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Combating the Challenges of working as an Athletic Trainer in an Ego-Oriented Motivational Climate:  
Theory to Practice

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### **Abstract**

Achievement goal theory explains the underlying reasons for why people do what they do (Roberts & Papaioannou, 2014). At the heart of this theory are two goal orientations; task-orientation which describe individuals who view success as making improvements and giving high effort, while ego-oriented individuals view success by outperforming others (Duda & Treasure, 2015). In addition to having individual goal orientations, motivational climate is a construct within achievement goal theory that describes the environment created by authority figures, via their words and actions (Duda et al., 2014). The environment created is described as either being task- or ego-oriented. Previous research suggests that task-oriented motivational climates elicit more enjoyment, satisfaction, and interest in sport, while ego-oriented motivational climates are correlated with higher levels of anxiety, more avoidance or reduced effort in response to failure, decreased quality of friendships, more conflict within the team, and contingent self-worth (Baric & Bucik, 2009; Breiger, Cumming, Smith, & Smoll, 2015; Curran, Hill, Hall, & Jowett, 2015; Duda et al. 2014). The stress-injury model (Andersen & Williams, 1988) proposes that an athlete's personality, stress history, and coping resources influence the athlete's cognitive appraisal of the stressful situation and influence the risk of injury (Andersen & Williams, 1988). To reduce the risk of injury, athletic trainers (ATs) can help athletes to control stress through by teaching the athlete strategies to help cope with stress including deep breathing techniques and controlling negative thoughts. However, there are many challenges that arise for ATs that are working within ego-oriented motivational climates. It is important that the AT knows how to navigate the ego-oriented motivational climate in order to provide the best care for the athletes. The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical background of achievement goal theory and practical solutions for ATs to combat ego-oriented motivational climates that are created by the coaching staff. Suggestions to do so include teaching athletes to be assertive, using role play to prepare the athletes for difficult conversations, and weighing the pros and cons during decision making.

## **Combating the Challenges of working as an Athletic Trainer in an Ego-Oriented Motivational Climate: Theory to Practice**

Each year millions of athletes are injured participating in athletics. In 2012 alone, approximately 1.35 million youths had a sport related injury (Loehrke, 2012). The National Collegiate Athletic Association reported 41,000 injuries among football players from 2004 to 2009. Athletic trainers are the health care professionals who collaborate with physicians to provide preventative services, emergency care, clinical diagnosis, and therapeutic intervention for injuries and medical conditions for athletes (NATA, 2015). While caring for athletes, athletic trainers have to work within the motivational climate that the coaching staff has created; in particular, there are unique challenges associated with ego-oriented motivational climates. In these win-at-all-costs climates, athletes are often taught “no pain, no gain” and that one should be willing to sacrifice their body for the sake of a win (Waldron & Krane, 2005). In this paper I will provide a theoretical framework for considering the unique challenges athletic trainers might face while working with athletes who are in an ego-oriented team climate, and suggest strategies athletic trainers can use to combat the effects of a highly ego-oriented motivational climate.

### **Achievement Goal Theory and Motivational Climate**

The achievement goal theory (AGT) explains why people do what they do (Roberts & Papaioannou, 2014). AGT is grounded in the social-cognitive perspective which explains the interaction between the social environment and thought processes. People are motivated to develop and demonstrate competence and avoid demonstrating incompetence (Nicholls, 1989). At the heart of AGT are two central achievement goal orientations, task and ego, that govern thoughts about success and guide subsequent decisions and actions (Nicholls, 1989). Goal orientations refer to the thoughts and behaviors that are subject to change as feedback pertaining

to performance is processed (Roberts & Papaioannou, 2014). A task-oriented athlete is motivated to perform because he or she wants to gain mastery of a task. The athlete's main purposes are to gain skill, exhibit high effort, perform one's best, and experience personal improvement (Duda & Treasure, 2015). For these athletes, success is self-referenced and is achieved by attaining mastery of a skill or task. An ego-oriented athlete is motivated by outperforming others and perceives success when exceeding the performance of others with the same or less effort (Duda & Treasure, 2015).

AGT not only addresses what drives individuals to do what they do, but also applies to the team atmosphere, in the form of motivational climate, which impacts individual behavior (Roberts & Papaioannou, 2014). Motivational climate is the environment created by the authority figure(s) via what they typically do and say, and captures how they tend to provide feedback, evaluation, and organization (Duda et al., 2014). For example, the behaviors that are rewarded and the criteria used for being considered successful send powerful messages to athletes. In sport, the motivational climate is created by the coach. The motivational climate can encourage hard work, enjoyment, and skill development or it can induce anxiety, low effort, and low interest. In a task-oriented climate, emphasis is placed on giving high effort, learning values, growing personally, improving skills, and mastering tasks. In this type of motivational climate, the person of authority provides much instruction and encouragement (Duda et al., 2014). When the motivational climate is primarily ego-oriented, rivalry is encouraged, there is emphasis on being "*the*" best, the more talented athletes receive more attention, and mistakes are to be avoided at all cost (Duda et al., 2014). In these settings, athletes are punished for making mistakes and are considered successful when they perform better than their peers.

Previous research on task-oriented motivational climates suggests that individuals within the climate experience enjoyment, satisfaction, and interest in participating in sport (Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2006). Compared to ego-oriented motivational climates, task-oriented motivational climates are associated with lower levels of anxiety, higher levels of commitment, dedication to learning new skills, positive well-being, constructive peer relationships, positive attitudes towards the coach, lower levels of burnout symptoms, and performance improvements (e.g., Baric & Bucik, 2009; Breiger, Cumming, Smith, & Smoll, 2015; Curran, Hill, Hall, & Jowett, 2015; Duda et al. 2014). In addition, confidence, dedication, enthusiasm, and vigor are higher in task-oriented climates compared to ego-oriented climates (Curran, Hill, Hall, & Jowett, 2015). Research on ego-oriented climates reveals higher levels of anxiety and worry, more avoidance or reduced effort in response to failure, decreased quality of friendships, more conflict within the team, contingent self-worth, and increased levels of burnout and drop-out compared to task-oriented climates (Baric & Bucik, 2009; Duda et al., 2014; Reinboth & Duda, 2004).

### **Motivational Climate, Stress, and Injury**

Williams and Andersen's (1988) stress-injury model, suggests that when athletes are in acutely stressful athletic situations, their cognitive appraisal of that situation and the associated physiological and attentional disturbances influence the athletes' likelihood of sustaining an injury. The stress response can lead to negative thoughts, concerns about ability, and disrupted attention and concentration in addition to causing shortness of breath, increased heart rate, excessive sweating, and upset stomach (Monsma, 2008). As such, stress is a common precursor to injury because athletes can be easily distracted by their thoughts and the physiological responses (Appaneal & Habif, 2013; Monsma, 2008).

Research on motivational climate suggests that perceptions of an ego-oriented climate are related to high performance anxiety (Baric & Bucik, 2009; Duda et al., 2014; Reinboth & Duda, 2004), which is a common outcome of the stress response (REF). Positive correlations were found between ego-oriented climates and performance anxiety because of the increased pressure to outperform others (O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2011; Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007). Vazou, Ntoumanis, and Duda (2006) found that coach-created ego-oriented climates are associated with increased competitive trait anxiety in athletes as a product of the perception of being penalized for mistakes and inadequate ability. Abrahamsen and Pensgaard (2012) found lower perceptions of a task-oriented climate were related to increased worry in female handball athletes. Based on what is known about the relationship between ego-oriented motivational climates and anxiety, and stress and anxiety as potential precursors to injury, if the motivational climate of a team is predominantly ego-oriented, then athletes will be at greater risk of injury.

### **Theory-to-Practice**

When working with athletes in ego-oriented climates, what can the athletic trainer do to aid in injury prevention? In addition, if an athlete on a highly ego-oriented team sustains an injury, what can the athletic trainer do to combat the motivational climate of the team to create an optimal climate for the athlete to recover? The purpose of this section of the paper is to provide athletic trainers with intervention strategies to combat the effects of an ego-oriented motivational climate when athletes are in the athletic training room.

#### *Scenario 1: Reducing stress*

*You are an athletic trainer for a football team. The motivational climate that has been created by the coaching staff is highly ego-oriented - coaches place great pressure on the athletes, punish athletes for mistakes, publically humiliate athletes by yelling and making them*

*do a punishment alone, encourage winning at all costs, and create rivalry among teammates.*

*Some of the athletes have told you, while they were getting their ankles taped or during the water breaks, that they are no longer enjoying the sport, they hate being at practice, they are afraid of making mistakes, and they worry about having a poor performance because they do not want to be punished.*

In this case, the athletes are experiencing football as a stressor. According to the stress-injury model (Williams & Andersen, 1988), stress places athletes at greater risk for injury if they do not have the proper support or coping mechanisms in place. In this scenario, the athletic trainer can assist in injury prevention by teaching simple sport psychology strategies to help these athletes cope with the stress created by the team climate. The following are relatively simple strategies that can be taught when you only have a short time with athletes (e.g., while an ankle is being taped, when icing, during a water break).

Thought-stoppage can be taught to help athletes cope with negative thoughts associated with social comparison. This technique is used to help eliminate counter-productive thoughts (Williams, Zinsser, & Bunker, 2015). Ask the athlete what is bothering him, this likely will reveal his negative thoughts. Then instruct the athlete to stop the thought by saying STOP or clapping his hands once. Next, teach the athlete to change unproductive thoughts to productive thoughts. Be prepared to provide examples of thoughts that can counter the unproductive thoughts. For example, if an athlete tells you he is mad at the coach (because of harsh feedback), suggest that he refocus on his skills (e.g., ball security, stay low, be strong, etc.). Tell the athlete to use the following sequence: negative thought – STOP – be strong! Later you can remind the athlete that when he has an unproductive thought during practice or competition, immediately



counter it with the productive thought. Encourage the athlete to use this technique often so that it becomes a natural response.

The athletic trainer also can teach simple relaxation techniques. Concentration breathing can be a useful tool when an athlete is having distracting thoughts or becomes overwhelmed during a competition or practice (Hanton, Mellalieu, & Williams, 2015). This technique focuses attention onto the rhythm of breathing. If the mind begins to wander, refocus attention on the breathing rhythm. During a down time, encourage the athlete to take a deep breath whenever he or she becomes anxious during practice or games. The athletic trainer can also encourage athletes to take time before practices and games to focus on their breathing. If some other thought comes to mind during breathing, instruct the athlete to redirect his attention back to his breathing, letting the intruding thought disappear with each breath. Encourage the athlete to become more relaxed with each exhalation (Hanton, Mellalieu, & Williams, 2015). These are just two of many easy-to-teach skills that athletes can learn on the fly and put into practice quickly.

*Scenario 2: Teaching assertiveness*

*An athlete on the volleyball team sustains a grade 2 lateral ankle sprain and the team physician instructs the athlete to do rehabilitation with the athletic trainer and to return to play upon the clearance of the athletic trainer. When the athlete handed the coach the doctor's note, the coach told the athlete that he expects her playing in the next game, two days later. The coach tells the athlete that she doesn't need to do rehab; she just needs to get her ankle taped and put her ankle in the ice bath. After this conversation with her coach, the athlete came to the athletic training room to tell you what her coach just said regarding her rehabilitation.*

The most important thing for the athletic trainer to do in this scenario is to educate the athlete about the injury, the purpose of rehabilitation, and the dangers of returning to play too quickly. Not only does this legally protect the athletic trainer, but more importantly it provides the athlete with enough information to make an informed decision about what her coach is asking her to do. This education will lay the foundation for moving into another strategy that the athletic trainer can use: helping the athlete reframe the pressures of the coach. For example, pressuring the athlete to return early probably indicates that she is an important part of the team. Though, it is important to continue this conversation; understanding why the coach is pressuring the athlete can be helpful, but the athlete also needs to know what to do about the coach pressure.

The athletic trainer can teach the athlete to be assertive. Assertiveness training is the process of training individuals in being self-confident (Ivanovic & Collin, 2009). Through assertiveness training, athletes have the ability to express their thoughts and feelings in a productive way to the coaching staff (Krane & Greenleaf, 1999). Being assertive allows the athlete to voice her needs in a positive manner, stand up for herself, and express her feelings on the issue appropriately (Krane & Greenleaf, 1999). The athletic trainer can help the athlete develop the communication skills necessary to express her concern and do what is best for her. The athletic trainer should encourage the athlete to use the following strategies (Krane & Greenleaf, 1999) when communicating her concern to the coaching staff:

1. Use “I” statements to explain her position on the issue (“I am feeling pressured to play before I feel ready.”)
2. Ask why: be willing to get more information from the coach (Why do you think I should come back without doing rehabilitation?)
3. Express feelings, physically, mentally, and emotionally about returning too soon

#### 4. Maintain eye contact when communicating with coaches

Increasing assertiveness will take time. Because the athletic trainer is asking the athlete to engage in a potentially difficult and uncomfortable conversation with the coach, provide opportunities to prepare the athlete by role playing. During the role play, the athletic trainer acts as the coach and the athlete will approach him or her with the same intentions she would when she talks with his coach. For role play to be most effective, the athletic trainer needs to play the part of the coach well and provide responses similar to what he or she is expecting from the coach. This will allow the athlete to prepare responses and effectively communicate her feelings about the situation. When the athlete feels confident enough to have the conversation with the coach, the athletic trainer should be prepared to meet with the athlete and debrief shortly after the coach meeting. And, importantly, the athletic trainer must be willing to advocate for the athlete if the coach questions the athlete's decision.

#### *Scenario 3: Making the tough decisions*

*A senior on the boys' soccer team tore his anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and meniscus in his left knee, ending his season early. The athlete had surgery the following week and began rehabilitation immediately. He is doing really well in rehabilitation and is progressing more quickly than expected. He is hoping to be fully recovered and ready to play by next fall when he begins his college soccer career. With senior night coming up, the coach begins to pressure him to play a few minutes in his last home high school game ever. The athlete knows that he hasn't been cleared by his surgeon to return to play, but the athlete not only feels pressured to play, but wants to play.*

Similar to scenario two, the athletic trainer must educate the athlete about the dangers of returning to play before the ACL is completely healed. At this point, the athletic trainer and the

athlete should sit down and weigh the pros and cons of doing what the coach is asking. With plans for playing college soccer in less than a year, being healthy and fully recovered is very important to this athlete. The athletic trainer should work hard to ensure that the cons would outweigh the pros. The athletic trainer should reinforce the correct decision of not playing senior night, so that the athlete may gain confidence in knowing that he is doing the right thing for his overall well-being and his future. Once the athlete has enough information about the recovery process and the possible damage that can occur, and the athlete understands what the correct decision is, the athletic trainer can also brainstorm with the athlete about alternate ways to be involved in senior night. For example, the athlete still can be part of the pre-game or half-time recognition of the seniors. He also might want to consider developing other unique ways to celebrate the seniors (e.g. design “seniors” t-shirt, participate in senior recognition). Once the player knows what he wants to do, teach this athlete how to be assertive, as in the previous example. The athletic trainer can teach the athlete how to effectively communicate his desire to follow his rehabilitation protocol and then role play the conversation the athlete will have with his coach. Again, the athletic trainer must advocate for this athlete to ensure that his health and safety is the priority. If the coach is resistant and continues to pressure the athlete to play in his senior game, the athletic trainer can arrange a time for the coach, athlete, and himself or herself to meet and discuss the issue.

### **Conclusion**

Athletic trainers are in a unique position because of the daily contact they have with coaches and athletes and they are a primary source of care for athletes’ physical, mental, and emotional needs. In a team environment, the coaches are the authority figures who create the motivational climate. In most cases, the athletic trainer has very little say in how the team is

organized, how practices are run, and the motivational climate that is created. If the athletic trainer is working with a team that has a highly ego-oriented climate, she or he is faced with unique challenges. The athletic trainer must have knowledge about the effects of the motivational climate and be armed with strategies to counter its negative impact. While athletic trainers know what to do to aid athletes in injury prevention and rehabilitation, it also is important to recognize when athletes need support when coping with pressures from the coaching staff. The athletic trainer working within an ego-oriented motivational climate must be confident in his or her abilities as an athletic trainer, must be assertive when communicating with coaches on behalf of the athletes, and must advocate for the athletes' health and safety. Athletic trainers can play an important role when it comes to assisting athletes who are struggling in ego-oriented climates by teaching mental skills that will help athletes cope with stress and anxiety, gain confidence in their recovery protocol, and assertively discuss their rehabilitation needs with coaches. These actions also can reduce future injury and promote successful rehabilitations

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