*  
12 and *non-ironic* performance error and we induce mental load by manipulating anxiety via an  
13 ecologically valid performance stressor. Specifically, we aim to manipulate anxiety using a  
14 performance-contingent financial reward (i.e., the opportunity to gain a financial reward as  
15 recompense for performance accomplishments), a method which has been successfully  
16 implemented in previous research (e.g., Bell & Hardy, 2009; Woodman & Davis, 2008;  
17 Woodman et al., 2015; Wright, Killebrew, & Pimpalpure, 2002). Furthermore, and of  
18 primary importance, we provide the first examination of neuroticism as a moderator of both  
19 the *occurrence* (Study 1 and Study 2) and *precision* (Study 2) of ironic error within a  
20 performance domain.

### 21 **Study 1**

22 In the present study we aimed to extend Wegner's theory by providing the first test of  
23 neuroticism as a moderator of ironic performance error. Bakker, Oudejans, Binsch and Van  
24 der Kamp (2006) and Binsch, Oudejans, Bakker, Hoozemans and Savelsbergh (2010)  
25 successfully used a football penalty shooting task – which given their experimental design

1 was by necessity laboratory based – to examine the influence of *final target fixation* on ironic  
2 performance error. In the present study, with the aim of increasing ecological validity, we  
3 employed a football penalty shooting task that has three major differences to the penalty  
4 shooting task employed in the Bakker et al. (2006) and Binsch et al. (2010) studies.  
5 Specifically, we used a regulation size 5 FIFA approved football (as opposed to a size 4 foam  
6 ball), a standard football goal located outside (as opposed to a screen with a projected image  
7 of a football goal located in a laboratory), and a standard 11m penalty kick (as opposed to  
8 penalty kicks from 2.48m and 2.83m, respectively). In line with Wegner’s theory, we  
9 hypothesized that neurotics would demonstrate significantly greater increases in *ironic*  
10 performance error, and decreases in *target* hits, from low-anxiety to high-anxiety conditions  
11 than their comparatively emotionally stable counterparts. Importantly, in terms of providing  
12 specific support for the theory of ironic processes, neuroticism should not moderate  
13 significantly the incidence of *non-ironic* error across anxiety conditions.

#### 14 **Method**

15 **Participants.** Before a university team-training session, we approached experienced  
16 male football players and invited them to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria were  
17 that participants represent one of the top three squads at the university and trained and/or  
18 played in a match at least once per week throughout the competitive season. The final sample  
19 comprised 67 male university football players ( $M_{age} = 20.55$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ).

#### 20 **Measures**

21 **Anxiety.** We measured anxiety using the Mental Readiness Form-3 (MRF-3; Krane,  
22 1994). The MRF-3, which comprises three single-item factors, requires participants to  
23 express how they feel *right now* by placing a mark on three separate 10cm visual-analog  
24 scales. From left to right the scales are anchored: *worried – not worried* (cognitive anxiety);  
25 *tense – not tense* (somatic anxiety); and *confident – not confident* (self-confidence). Thus,

1 high scores represent low cognitive anxiety, low somatic anxiety and low self-confidence.  
2 We preferred the MRF-3 to the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2; Martens,  
3 Burton, Vealey, Bump, & Smith, 1990) because it is more expedient and less intrusive to  
4 administer. As such, we were able to deliver the experimental instructions and measure the  
5 participant's anxiety in close temporal proximity. Additionally, given that the present  
6 research revolves around the experience of *anxiety*, we preferred the use of the word  
7 "*worried*" in the MRF-3 which better captures the experience of anxiety compared to the use  
8 of the more ambiguous term "*concern*" in the CSAI-2 (see also Woodman & Hardy, 2001).  
9 The MRF-3 has been used in previous studies to assess anxiety in competitive settings (e.g.,  
10 Robazza, Bortoli, & Nougier, 2000; Woodman & Davis, 2008) and is significantly correlated  
11 with the CSAI-2 (Krane, 1994): .58 (*cognitive anxiety*), .59 (*somatic anxiety*), and .77 (*self-*  
12 *confidence*).

13 **Neuroticism.** The 50-item International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999)  
14 measures emotional stability, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and  
15 conscientiousness. We used the 10-item emotional stability factor (e.g., *I get upset easily*) as  
16 a measure of neuroticism on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *very inaccurate*; 5 = *very*  
17 *accurate*). High emotional stability scores reflect low neuroticism. This factor has been  
18 shown to have strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .86$ ; Goldberg, 1999; Gow, Whiteman, Pattie,  
19 & Deary, 2005).

20 **Performance.** We measured performance on a flat Astroturf surface using a  
21 regulation size 5 FIFA approved football, a standard football goal, and a standard 11m  
22 penalty kick (FIFA, 2013). A *target* zone was delimited by a rope that hung vertically from  
23 the football crossbar to the ground, 1m from the right-hand post. Both the *ironic* error zone  
24 (to the right of the target zone and delimited by a cone) and the *non-ironic* error zone (to the  
25 left of the target zone and delimited by a rope) were the same size as the target zone (i.e., 1

1 meter wide and 2.44 meters high; see Figure 1). Left-footed participants were given a  
2 mirrored set-up. Specifically, their *target* zone was marked one meter in from the left-hand  
3 post with the *ironic* error zone to the left of the target zone and *non-ironic* error zone to the  
4 right. We operationalized performance as the number of shots hit into each zone (ironic error  
5 zone, target zone, non-ironic error zone), which was recorded by a qualified Level 1 Football  
6 Association coach who stood directly behind the strike of the ball. The coach was male, aged  
7 25, and himself an experienced football player (University 1<sup>st</sup> team). Shots that did not clearly  
8 enter one of the three zones were retaken (0.5%).

9       **Procedure.** We first obtained institutional ethics approval for the study. On arrival at  
10 the test site, each participant reported their preferred kicking foot and completed the IPIP.  
11 The experimenter reminded each participant that the football-shooting task would comprise  
12 taking two sets of 20 penalty kicks. The experimenter then described the scoring system for  
13 the penalty-shooting task. Instructions regarding the location of the target and error zones  
14 were specific to whether the participant was right- or left-footed. Right-footed participants  
15 were told that they would score 10 points for hitting the *target* zone, zero points for hitting  
16 the left of the target zone (*non-ironic* error zone) and minus five points for hitting the right of  
17 the target zone (*ironic* error zone). The verbal instructions concluded with the priming  
18 phrase, “Try to hit the target zone. Be particularly careful not to hit the ball to the right of the  
19 post, as you will score minus five points each time you do.” We gave left-footed players  
20 mirrored instructions. Immediately before striking the first ball in the low-anxiety condition,  
21 we reminded participants of the instructional set and then completed the MRF-3 before we  
22 repeated the priming phrase to them. In the high-anxiety condition, we used the same  
23 procedure with one exception: Before completing the MRF-3, we informed participants of the  
24 performance-contingent financial reward. Specifically, we told participants that we would  
25 award £100 (approx. US\$155) to the participant with the highest performance score. In both

1 conditions, participants took 20 penalty kicks. We counter-balanced the order of presentation  
2 for the anxiety conditions across participants and we gave all participants a two-minute break  
3 between conditions.

4 **Analysis.** We used Judd, Kenny, and McClelland's (2001) regression procedure to  
5 test within-subjects moderation. Specifically, we examined the potential moderating effects  
6 of *neuroticism* ( $N$ ) on *performance* – performance was operationalized as the total number of  
7 shots hit into the (1) *ironic* error zone, (2) *target* zone and (3) *non-ironic* error zone – in a  
8 repeated measures (*high-anxiety* and *low-anxiety*) design. The advantage of employing the  
9 Judd et al. (2001) approach in the present studies is that this method is not bound by the  
10 large-sample assumptions underlying certain estimation procedures in multilevel modelling.  
11 Based on the Judd et al. (2001) methodology we first regressed low-anxiety performance ( $\hat{Y}_1$ )  
12 and high-anxiety performance ( $\hat{Y}_2$ ) on neuroticism (see Table 1). To examine neuroticism as a  
13 moderator we regressed the performance difference –  $Y_d$  (i.e.,  $Y_1 - Y_2$ ) – on neuroticism. The  
14 test of whether this slope differs from zero is equivalent to testing whether the slope for  
15 *neuroticism* in the high-anxiety condition (i.e., the  $Y_2$  equation) differs from the slope for  
16 *neuroticism* in the low-anxiety condition (i.e., the  $Y_1$  equation). A significant *neuroticism*  $\times$   
17 *performance* interaction is evidence of a significant moderation effect (see Judd et al., 2001).

## 18 **Results**

19 **Anxiety manipulation.** Paired samples  $t$ -tests on the MRF-3 data confirmed that the  
20 anxiety manipulation was successful. Specifically, participants' cognitive anxiety was higher  
21 in the high-anxiety condition ( $M = 7.30$ ,  $SD = 2.19$ ) compared to the low-anxiety  
22 condition ( $M = 9.07$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ;  $t(66) = 6.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Somatic anxiety was higher in the  
23 high-anxiety condition ( $M = 7.33$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ) compared to low-anxiety condition ( $M = 8.69$ ,  
24  $SD = 2.05$ ;  $t(66) = 4.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Self-confidence was significantly lower in the high-

1 anxiety condition ( $M = 5.25$ ,  $SD = 2.49$ ) compared to low-anxiety condition ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD =$   
2  $2.09$ ;  $t(66) = 5.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

3 **Performance.** The results provide support for the hypothesis that neuroticism  
4 moderates the incidence of both *ironic* performance error and *target* hits across anxiety  
5 conditions. Importantly, *non-ironic* error was unaffected (see Table 1 and Figure 2).  
6 Specifically, neurotics demonstrated significantly greater increases in *ironic* performance  
7 error, and decreases in *target* hits, from low-anxiety to high-anxiety conditions than their  
8 comparatively emotionally stable counterparts.

### 9 **Discussion**

10 Study 1 provides the first evidence that neuroticism moderates the incidence of  
11 anxiety-induced ironic performance errors. As hypothesized, neurotics experienced greater  
12 increases in *ironic* performance error and greater decreases in *target* hits, from low-anxiety to  
13 high-anxiety conditions, than their comparatively emotionally stable counterparts.  
14 Importantly, neuroticism did not moderate the incidence of *non-ironic* error. That is, it was  
15 specifically neurotics' incidence of *ironic* error rather than their generic error that was  
16 affected by anxiety.

17 Using a 'real-world' penalty shooting task is an improvement in ecological validity  
18 compared to previous laboratory-based penalty-shooting tasks (e.g., Bakker, et al., 2006;  
19 Binsch et al., 2010). However, the ecological validity of the task was limited in that the *non-*  
20 *ironic* error zone was operationalized within the goal itself (see Figure 1). Thus, although we  
21 classified shots entering the *non-ironic error zone* as an 'error' (i.e., failure to hit the *target*  
22 zone), shots that entered this zone in a 'real-world' football penalty could go past the  
23 goalkeeper into the goal. A more serious limitation is that the fixed location of the *non-ironic*  
24 error zone could have introduced a systematic performance bias. Specifically, for right-footed  
25 participants, the *non-ironic* error zone was consistently located to the left of the *target* zone,

1 and the *ironic* error zone was consistently located wide of the goal to the right (we used a  
2 mirrored set-up for left-footed participants). Thus, despite no theoretical or empirical  
3 evidence for the postulate that anxious footballers might systematically ‘slice’ penalty kicks  
4 to the outside of the goal (reflective of systematized error rather than ironic performance error  
5 *per se*), such a postulate cannot be dismissed. We address this limitation in Study 2.

## 6 **Study 2**

7 The reader will recall Bill, the PGA tour golfer who is also a worrier. Bill hit his golf  
8 ball into the lake when playing his tee shot at the final hole. He did the very thing he was  
9 specifically trying to avoid doing. But Bill’s tee shot was not just a marginal error (i.e., the  
10 golf ball didn’t only just miss the fairway and roll slowly into the very edge of the lake).  
11 Rather, Bill hooked his tee shot high, wide, and into the very middle of the lake. Bill’s shot  
12 was *precisely* ironic. In a performance setting, such precision is laudable and sought after, if  
13 only it were not specifically counter-intentional. However, researchers have typically  
14 dichotomized the incidence of ironic errors rather than investigating the specific precision of  
15 any ironic errors.

16 The aim of Study 2 was threefold: First, we aimed to replicate the moderating role of  
17 neuroticism on the incidence of *ironic* performance error, as revealed in Study 1, using a  
18 different task. The hypothesis remained unchanged. That is, neurotics will demonstrate  
19 significantly greater increases in ironic performance error, and decreases in target hits, from  
20 low-anxiety to high-anxiety conditions than their comparatively emotionally stable  
21 counterparts. Again, we hypothesized that non-ironic error would not significantly change  
22 across anxiety conditions.

23 Second, we aimed to examine the *precision* of irony in ironic performance errors (see  
24 Woodman et al., 2015) as moderated by neuroticism. That is, we aimed to examine whether  
25 neurotic individuals’ ironic errors are more *precisely* ironic when anxious compared to

1 emotionally stable individuals' errors. As argued previously, maintaining emotion regulation  
2 in daily-life consumes more of the neurotic individuals' cognitive resources compared to their  
3 emotionally stable counterparts. Thus, for the neurotic individual, conditions of elevated  
4 mental load – such as high-anxiety – occupy the critical mental capacity required to maintain  
5 the salience of the *operating* process. Since a salient *monitoring* process increases an  
6 individual's conscious awareness of the specifically to-be-avoided state, we argue that under  
7 conditions of high-anxiety neurotics will *more precisely* do the very thing they are trying not  
8 to do. Thus, we hypothesize that under conditions of high-anxiety neurotics' ironic error zone  
9 hits will be *farther* away from the *target* zone and *more precisely* within the *ironic* error zone  
10 compared to emotionally stable individuals.

11 Third, we introduced three methodological modifications to improve the methodology  
12 used in Study 1: (a) We included an additional stressor – social evaluation – to enhance the  
13 ecological validity of inducing mental load in a competitive sporting environment. Previous  
14 research has utilized social evaluation to successfully manipulate anxiety (Bell & Hardy,  
15 2009; Hardy et al., 1996; Woodman et al., 2015; Woodman, Roberts, Hardy, Callow &  
16 Rogers, 2011); (b) We included an indicator of participants' physiological arousal with the  
17 aim of deriving a more reliable measure of anxiety change across conditions; (c) To dismiss  
18 the postulate that Study 1 results can be attributed to systematic performance bias (as a  
19 consequence of the ironic error zone being in a consistent direction relative to the target), we  
20 varied the location of the ironic error zone across participants.

## 21 **Method**

22 **Participants.** We used poster adverts to recruit 73 participants (45 men, 28 women;  
23  $M_{\text{age}} = 22.82$ ,  $SD = 4.07$ ; 71 right-handed, 2 left-handed) who had played darts fewer than 10  
24 times.

25 **Measures.**



1           **Anxiety.** We administered the MRF-3 (Krane, 1994), as described in Study 1, to  
2 measure *cognitive anxiety*, *somatic anxiety* and *self-confidence*. Additionally, we measured  
3 *physiological arousal* by recording *heart rate (HR)* and *heart rate variability (HRV)* using  
4 the Polar RS800CX heart rate monitor (Quintana, Heathers & Kemp, 2012). We analyzed  
5 individuals' HR and HRV data from the final three minutes of their engagement in both the  
6 high-anxiety and low-anxiety conditions. Researchers have previously used HR and HRV as  
7 a successful indicator of participants' physiological response to anxiety (e.g., Cervantes,  
8 Rodas, & Capdevila, 2009; Laborde, Brull, Weber, & Anders, 2011; Mateo, Lafarga,  
9 Navarro, Guzman & Zabala, 2012; Murray & Raedeke, 2008).

10           **Neuroticism.** The 10-item Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10; Rammstedt & John, 2007)  
11 measures extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness on a  
12 five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). We used the neuroticism  
13 factor, which comprises two items: *I see myself as someone who is relaxed, handles stress*  
14 *well* (reverse-scored item); *I see myself as someone who gets nervous easily*. This factor has  
15 been shown to have strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .88$ ; Denissen, Geenen, Selfhout, & van  
16 Aken, 2008) and Rammstedt & John (2007) revealed it has both good test-retest reliability  
17 (.75) and correlates well with the eight-item BFI-44 (John & Srivastava, 1999) neuroticism  
18 factor (.86).

19           **Performance.** We measured dart-throwing performance using a regulation dartboard  
20 and darts. We positioned the center of the dartboard 1.73m from the floor and 2.37m  
21 horizontally from the Oche (throwing line). Following removal of the standard wireframe, we  
22 placed a paper coversheet that matched the dimensions of the dartboard over the dartboard  
23 (see Figure 3). On the dartboard cover sheet we marked in black a central circle – the *target*  
24 zone – which measured 6cm in diameter. Participants scored nine points for hitting the *target*  
25 zone. Darts landing in the next concentric circle scored eight points. Darts landing in the next

1 concentric circle scored seven points. The scoring system continued in the same manner to  
2 the outermost concentric circle, which scored one point. All concentric circles were 2.1cm  
3 wide, except the outermost one, which was 3.9cm wide to accommodate the cover sheet to  
4 the edge of the dartboard.

5         A single quadrant (e.g., top-right quadrant of the dartboard excluding the area of the  
6 *target* zone that fell within the quadrant) was operationalized as the *ironic* error zone. We  
7 informed participants that they would score zero points for any darts landing within this zone.  
8 We designated the *ironic* error zone as the top-right quadrant for the first participant. We then  
9 rotated clockwise the location of the *ironic* error zone by one quadrant for each subsequent  
10 participant. Thus, for the second participant the *ironic* error zone was the bottom right  
11 quadrant. Each time, we conceptualized the quadrant opposite the *ironic* error zone as the  
12 *non-ironic* error zone but we did not mention this to the participants. Hits in the *non-ironic*  
13 error zone scored between one and eight points dependent on the proximity to the *target*  
14 zone. An observer recorded the zone hit for each dart. Darts that missed the dart board  
15 entirely were retaken (0.3%).

16         **Procedure.** Using a standardized instructional set, the experimenter informed each  
17 participant that the task – as approved by the university ethics committee – would comprise  
18 two sets of 24 dart throws and described the scoring system for the dart-throwing task.  
19 Participants completed an informed consent form with additional demographic data (age, sex,  
20 and experience) and wore a heart rate chest strap transmitter. Before the task, we conducted a  
21 warm up that consisted of 15 practice throws, the scores of which were not recorded. These  
22 15 shots primarily served as a warm-up rather than as a meaningful task familiarization; that  
23 is, despite all participants being inexperienced darts players, we did not consider the task to  
24 be a difficult one with which to familiarize oneself.

1           Our pilot testing revealed that (similarly inexperienced) participants who initially  
2 performed in the high-anxiety condition often remained highly anxious, even after a two-  
3 minute break, when subsequently participating under conditions of supposed low-anxiety. As  
4 such, to minimize any anxiety carryover effect, we fixed the order of the presentation of  
5 anxiety conditions for all participants as low-anxiety first and high-anxiety second (cf. Hardy  
6 & Hutchinson, 2007). Thus, the task required each participant to perform 24 throws in the  
7 low-anxiety condition, followed by a two-minute break, and 24 throws in the high-anxiety  
8 condition. Each participant completed the dart-throwing task individually.

9           Immediately before the first dart throw, in the low-anxiety condition, we repeated the  
10 instructional set to the participants who then completed the MRF-3. These verbal instructions  
11 concluded with the priming phrase, “Please try to hit the target zone, or as close to the target  
12 zone as possible, in order to gain maximal points, but be particularly careful not to hit the top  
13 right quarter<sup>1</sup> of the dart board, as you will score zero points each time you do so.” We used  
14 the same procedure in the high-anxiety condition with one exception: Before completing the  
15 MRF-3, we informed participants that, for one week, we would display all scores publically  
16 on a television screen located in a busy indoor thoroughfare of the university. Additionally,  
17 we informed each participant that the highest scoring participant would receive £50 (approx.  
18 US\$80).

## 19 **Results**

20           **Anxiety manipulation.** Both physiological arousal and self-report anxiety measures  
21 confirmed the anxiety manipulation. Specifically, paired samples *t*-tests on the MRF-3 data  
22 revealed that participants’ cognitive anxiety was higher in the high-anxiety condition ( $M =$   
23  $6.37, SD = 2.86$ ) compared to the low-anxiety condition ( $M = 8.10, SD = 2.48; t(72) = 6.03, p$

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<sup>1</sup> The priming phrase was modified to reflect the changing position of the ironic error zone between participants: (a) bottom right quarter (b) bottom left quarter (c) top left quarter.

1 < .001). Somatic anxiety was higher in the high-anxiety condition ( $M = 6.09$ ,  $SD = 2.57$ )  
2 compared to low-anxiety condition ( $M = 7.63$ ,  $SD = 2.60$ ;  $t(72) = 4.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Self-  
3 confidence was significantly lower in the high-anxiety condition ( $M = 6.17$ ,  $SD = 2.22$ )  
4 compared to low-anxiety condition ( $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ;  $t(72) = 2.94$ ,  $p = .004$ ).  
5 Additionally, participants' HR was significantly higher in the high-anxiety condition ( $M =$   
6  $96.03$ ,  $SD = 14.20$ ) compared to low-anxiety condition ( $M = 85.83$ ,  $SD = 12.72$ ;  $t(72) = 9.42$ ,  
7  $p < .001$ ). We examined HRV using both standard deviation of R wave intervals (SDNN) and  
8 root mean square of successive R-R intervals (r-MSSD), where low values (i.e., low HRV)  
9 represent a high stress response. Specifically, SDNN was significantly lower in the high-  
10 anxiety condition ( $M = 64.34$ ,  $SD = 17.69$ ) compared to the low-anxiety condition ( $M =$   
11  $75.34$ ,  $SD = 18.93$ ;  $t(72) = 6.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and r-MSSD was significantly lower in the high  
12 anxiety condition ( $M = 35.05$ ,  $SD = 15.27$ ) compared to the low-anxiety condition ( $M =$   
13  $40.63$ ,  $SD = 15.48$ ;  $t(72) = 4.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

14 **Performance.** As in Study 1, we applied the Judd et al. (2001) within-subjects  
15 regression procedure to examine the potential moderating effect of neuroticism on  
16 performance. Results again provide support for the hypothesis that neuroticism moderates  
17 significantly the incidence of both *ironic* performance error and *target* hits – but not *non-*  
18 *ironic* error – across anxiety conditions (see Table 1 and Figure 2). Specifically, as in Study  
19 1, neurotics demonstrated significantly greater increases in *ironic* performance error, and  
20 decreases in *target* hits, from low-anxiety to high-anxiety conditions than their comparatively  
21 emotionally stable counterparts.

22 **How precisely ironic are ironic errors?** Woodman et al. (2015) conceptualized the  
23 *precision of irony*, for *ironic* error zone hits, via two measures of irony. We adopted their  
24 approach to test the hypothesis that neurotic participants would perform in a more precisely  
25 ironic fashion when anxious compared to their emotionally stable counterparts. Specifically,

1 we took each participant's mean *radial error* within the ironic zone as the measure of the  
2 *distance from the target zone*. Second, we took each participant's mean *arc-length* within the  
3 ironic zone (from the closest non-ironic zone) as the measure of the *distance into the ironic*  
4 *zone* (see Figure 4). Results provide support for the hypothesis that across anxiety conditions  
5 neuroticism moderates significantly how precisely ironic participants' ironic performance  
6 errors are (see Table 1). Specifically, neurotics demonstrated significantly greater increases in  
7 both mean *arc-length* and mean *radial error* (of their *ironic* error zone hits) from low-anxiety  
8 to high-anxiety conditions than their comparatively emotionally stable counterparts<sup>2</sup>.

## 9 **Discussion**

10 Results support the Study 1 findings that neuroticism moderates significantly the  
11 incidence of ironic performance error when anxious. This replication is important since,  
12 unlike in Study 1, in the present study we varied the location of the *ironic* and *non-ironic*  
13 error zones across participants. As such, we demonstrated that the results cannot be attributed  
14 to generalized performance breakdown under conditions of high-anxiety, but rather represent  
15 a precisely ironic performance decline.

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<sup>2</sup> We have focused on the incidence of ironic effects across both studies and have revealed a greater incidence of ironic error (and not of generic, non-ironic, error) from low- to high-anxiety for individuals higher in neuroticism. When testing for anxiety-induced ironic effects, other researchers (e.g., de la Peña et al., 2008) have revealed *overcompensation* effects (albeit not investigating neuroticism as a moderator). As such, to explore the potential incidence of *overcompensation*, we ran paired samples *t*-tests examining changes in *non-ironic* error from low-anxiety to high-anxiety conditions. In Study 1, there was no significant increase in the incidence of *non-ironic* error from low-anxiety ( $M = 4.72, SD = 2.27$ ) to high-anxiety ( $M = 4.51, SD = 2.32$ ) conditions,  $t(66) = .84, p = .40$ . Similarly, in Study 2, there was no significant increase in the incidence of *non-ironic* error from low-anxiety ( $M = 7.30, SD = 2.93$ ) to high-anxiety ( $M = 7.58, SD = 2.55$ ) conditions,  $t(72) = .98, p = .33$ .



1           The neurotic individual's life is characterized by the experience of more frequent  
2    distressing emotions, and more elevated negative reactions to such emotions, compared to  
3    their emotionally stable (low neurotic) counterparts (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). As such,  
4    self- and emotion-regulation processes demand more cognitive resources for the neurotic  
5    individual when compared to the emotionally stable individual even under normative  
6    conditions of supposed low-anxiety (Gross, 2007). Consuming critical cognitive space with  
7    more general self- and emotional-regulation processes leaves the neurotic individual  
8    susceptible to overwhelming their cognitive capacity when additional processes – such as  
9    dealing with high-anxiety situations – tax their working memory. The present results support  
10   the theoretical position that, for neurotic individuals, the additional cognitive load of  
11   engaging in a high-anxiety sport-performance task is enough to tax cognitive resources to the  
12   degree that the *operating process* cannot work effectively. Consequently, the *monitoring*  
13   *process* becomes salient, which increases the likelihood of experiencing a precisely ironic  
14   performance breakdown under pressure (Wegner, 2009).

15           Interestingly, emotional stability was associated with fewer *ironic* errors and a greater  
16   number of *target* hits under conditions of high-anxiety compared to low-anxiety. In the  
17   context of ironic processes theory, in the low-anxiety condition – in lieu of either a perceived  
18   incentive and/or a significant stressor – emotionally stable individuals may have processed  
19   both relevant and irrelevant attentional cues (Eysenck et al., 2007; Weinberg & Gould, 2007)  
20   as a consequence of boredom (Brissett & Snow, 1993) or under-arousal (Hardy, 1990).  
21   Emotional stability is a strong predictor of positive interpretations of anxiety (e.g., challenge,  
22   excitement) and positive emotion (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Hills & Argyle, 2001). As such,  
23   emotionally stable individuals may use the stressor and/or the reward as a motivational tool to  
24   concentrate their attentional focus primarily on salient aspects of the performance task (Jones,  
25   Swain, & Hardy, 1993). In doing so, the emotionally stable performer is able to increase

1 effort and free-up any cognitive resources that had been consumed processing irrelevant cues  
2 (Eysenck et al., 2007). In other words, conditions of high-anxiety may afford the emotionally  
3 stable individual more cognitive resource, and thus increase the likelihood of the (operating  
4 and monitoring) control system working effectively.

5         The present results support the postulate that anxiety exerts differential effects on  
6 individuals' susceptibility to producing ironic performance errors (cf. Diener, Larsen, &  
7 Emmons, 1984; Woodman & Davis, 2008). The influence of personality and individual  
8 differences on the precise nature of performance breakdown when anxious has considerable  
9 applied implications for practitioners. For example, given that neuroticism can be reliably  
10 assessed via a two-item measure (Rammstedt & John, 2007) it is feasible to assess an  
11 athlete's neuroticism and (1) for coaches to individualize their own coaching behaviors  
12 accordingly or (2) for sporting systems to align athletes with a coach whose behaviors will  
13 most complement their neuroticism. For example, research suggests that during competitive  
14 scenarios cognitive load is increased for those athletes who perceive that their coach exhibits  
15 *negative activation* coaching behaviors; that is low emotional composure that increases the  
16 athlete's feelings of tension and worry (Williams et al., 2003). As argued previously, elevated  
17 cognitive load increases the likelihood of a (neurotic) individual's *monitoring* process  
18 becoming salient relative to their *operating* process, thus increasing the incidence of ironic  
19 performance errors. Furthermore, *negative activation* coaching behaviors increases athletes'  
20 *negative* self-talk (Zourbanos, Theodorakis & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2006). To continue with the  
21 golfing example from earlier, negative self-talk may comprise self-statements such as, "*Don't*  
22 *mess up here by hooking the golf ball into the lake*". In a competitive environment – that is,  
23 under conditions of relatively high-anxiety when the *monitoring* process is salient over the  
24 *operating* process – the neurotic athlete's internalized negative self-talk could ironically bring  
25 into consciousness the specifically to-be-avoided state (i.e., hitting the golf ball into the lake).



1 It is worth noting that *negative activation* coaching behaviors may not prove acutely  
2 detrimental to the neurotic individual's performance under conditions of low-anxiety (i.e.,  
3 during training). In other words, the athlete's *increased cognitive load* and increased *negative*  
4 *self-talk* that is associated with experiencing perceived *negative activation* coaching  
5 behaviors would not increase ironic performance errors if the neurotic individual has the  
6 cognitive capacity to accommodate such additional mental load (i.e., in a training  
7 environment). As such, a coach may not overtly witness any (ironic) performance breakdown  
8 that is directly caused by their *negative activation* coaching behaviors because the low-  
9 anxiety (training) environment does not directly result in ironic performance breakdown.  
10 Indeed, it is only when the individual transfers his/her negative activation to the high-anxiety  
11 environment (e.g., competition) that the likelihood of the ironic performance breakdown  
12 dramatically increases. This issue is further compounded by the majority of a coach's time  
13 being spent with an athlete when the athlete is not in anxiety-inducing environment. As such,  
14 the coach might understandably argue that his/her coaching techniques and feedback are  
15 effective. However, although the coach who employs *negative activation* behaviors with the  
16 neurotic athlete may produce exceptional performances in training (i.e., low-anxiety  
17 condition), they may fail to repeat such elevated performances in the 'heat of competition'  
18 (i.e., high-anxiety condition). Research would do well to examine the extent to which  
19 coaching behaviors such as *emotional composure* and *esteem support* provide a *buffer* from  
20 the effects of anxiety on ironic performance errors for neurotic individuals (see also Kenow  
21 & Williams, 1992).

22 Future research should examine the precise mechanisms that may underpin the  
23 neurotic's susceptibility to ironic performance error when anxious. Indeed, personality  
24 variables beyond the Big Five have considerable potential in moderating the incidence of  
25 ironic performance error and are worthy of research attention. Alexithymia is one such

1 personality trait that has been subject to little research attention in the competitive sport  
2 domain (Roberts & Woodman, 2015). Alexithymia is the difficulty in identifying emotions  
3 and an inability to express them (Taylor, Bagby & Parker, 1997). The alexithymic  
4 individual's difficulty in interpreting emotional signals frequently impedes their interpersonal  
5 relationships (Taylor et al., 1997). However, beyond the high-risk sport domain (e.g.,  
6 Woodman, Hardy, Barlow & Le Scanff, 2010), research to date has failed to consider any  
7 *functional* aspects of alexithymia (Roberts & Woodman, 2015). The alexithmic individual's  
8 somewhat 'blunted' emotional response may prove advantageous in the competitive sporting  
9 domain. Specifically, alexithymic individuals may not acknowledge the distinct and profuse  
10 intense emotions that are typically concomitant with the (high-anxiety) competitive  
11 performance environment: the very emotions that for most individuals – and neurotics in  
12 particular – increase cognitive load and the associated tax on cognitive resources.

13         In the present research we did not primarily aim to test directly de la Peña et al.'s  
14 (2008) *implicit overcompensation* hypothesis. However, in line with recommendations by  
15 Woodman et al. (2015), we clearly differentiated *ironic* and *non-ironic* performance error.  
16 The precise nature of this differentiation made possible an examination of *overcompensation*.  
17 Specifically, the *non-ironic* error zone was located on the opposite side of the *target* zone to  
18 the *ironic error* zone. Thus, evidence that participants hit more penalty kicks (Study 1) or  
19 threw more darts (Study 2) in the *non-ironic* error zone under conditions of high-anxiety  
20 (compared to low anxiety) would be evidence of *overcompensation*. No such difference was  
21 evident in either Study 1 or Study 2. Although there was no difference in *non-ironic* error  
22 between low- and high-anxiety conditions, the incidence of *non-ironic* error was consistently  
23 higher than the incidence of *ironic* error, regardless of anxiety condition, in both Study 1 and  
24 Study 2. In other words, although an individual is more likely to commit an *ironic* error when  
25 anxious (compared to when not anxious) an individual is also more likely to commit a *non-*

1 *ironic* error (compared to an *ironic* error) regardless of whether that individual is anxious or  
2 not.

3         In the present research a single observer adjudged whether penalty kicks (Study 1) or  
4 dart throws (Study 2) had entered one of the three zones (*ironic* error, *non-ironic* error, or  
5 target zones). He asked participants to retake the shot if the shot had missed all three zones.  
6 As such, we cannot dismiss the postulate that shots or darts not entering one of the three  
7 designated zones were evidence of ‘extreme’ *ironic* or compensatory *non-ironic* errors. This  
8 approach is a limitation that is mitigated only by the fact that  $\leq 0.5\%$  of shots/darts were  
9 unclassified (and were thus retaken). Nonetheless, given that ‘wild’ shots could reflect  
10 extreme cases of irony when least desired, research that is geared specifically to explore such  
11 incidences, rather than to dismiss them, would clearly advance our understanding of ironic  
12 processes of performance. Researchers would do well to grapple with specifically how one  
13 might conduct such an experiment. The single-source methodology is also a limitation of the  
14 present studies. First, by verbally informing each participant of the stressor (i.e., the financial  
15 reward and the social evaluation), the observer was not blind to the respective anxiety  
16 condition (high- or low-anxiety). Importantly, however, the observer was blind to the  
17 participants’ neuroticism scores. As such, even if one were to argue that the experimenter  
18 biased the results, such experimenter bias could not account for the observed three-way  
19 interaction. This robust interaction meaningfully mitigates any such concern.

20         The primary limitation of Study 1 was that the location of the *ironic* error zone  
21 remained consistent. Thus, we could not dismiss systematic performance bias as a potential  
22 explanation of the findings. In Study 2, we were able to dismiss this alternate explanation of  
23 the results by varying the location of both the *ironic* and *non-ironic* error zones across  
24 participants (see also Woodman et al., 2015). Additionally, one can be confident in the  
25 generalizability of the present findings because of the methodological differences between

- 1 Study 1 and Study 2, namely the performance tasks (football, darts) and the experience of
- 2 participants (expert and novice). In summary, the data across two studies provide new and
- 3 compelling evidence that neuroticism moderates both the *incidence* and the *precision of irony*
- 4 of ironic performance error when anxious.

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1 Table 1. Regression results based on the Judd et al. (2001) procedure for testing within-subjects moderation in Study 1 and Study 2.

	Study 1				Study 2			
	Mean (SD) hits	$b_0$	$b_1$	$t$	Mean (SD) hits	$b_0$	$b_1$	$t$
<i>Ironic performance error</i>								
Low-anxiety ( $\hat{Y}_1$ )	3.75 (2.11)	1.69	.06 <sup>a</sup>	1.38	2.16 (1.74)	3.58	-.21 <sup>a</sup>	2.32*
High-anxiety ( $\hat{Y}_2$ )	4.06 (2.08)	7.82	-.11 <sup>a</sup>	2.68**	3.58 (1.92)	1.43	.36 <sup>a</sup>	3.75***
$\hat{Y}_1 - \hat{Y}_2$ difference	.31 (2.53)	6.13 <sup>a</sup>	-.17 <sup>a</sup>	3.52**	1.42 (2.73)	-2.12	.56 <sup>a</sup>	4.25***
<i>Target hits</i>								
Low-anxiety ( $\hat{Y}_1$ )	11.12 (2.94)	15.73	-.14 <sup>a</sup>	2.29*	4.83 (2.81)	1.20	.56 <sup>a</sup>	4.09***
High-anxiety ( $\hat{Y}_2$ )	11.22 (2.88)	6.98	.12 <sup>a</sup>	2.15*	3.00 (2.63)	4.09	-.17 <sup>a</sup>	-1.19
$\hat{Y}_1 - \hat{Y}_2$ difference	.10 (2.97)	-8.75 <sup>a</sup>	.26 <sup>a</sup>	4.90***	-1.83 (2.94)	2.89 <sup>a</sup>	-.73 <sup>a</sup>	-5.43***
<i>Non-ironic error</i>								
Low-anxiety ( $\hat{Y}_1$ )	4.72 (2.27)	2.95	.05 <sup>a</sup>	1.10	7.30 (2.93)	7.39	-.01 <sup>a</sup>	.09
High-anxiety ( $\hat{Y}_2$ )	4.51 (2.32)	5.44	-.03 <sup>a</sup>	.57	7.58 (2.55)	6.88	.11 <sup>a</sup>	.79
$\hat{Y}_1 - \hat{Y}_2$ difference	-.21 (2.03)	2.49 <sup>a</sup>	-.08 <sup>a</sup>	1.92	.28 (2.50)	-.51 <sup>a</sup>	.12 <sup>a</sup>	.92
<i>Arc-length (cm)</i>								
Low-anxiety ( $\hat{Y}_1$ )	-	-	-	-	2.34 (1.82)	2.70	-.06	-.57
High-anxiety ( $\hat{Y}_2$ )	-	-	-	-	3.61 (1.69)	2.33	.19	2.11*
$\hat{Y}_1 - \hat{Y}_2$ difference	-	-	-	-	1.19 (2.17)	-.43	.25	2.08*
<i>Radial error (cm)</i>								
Low-anxiety ( $\hat{Y}_1$ )	-	-	-	-	6.68 (3.10)	7.84	-.19	-1.07
High-anxiety ( $\hat{Y}_2$ )	-	-	-	-	8.72 (2.75)	7.02	.26	1.71
$\hat{Y}_1 - \hat{Y}_2$ difference	-	-	-	-	1.86 (3.58)	-1.27	.49	2.47*

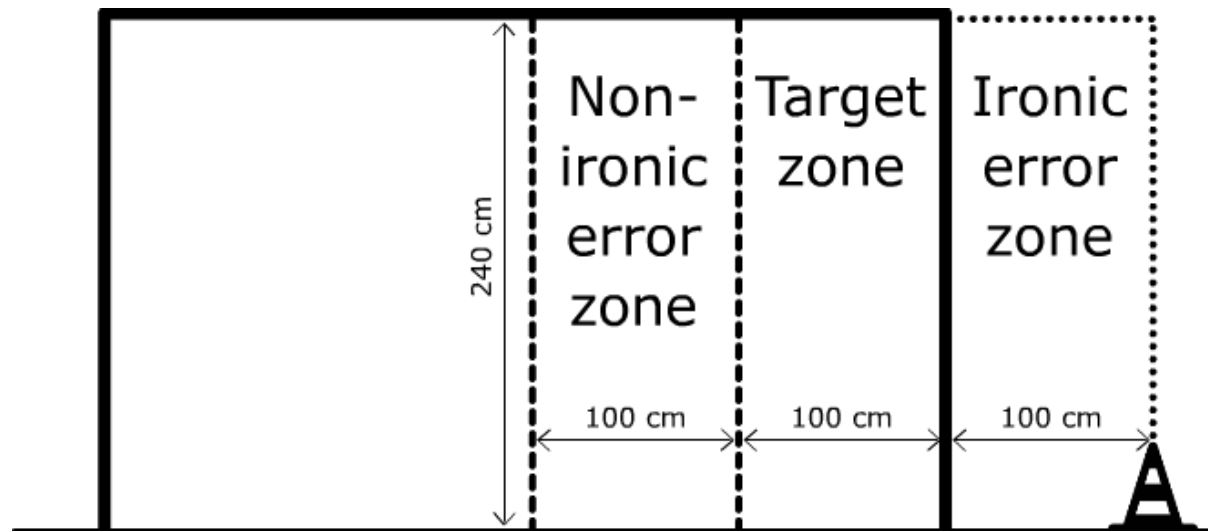
2  
3 Notes:  $b_0$  = Y intercept;  $b_1$  = Unstandardized beta coefficient; Based on the Judd et al. (2001) within-subjects moderation procedure, a significant  $\hat{Y}_1 - \hat{Y}_2$   
4 difference score is evidence that neuroticism is a significant moderator.

5 \*  $p < .05$ ,  
6 \*\*  $p < .01$ ,  
7 \*\*\*  $p < .001$

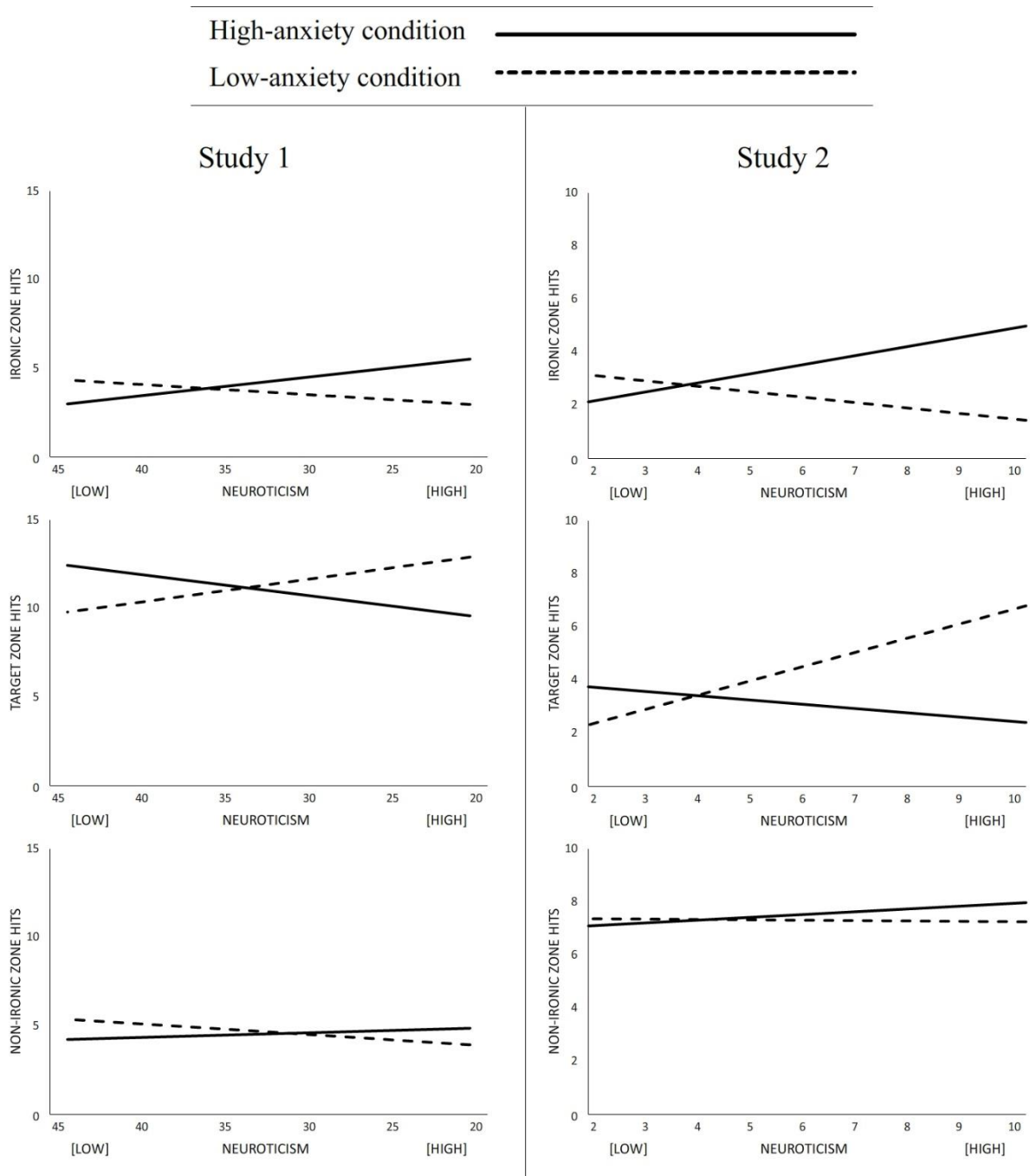
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9 <sup>a</sup> = The  $b_1$  values between Study 1 and Study 2 have opposite values because we assessed neuroticism using Goldberg's (1999) IPEP measure of emotional  
10 stability in Study 1 (high scores reflect low neuroticism) and we assessed neuroticism using Rammstedt and John's (2007) BFI-10 neuroticism factor in Study  
11 2 (high scores reflect high neuroticism).  
12

- 1 Figure 1. The *ironic error*, *target*, and *non-ironic error* zones for the football penalty-shooting  
2 task in Study 1.  
3 *Note:* The thick dashed line represents two ropes that delimited both the *target* and *non-ironic*  
4 *error* zones. The *ironic error* zone was delimited by a cone. A mirrored set-up was used for  
5 left-footed participants.

6



1 Figure 2. Regression slopes for performance (*ironic* error hits, *target* hits, *non-ironic* error  
 2 hits) regressed on neuroticism in Study 1 and Study 2 as presented in Table 1; a significant  
 3 neuroticism x anxiety interaction for ironic error hits and target hits (top two graphs) but not  
 4 for non-ironic error hits (bottom graph).  
 5



6  
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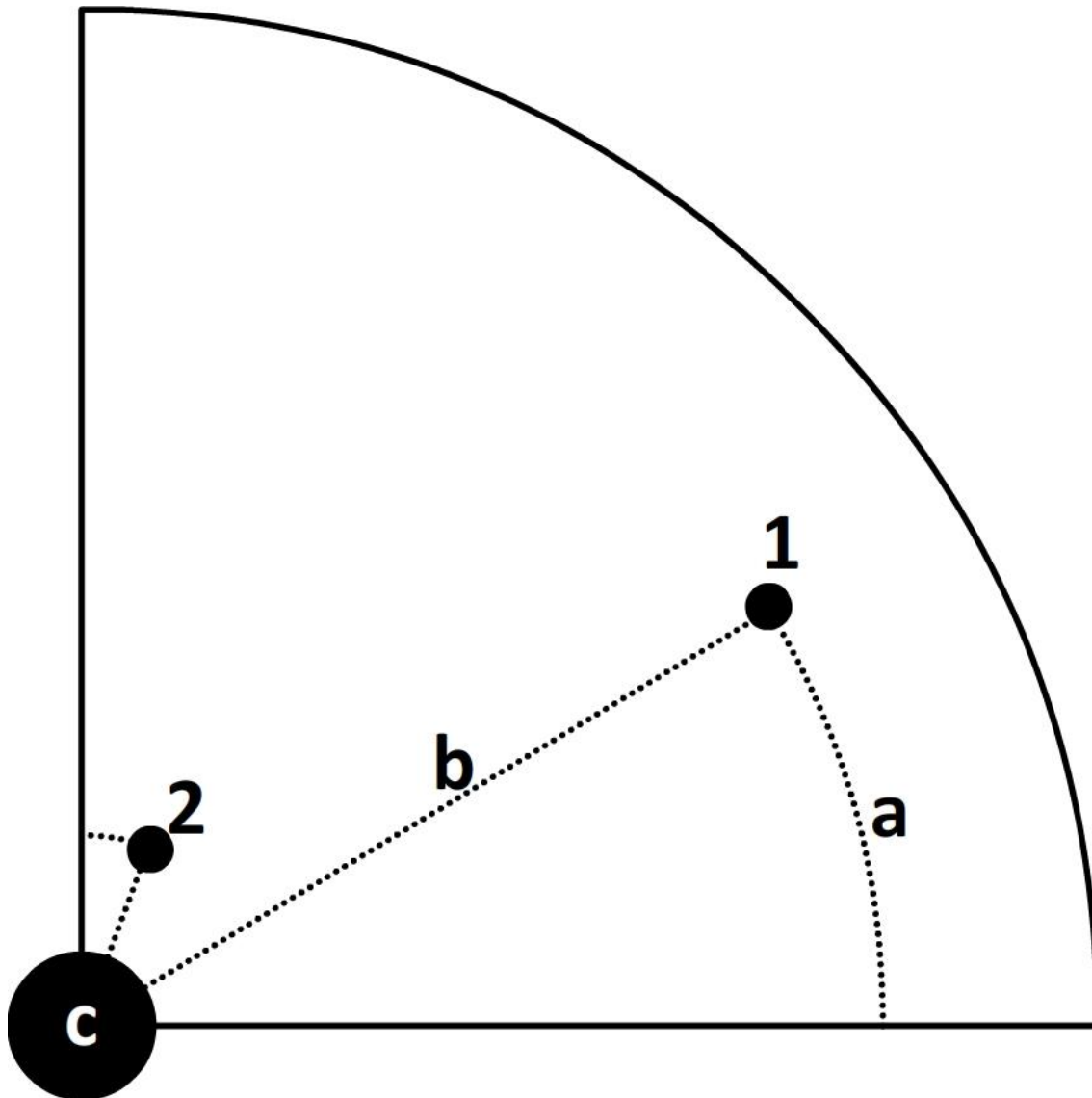
1 Figure 3. The dart throwing task target.  
2 *Note:* The dart board cover sheet indicates the available scores based on proximity of the dart  
3 to the central *target* zone, which was worth nine points. The designated *ironic* error zone was  
4 one of the four quadrants (e.g., top right quadrant) and was balanced across participants. We  
5 informed participants that hits landing in the designated *ironic* error zone would score zero  
6 points regardless of the proximity to the target zone. This figure is reproduced with  
7 permission of Woodman et al. (2015).

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1 Figure 4. The measurement of arc-length and radial error in the Study 2 dart throwing task.  
 2 *Note.* The quadrant represents the *ironic* error zone. The points that are labeled 1 and 2  
 3 represent two hypothetical dart strikes, which have landed within the ironic error zone. We  
 4 consider Dart 1 to be precisely more ironic than Dart 2 because it has both a greater *arc-*  
 5 *length* (a; the arc-length from the closest non-ironic error zone) and a greater *radial error* (b;  
 6 the radial distance from the target zone c). This figure is reproduced with permission of  
 7 Woodman et al. (2015).  
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### Highlights

- 13 • Across two studies we examined Wegner's theory of ironic processes of mental control
- 14 • We used ecologically valid performance tasks and ecologically valid performance stressors
- 15 • We provide the first evidence that neuroticism moderates ironic performance error
- 16 • Neuroticism moderates the *incidence* of ironic performance error when anxious
- 17 • Neuroticism moderates the *precision of irony* of ironic error when anxious
- 18
- 19