

4-1-1995

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Jeffrey J. Martin

Wayne State University, aa3975@wayne.edu

Carol Adams Mushett

Georgia State University

Kari L. Smith

Wayne State University

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## Recommended Citation

Martin, J. J., Adams-Mushett, C., & Smith, K.L. (1995). Athletic identity and sport orientation of adolescent swimmers with disabilities. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, **12**(2), 113-123.

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## **Athletic Identity and Sport Orientation of Adolescent Swimmers With Disabilities**

**Jeffrey J. Martin**  
Wayne State University

**Carol Adams-Mushett**  
Georgia State University

**Kari L. Smith**  
Wayne State University

Measures of athletic identity and sport orientation, developed from self-schema theory, social role theory, and achievement motivation theory, were used to examine international adolescent swimmers with disabilities. The multidimensional Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) was used to assess self-identity, social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity. The Sport Orientation Questionnaire (Gill & Deeter, 1988) measured competitiveness, win orientation, and goal orientation. Swimmers reported (a) a strong self-identity, (b) a moderate to strong social identity, (c) negative affectivity with lower levels of exclusivity, (d) strong competitiveness and goal orientation, and (e) moderate win orientation. Self-identity was correlated with competitiveness, suggesting that swimmers did not simply report an identification with an athletic role; they also reported a strong desire to attain competitive goals. Additionally, exclusivity was associated with negative affectivity, indicating that athletes without diversified self-schemas may be at risk for emotional problems when unable to compete. In general, the results indicated that these swimmers possess a strong athletic identity and that sport is important to them.

Little is known about the psychological characteristics of adolescent athletes with disabilities, although recent research (Brasile & Hedrick, 1991; Brasile, Kleiber, & Harnisch, 1991; Sherrill, Hinson, Gench, Kennedy, & Low, 1990; White & Duda, 1993) has started to amass a body of knowledge associated with sport participation by adolescents with disabilities. Many reasons have been offered as to why athletes with disabilities have been underrepresented in sport psychology research (DePauw, 1988; Henschen, 1988; Ogilvie, 1985; Sachs, 1988; Sherrill, 1993a, 1993b; Wyeth, 1989). A common theme throughout these

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Jeffrey J. Martin and Kari L. Smith are with the Division of Health, Recreation, and Physical Education, 266 Matthaei Building, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202. Carol Adams-Mushett is with the Department of Kinesiology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA 30303.

writings suggests that many individuals do not consider athletes with disabilities as legitimate or real athletes. Lack of awareness and indifferent and negative attitudes toward sport opportunities for people with disabilities have limited not only research efforts but also funding and recruitment of coaches, sport psychologists, and athletes (Sherrill, 1986, 1993a; Wyeth, 1989).

Almost two-thirds of those with severe disabilities, such as individuals having cerebral palsy or using a wheelchair, are unemployed or underemployed (McNeil, 1993) and engage in significantly less social activity than nondisabled individuals (Wyeth, 1989). Thus, it has been suggested that sport represents a potentially important avenue for the development of positive psychological as well as physiological characteristics (McCann, 1986; Richter, 1989; Valliant, Bezzubik, Daley, & Asu, 1985; Wyeth, 1989). Sport participation is also viewed as an effective tool in combating discrimination as the nondisabled population has an opportunity to see the "abilities" of those with disabilities (Sherrill, 1986, 1993a). Although athletes with disabilities may benefit from sport participation as do nondisabled individuals, many barriers limit participation as well as interest and support of spectators (Sherrill, 1986). Given the value of sport to athletes with disabilities and the challenge to extend sport opportunities, research is needed to document the meaning and importance that sport holds for athletes with disabilities.

The current study sought to achieve this using two sport-specific measures derived from self-schema theory, social role theory, and achievement motivation theory. Our first goal was to examine the athletic identities of adolescent swimmers with disabilities. Based on social role theory, athletic identity is defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role and looks to others for acknowledgment of that role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). An individual with a strong athletic identity has a self-schema built upon being an athlete and processes information from an athletic perspective. For example, individuals with strong athletic identities, compared to nonathletes, should be more likely to think about how their nutritional and sleep habits affect performance. Exploration of the existence and salience of an athletic identity should indicate the degree to which athletes with disabilities identify with the athletic role, develop a self-concept based on their athletic identity, and provide evidence that they are indeed true athletes. According to previous work on nondisabled individuals (Brewer, Boin, & Petitpas, 1993; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993), individuals with strong athletic identities establish salient self-identities through the development of skills, confidence, and social interactions during sport (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Conversely, a strong and exclusive athletic identity may predispose athletes to emotional difficulties, such as depression, when they are unable to participate in sport.

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) was developed to assess athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Although preliminary research with a nonathletic population suggested that AIMS was unidimensional (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993), subsequent studies with nondisabled athletes indicated that the AIMS was multidimensional. Using factor analyses, Brewer, Boin, and Petitpas (1993) identified three factors: social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity. Social identity is the strength with which athletes identify with the athletic role. Exclusivity is the degree to which athletes rely solely on their athletic identity and identify less strongly with other roles such

as student, friend, or worker. Negative affectivity measures negative emotional responses to not being able to train or compete as an athlete due to injury, retirement, or other reasons. Further research with adolescents with disabilities revealed a fourth factor labeled self-identity (Martin, Mushett, & Eklund, 1994). Self-identity was differentiated from social identity in that items pertaining to self-identity reflected subjects' views of themselves as athletes, whereas social identity was indicative of subjects' perceptions of others' views of them as athletes. The discovery of a fourth factor was conceptually consistent with the AIMS's theoretical foundations, which considered both self- and social-based perceptions as important sources of information contributing to athletic identity.

Documenting the existence and extent of athletic identity may assist individuals working with athletes with disabilities to understand the psychological impact of sport participation and cessation. Moreover, this information can help target individuals who may need increased social support during periods of injury or transitions out of sport. Finally, and equally important, recognizing that individuals with disabilities see themselves as "athletes" provides information useful in educating people who may not perceive athletes with disabilities as "legitimate" athletes. Such information should help change the cognitive aspect of these limiting attitudes (Archie & Sherrill, 1989; Miller & Roth, 1993).

The second goal of this study was to examine sport motivation with the Sport Orientation Questionnaire (SOQ; Gill & Deeter, 1988), which yields scores for three factors: competitiveness, goal orientation, and win orientation. Competitiveness, the sport-specific form of general achievement motivation, is the desire to strive for success and satisfaction in sport. Goal orientation is a predisposition to focus on self-referenced performance goals such as swimming a personal best time. Win orientation is the tendency to strive for socially comparative goals such as winning a race.

Examining sport orientation provides information about how athletes direct their motivation (Gill, 1993; Weiss & Chaumeton, 1993). Knowledge of goal and win orientations, which are athletes' predispositions to focus on particular goals, can assist coaches in formulating effective goal-setting programs. For instance, previous work examining ego and task orientations in wheelchair athletes highlights the need for coaches and sport psychologists to understand athletes' goal perspectives in order to promote goals consistent with a task orientation (White & Duda, 1993). Although the theoretical bases of task and ego orientation (Duda, 1992) and goal and win orientation (Gill & Deeter, 1988) are different, they are similar in that they both provide important information about athletes' motivations (Weiss & Chaumeton, 1993). Last, a description of sport orientation provides further evidence of the importance that sport holds for adolescent athletes with disabilities.

The third goal of this study was to determine interrelationships among these characteristics. Related literature using the AIMS and SOQ subscales suggests that athletes with strong athletic identities are also competitive, win oriented, and goal oriented (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Certainly it is logical to expect individuals with strong athletic identities to also be competitive and to possess important goals toward which to direct their competitiveness. However, adolescents participate in sport for nonachievement reasons (Weiss & Chaumeton, 1993). For example, many youngsters cite having fun, being with friends, and learning skills as important participation motives (Weiss & Chaumeton, 1993).

Thus, adolescents with strong athletic identities may not necessarily be competitive and hold competitive goals. Nevertheless, considering the somewhat elite nature of the current sample, and considering previous research, we hypothesized that competitiveness, win orientation, and goal orientation would be positively associated with components of athletic identity (self-identity, social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity).

Previous research (Brewer, Boin, & Petitpas, 1993; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) has also suggested that athletes with high exclusivity scores may experience emotional difficulties when unable to participate in sport because they perceive that they lack other important roles to gravitate toward. Thus, we hypothesized that athletes with high exclusivity scores would also have high negative affectivity scores.

The overall purpose of the present paper was to examine perceptions of athletic identity and sport orientation. To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate these psychological characteristics with athletes with disabilities.

## Method

### Subjects

Subjects included 57 youth swimmers (27 females and 30 males) with disabilities (cerebral palsy,  $n = 24$ ; amputee,  $n = 13$ ; paraplegic,  $n = 13$ ; les autres,  $n = 7$ ) competing at the Rotary International Junior Swimming Match in Glasgow, Scotland. The les autres category ( $n = 7$ ) were athletes classified as dwarfs, visually impaired, having osteoporosis, and so forth. Seventy percent of athletes, ranging in age from 16 to 19,  $M = 16.2$ , completed the survey. Swimmers represented their national teams (England,  $n = 9$ ; Ireland,  $n = 15$ ; Scotland,  $n = 19$ ; United States,  $n = 12$ ; Wales,  $n = 2$ ) at this international competition. The Netherlands ( $n = 4$ ) was the only team present that was not assessed due to language difficulties.

### Procedures

Packets containing a letter describing the purpose of the study, human subject consent forms, a demographic questionnaire (i.e., age, gender, team affiliation, event), and the SOQ and the AIMS were distributed to athletes on the night before the 2-day competition. Athletes completed the questionnaires on their own or were given assistance by the first two authors or by team support staff if their physical or sensory limitations precluded independent completion of the questionnaires. Team support staff were given standardized verbal instructions for assisting athletes.

### Instruments

*Athletic Identity Measurement Scale.* The AIMS is a 10-item scale with four subscales that assess self-identity, social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity (Martin et al., 1994). Test-retest reliability (.89), internal consistency (.80 to .93), and concurrent validity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) as well as construct validity via factor analysis have been demonstrated (Martin et

**Table 1** Subscale and Individual Item Scores for the AIMS

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Self-identity subscale</i>	11.9	2.4
1. I consider myself an athlete.	5.9	1.4
2. I have many goals related to sport.	6.0	1.3
<i>Social identity subscale</i>	8.5	3.9
3. Most of my friends are athletes.	4.3	2.3
7. Other people see me mainly as an athlete.	4.2	2.3
<i>Exclusivity subscale</i>	10.7	4.9
4. Sport is the most important part of my life.	4.5	2.1
5. I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else.	3.4	2.1
9. Sport is the only important thing in my life.	2.7	1.9
<i>Negative affectivity subscale</i>	10.4	3.5
8. I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport.	4.5	2.2
10. I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport.	5.9	1.8

al., 1994). Subscale and individual items can be found in Table 1. For each item, subjects responded on a 7-point scale with 7 anchored by *strongly agree* and 1 anchored by *strongly disagree*.

*Sport Orientation Questionnaire.* The SOQ is a 25-item scale with three subscales that assess competitiveness, goal orientation, and win orientation (Gill & Deeter, 1988). Scores range from 13 to 65 for the 13-item competitiveness subscale and from 6 to 30 for the 6-item goal and win orientation subscales. Subscale and individual items can be found in Table 2. Subjects respond on a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored by *strongly agree* (5 points) and *strongly disagree* (1 point). Test-retest reliability (.73 to .89), intraclass reliability (.84 to .94), internal consistency (.79 to .95), and construct and concurrent validity have been adequately demonstrated (Gill & Deeter, 1988).

## Results

Cronbach's (1951) coefficient alpha was used to determine internal consistency of the two instruments. Alpha coefficients for the AIMS subscales were as follows: self-identity (alpha = .72), social identity (alpha = .65), exclusivity (alpha = .72), and negative affectivity (alpha = .64), all indicating acceptable internal consistency. The SOQ subscales of competitiveness (alpha = .78), goal orientation (alpha = .63), and win orientation (alpha = .78) all demonstrated acceptable internal consistencies.

A MANOVA on the AIMS and SOQ subscales testing for gender differences was not significant, and data were therefore collapsed across gender for subsequent analyses. Further MANOVAs examining differences among swimmers based on

**Table 2** Subscale and Individual Item Scores for the SOQ

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Competitiveness</i>	56.0	6.7
1. I am a determined competitor.	4.4	0.9
3. I am a competitive person.	4.4	0.8
5. I try my hardest to win.	4.7	0.7
7. I look forward to competing.	4.8	0.5
9. I enjoy competing against others.	4.7	0.6
11. I thrive on competition.	3.6	1.3
13. My goal is to be the best athlete possible.	3.8	1.5
15. I want to be successful in sports.	4.6	0.6
17. I work hard to be successful in sports.	4.6	0.8
19. The best test of my ability is competing against others.	4.2	1.2
21. I look forward to the opportunity to test my skills in competition.	4.5	0.7
23. I perform my best when I am competing against an opponent.	4.3	1.1
25. I want to be the best every time I compete.	3.5	1.3
<i>Goal orientation</i>	26.1	3.6
4. I set goals for myself when I compete.	4.3	0.9
8. I am most competitive when I try to achieve personal goals.	4.2	0.9
12. I try hardest when I have a specific goal.	4.4	0.7
16. Performing to the best of my ability is very important to me.	4.8	0.5
20. Reaching personal performance goals is very important to me.	4.4	0.7
24. The best way to determine my ability is to set a goal and try to reach it.	4.3	1.0
<i>Win orientation</i>	19.5	5.5
2. Winning is important.	3.6	1.2
6. Scoring more points than my opponent is very important to me.	3.8	1.3
10. I hate to lose.	3.2	1.2
14. The only time I am satisfied is when I win.	2.6	1.4
18. Losing upsets me.	2.8	1.3
22. I have the most fun when I win.	3.6	1.4

disability or classification were not calculated due to small sample sizes in each category. These swimmers were of adolescent age ranging from 16 to 19 years old ( $M = 16.2$ ,  $SD = 1.31$  years) and were somewhat experienced in competitive swimming ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 2.79$  years). Interestingly, females reported significantly greater,  $F(1, 55) = 10.07$ ,  $p < .01$ , years of experience ( $M = 5.5$ ) compared to men

**Table 3** Correlations Among the AIMS and SOQ Subscales

	AIMS subscales			SOQ subscales			
	Self-identity	Social identity	Exclusivity	Negative affect	Comp	Win	Goal
Self-identity		.46**	.26*	.25	.63**	.27*	.27*
Social identity			.43**	.18	.31*	.31*	.23
Exclusivity				.43**	.28*	.25	.19
Negative affect					.16	.15	.00
Comp						.51**	.50**
Win							.42**

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

(*M* = 3.3). As indicated in Table 1, swimmers scored strong for self-identity, moderate to strong on social identity and negative affectivity, and fairly low on exclusivity. For the SOQ scores (see Table 2), athletes scored high on competitiveness and goal orientation and moderate on win orientation.

As Table 3 indicates, our first hypothesis was partially supported, as athletes' self-identity and social identity scores were significantly and positively correlated with the SOQ subscales of competitiveness (.63, .31) and win orientation (.27, .31), whereas only self-identity was significantly related to goal orientation (.27). Our second hypothesis was supported also, indicating that athletes with high exclusivity scores also tended to have high negative affectivity scores (.43).

An examination of all correlations revealed other significant relationships. For example, self-identity was related to social identity (.46) and exclusivity (.26), and exclusivity was associated with social identity (.43) and negative affectivity (.43). Finally, as found in previous work (Gill & Deeter, 1988), all three SOQ subscales were correlated with each other.

### Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to describe the athletic identities and sport orientation of youth swimmers with disabilities. First, swimmers had moderate athletic identities. As a reference point (see Table 4), their mean scores on the AIMS were comparable to scores of competitive college-aged regional athletes (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). However, the large standard deviations suggest wide variability among athletes in our sample. Compared to nondisabled subjects studied previously, most swimmers (two-thirds) reported scores ranging from recreational/fitness athletes at one extreme and national-level athletes at the other extreme (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). These data suggest that, although these young athletes were performing at an international competition, there were strong individual differences in self-perceptions of athletic identity.

An examination of responses to individual AIMS items highlights important



**Table 4** Group Comparison Scores Among Athletes With and Without Disabilities on the AIMS

Sample	Gender	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>SD</i>
Swimmers with disabilities	Female	27	45.7	12.2
	Male	30	44.3	11.5
Nonathletes <sup>b</sup>	Female	23	15.7	5.3
	Male	6	19.7	7.6
Recreational/fitness <sup>b</sup>	Female	77	30.4	11.0
	Male	67	34.8	9.9
Intramural/local/regional <sup>b</sup>	Female	7	40.4	9.0
	Male	19	46.8	7.4
Intercollegiate/national <sup>b</sup>	Female	17	53.4	9.1
	Male	27	54.6	9.1

<sup>a</sup>Based on 10 items. <sup>b</sup>From Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993).

information. For example, the two items representing self-identity indicate that these swimmers very much considered themselves athletes and had many goals related to sport (see Table 1). The moderate endorsement of items pertaining to exclusivity of athletic identity (e.g., Sport is the only important thing in my life) suggests that many of these athletes have self-schemas that are not limited solely to their athletic identities. On the other hand, athletes also reported that, if injured and unable to compete, they would become very depressed. Support staff and professionals working with injured athletes with disabilities should be cognizant of such possible reactions in order to provide appropriate support. In summary, these swimmers reported moderate to strong athletic identities, which should be acknowledged and respected (Sherrill, 1993a).

An examination of scores from the SOQ (see Table 2) indicates that swimmers reported being very competitive and had scores similar to those of nondisabled high school runners (Martin & Gill, 1991) and collegiate athletes (Gill & Dziewaltowski, 1988). Interestingly, their competitive scores were closer to male intercollegiate swimmers than female intercollegiate swimmers (see Table 5). Similarly, swimmers' goal and win orientation scores were comparable to scores of nondisabled athletes studied previously (Gill & Dziewaltowski, 1988; Kang, Gill, Acevedo, & Deeter, 1990; Martin & Gill, 1991, in press). An examination of high and low scores for individual items from the SOQ provides more detailed information about these athletes. For example, they look forward to (Item 7) and enjoy (Item 9) competing. In contrast, losing isn't very upsetting (Item 18) and the don't need to win to derive satisfaction in sport (Item 14).

In contrast to findings of research with nondisabled athletes, there were no gender differences in SOQ subscale scores. Typically males report a stronger competitive and win orientation whereas females score higher on goal orientation (Gill, 1993). Gill (1993) suggested that gender differences in competitiveness are due to males typically having more competitive experiences. The females in this study had significantly greater experience in competitive sport. Thus, this

**Table 5** Group Comparison Scores Among Athletes With and Without Disabilities on the SOQ

Sample	Gender	Competitiveness		Win		Goal	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Current sample ( <i>n</i> = 57 swimmers)	Male	56.3	5.7	19.4	5.2	26.8	2.8
	Female	55.5	7.1	19.7	5.5	26.0	2.7
Gill & Dziewaltowski (1988) ( <i>n</i> = 20 swimmers)	Male	56.4		22.4		26.9	
	Female	51.7		18.2		27.1	

discrepancy in competitive experience may have contributed to a lack of gender differences in competitiveness.

Clearly, these results indicate that adolescent swimmers with disabilities are strongly motivated to achieve in sport. Similarly, they direct their motivation to both normative and self-referenced goals. However, as sport psychology research has indicated, coaches and support staff should help athletes focus on self-referenced performance goals, such as swimming a particular time, when formulating race plans as opposed to focusing on less controllable normative goals such as winning.

In addition to the descriptive data, a number of relationships within and among the SOQ and AIMS scores were documented. In particular the significant, albeit moderate, relationships of self-identity and social identity with exclusivity indicate that swimmers with strong athletic identities also reported high exclusivity. In other words, it is likely that some swimmers who strongly identified with their roles as athletes also felt that athletics was the most important social role they filled. Research from different theoretical bases has suggested that the development of both strong and exclusive athletic identities is, in many cases, associated with athletes who reach the highest levels of athletic achievement (Williams & Krane, 1993). However, as noted earlier (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) and in previous literature (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), a single-minded focus on athletics not only may promote superior athletic achievement but also may make postathletic life adjustments difficult. In this study, the significant relationship between exclusivity and negative affectivity supports such a supposition.

Finally, the relationship of self-identity to competitiveness suggests that athletes with strong athletic identities also had a strong desire to achieve success and satisfaction in athletics. Furthermore, these same athletes expressed that desire through self-referenced and normative goals. It is important to recognize that these athletes did not simply report an identification with an athletic role; they also reported achievement-related goals and the desire to attain those goals.

In summary, the present study clearly documents the importance of sport to adolescent athletes with disabilities. They have the desire to excel and pursue important goals. Overall, these results support the importance that sport holds for adolescent athletes with disabilities and provides information that should help

increase awareness and acceptance of athletes with disabilities. The results of the current study suggest that coaches, and support staff, of athletes with disabilities should be aware that their athletes may be highly invested in their sport. Expressing low performance expectations or patronizing attitudes toward performance potential can be psychologically and athletically harmful (Horn & Lox, 1993). In contrast, coaches should acknowledge these athletes and continue to provide them challenging, competitive opportunities for athletic excellence.

Future research could examine how athletes with disabilities are socialized into and through sport. More specifically, examining the influence of various types of social support on sport involvement in athletes with disabilities would further our understanding of how athletic identity and sport orientation develop.

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