Whatever it Takes:
Health Compromising Behaviors in Female Athletes

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The power and performance model of sport stresses a sport ethic of doing “whatever it takes” to win (Coakley, 2004). Uncritical acceptance of this model may lead to various health-compromising behaviors. Employing achievement goal theory, we examine why female athletes may adopt the power and performance approach. An ego motivational climate and a strong social approval goal orientation may encourage girls and women to engage in unhealthy and risky behaviors in pursuit of success. Athletes in an ego-involving climate may be at risk of using their bodies as a machine, unhealthy eating, and steroid use. Athletes with a strong social approval orientation may engage in unhealthy behaviors, such as binge drinking and hazing, in their quest for acceptance by teammates, coaches, and parents.

In sport, as well as in society in general, competition is highly valued. Parents and coaches believe that children learn important life lessons through youth sport competition that will help them become good citizens. Yet, competition often is equated with winning and losing, which can negate the constructive outcomes of sport participation. Demonstrating control and dominance has been conflated with winning, as reflected in the power and performance model of sport (Coakley, 2004; Singleton, 2003). This model, especially common in men’s sport, focuses on strength and power to dominate others, views opponents as enemies, uses a hierarchical authority structure, and regards the body as a weapon or machine (Coakley, 2004; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Messner, 2002). Those sports that most reflect the power and performance model, such as men’s football and ice hockey, typically garner large fan bases and are bestowed more resources than other sports. Because of such rewards, the power and performance model has become a standard against which all sports are compared. To be considered a “real” athlete, one must comply with these values. With this ideal in mind, the public frequently considers female
athletes as inferior to male athletes because often they do not measure up to this standard when compared to male athletes.

In fact, when women’s sport comes close to parity with men’s sport, its very nature seems to be assailed. At the same time that women’s sport has received more social acceptance than ever before, Title IX came under attack (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Although the muscular female physique has become chic, a highly muscled successful female athlete still is accused of using steroids (Davis & Delano, 1992) or being labeled lesbian (Krane, 2001). Female athletes receive far more media attention than in the past, yet their athletic accomplishments often are deflected by sexualized photographs or trivializing commentary (Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003). Scanning the sports section of any newspaper or viewing ESPN’s SportsCenter clearly reveals that men’s power sports dominate the media coverage. These men’s sports are cast as the ideal to be achieved. For example, some people believe that until many women “dunk” during basketball games, the WNBA will not achieve the same popularity as the NBA. Even when female athletes are highly successful and receive media attention, their status and notoriety tends to be short-lived (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003).

In this post-Title IX era of women’s sport, girls and women at all competitive levels have more sporting opportunities than ever before. Considering the increased number of women playing sport and the wide acceptance of the power and performance model of sport, feminist sport scholars realize that women’s sport is at a crossroads. On one hand, it may be necessary for female athletes to adopt the power and performance sport model to increase acceptance and gain equality in the athletic arena. On the other hand, there are serious consequences of this model including health-compromising behaviors (e.g., performance-enhancing drugs, disordered eating, overtraining). Thus, some feminist sport scholars question the uncritical acceptance of this model by female athletes, particularly concerning its emphasis on aggression and domination (e.g., Hall, 1996; Theberge, 2003). It is not the intent of this paper to engage in this debate. Instead, in this paper we offer a conceptual framework to explain why some female athletes appear to adopt the power and performance approach to sport and engage in health-compromising behaviors while pursuing their sport goals. The proposed framework integrates athletes’ achievement goals and social approval goals, the sport motivational climate, and the concept of overconformity, culminating in what can become a risky environment for female athletes. While these issues affect men’s sport as well as women’s sport, we focus on women’s sport, which seems to be at a critical juncture. Women are edging closer and closer to the “center of sport” and the recognition of being “real” athletes (Messner, 2002); thus, now more than ever, they may be likely to engage in health-compromising behaviors in return for athletic acceptance.

**Overconformity and Achievement Goal Theory**

Many people believe that hard work and effort lead to social status and prestige; in other words, good things happen to “winners.” In sport, coaches tell players to “give 110% effort,” “be tough,” and “you must make sacrifices to win.” Such comments reflect values often inherent in sport settings; in “real sport” (i.e., men’s sport), athletes are expected to want to win, no matter the cost. Hughes and Coakley (1991) described this perspective as the sport ethic, which requires making
sacrifices for the game, striving for distinction, playing through pain, and refusing to accept limitations in pursuit of winning. This sport ethic is the cornerstone of the power and performance model of sport.

There are many rewards that may come with adhering to the sport ethic. Athletes gain status, respect, and privilege when they use excessive force or compete while injured (Messner, 2002). They become “legends” when they “give their all” for the team. Coaches, parents, teammates, and fans sustain this value system by reinforcing athletes’ observance of the sport ethic. Because many athletes develop within the value system of the sport ethic, they learn that to be successful, they must adhere to it. Athletes internalize these norms, which become the benchmark for judging themselves as real athletes (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The values of the sport ethic and the concomitant reward structure create an environment where athletes may sacrifice their own health and well-being to achieve sport success. Within this context, some athletes will engage in overconformity to the sport ethic (Coakley, 2004). That is, they may uncritically accept the sport ethic and engage in behaviors that typically are productive to such an extent that they become unproductive. For example, while running for conditioning is essential for athletes, running exceptional distances with minimal rest may result in overtraining injuries. Overconforming athletes will perceive that “more is better,” and their conditioning program will actually impede performance. Overconforming female athletes also may use excessive force on the field, engage in unhealthy weight management practices, or participate in illicit off-field antics to achieve the athletic ideal. This sport ethic is reinforced through ego-involved motivational climates and the determined quest for social approval in sport.

Achievement goal theory provides a well-developed structure for understanding why overconformity occurs. The primary tenet of this theory is that people are motivated to demonstrate competence and feel successful (Maehr & Nicholls, 1980; Nicholls, 1989). How individuals define competence and success helps explain variations in people’s behaviors, attitudes, and cognitions in achievement contexts, such as sport. Typically, sport researchers have focused on task and ego goal orientations, which influence how athletes judge their ability, success, and failure. Goal orientations provide the framework for individual perceptions of sport achievement, guide what is considered acceptable sporting behavior, and influence athletes’ aspirations and reactions in sport (Nicholls, 1989).

In competitive situations, women who are task-oriented view successful achievement through personal improvement and place importance on prosocial behaviors such as respect and fairness (Nicholls, 1989). Ego-oriented women experience successful achievement through showing superiority over others and emphasizing winning as the primary objective of sport. Studies have shown that adopting an ego orientation is related to endorsing poor sporting behaviors and cheating (Duda, Olson, & Templin, 1991; Duda & White, 1992). A “what’s in it for me” and win-at-all costs attitude is observed in many ego-oriented athletes as they forcefully desire to be the very best (Duda, 1996). When winning is incompatible with issues of respect and fairness, the ego-oriented woman may wrestle for success in any way possible.

Achievement goal theory also maintains that perceptions of the motivational climate (i.e., the goals, expectations, and reinforcements valued in an environment) influence peoples’ behaviors, attitudes, and cognitions in achievement environments
Athletes will perceive a task-involving climate when coaches focus on learning and improving skills, putting forth high effort, and cooperating with teammates. Perceptions of an ego-involving climate are characterized by the coach emphasizing peer comparisons, publicly evaluating athletes, and rewarding displays of superiority over teammates. Perceiving an ego-involving climate, athletes learn that they have to be the best, among both opponents and teammates, to be considered successful. The longer an athlete participates in an ego-involving climate, the greater the chance that athlete will adopt an ego orientation and the sport ethic (Nicholls, 1989).

Several motivation theorists (Duda, 1996, 1997; Roberts & Treasure, 1995) expressed concern that perceptions of an ego-involving climate may be particularly hazardous for young female athletes, who tend to be more task-oriented than boys are (White & Duda, 1994). When task-oriented athletes are engaged in ego sport climates, they are most likely to be discontent. Task-oriented girls participating in an ego-climate are likely to drop out of sport and be deprived of an opportunity to improve health and gain the positive benefits of becoming skillful (Duda, 1997). Ego-oriented female athletes also may drop out if perceptions of their environment contain ego-oriented goals (Duda, 1997). These girls may not feel competent and therefore will not be motivated to continue participation. Unfortunately, many youth sport programs emulate the professional sport model and emphasize the importance of winning, with the potential consequence of girls dropping out of sport.

Achievement goal theory provides a conceptual link among the sport ethic, overconformity, and risky behavior. Athletes in an ego-involving climate learn that to be successful they must be the best, no matter what the cost to themselves or others. Research shows that perceptions of an ego-involving climate are related to athletes’ likelihood to aggress against an opponent, the temptation to play unfairly, and the belief that sport success is a means to enhance social status and recognition (Guivernau & Duda, 2002; Hom, Duda, & Miller, 1993). As Hughes and Coakley (1991) asserted, athletes who believe that sport is a means to enhance social status are likely to overconform to the sport ethic. Within an ego-involving climate, athletes often exhibit attitudes and behaviors that overlap with overconformity to the sport ethic. Therefore, athletes in an ego-involving climate may engage in health-compromising behaviors because of their win-at-all-costs attitude and their quest to be the best of the best. When female athletes adopt the ideals that long have been embraced by males in sport, they too are likely to engage in behaviors that can potentially jeopardize their own health. We suggest, as do others, that athletes who adopt an ego orientation and perceive an ego-involving climate may be more likely to put themselves at risk in their pursuit of athletic success and recognition (Duda, 1996; Reinboth & Duda, 2004; Weiss, Amorose, & Allen, 2000).

**Risky Situations, Overconformity, and the Motivational Climate**

Achievement goal theory and overconformity lay the foundation for further consideration of risky sporting behaviors in female athletes. We know that some females embrace the physicality of sport (Theberge, 2003; Young, 1997), engage in aggressive behaviors, play while injured, sacrifice their bodies (Baird,
2001; Theberge, 2000), and overtrain in pursuit of their sporting goals (Krane, Stiles-Shipley, Waldron, & Michalenok, 2001). The occurrence of these health-compromising behaviors can be explained through achievement goal theory. As female athletes endorse the sport ethic and perceived participation in ego-involved motivational climates, they are likely to do whatever they believe will help them win, including putting themselves in risky situations. Regarding their body as a machine, unhealthy eating, and using performance-enhancing substances are some of these risks.

**Body as Machine**

One component of the sport ethic is using one’s body as a weapon and perceiving it as a machine (Coakley, 2004). Athletes inherently are very physical—they use their bodies to achieve athletic goals. Ideally, they learn to be assertive and effortful without risking their own health or that of their opponents. However, overconforming athletes may perceive that they should push themselves beyond a healthy point or injure an opponent in the quest for victory. When bodies are perceived as machines, athletes will not accept reasonable boundaries or limits, such the need for rest or healing. Instead, they will do whatever is necessary to meet the demands of competition (Coakley, 2004). Ego motivational climates may sustain such beliefs and feed a need to do whatever it takes to win. For example, adult (Theberge, 2000) and youth (Theberge, 2003) female ice hockey players take pleasure in the physical confrontation of the game. Similarly, Baird’s (2001) ethnography of women’s rugby revealed the ruggers’ indulgence in rough play. Thing (2001), after interviewing female basketball, soccer, and ice hockey players, concluded that the women’s views of highly assertive play “embodies and harbours a masculine ideal” (p. 285). Further, these women were excited at “performing the female warrior identity” (p. 286).

Often such acceptance of physicality leads athletes to resort to aggressive acts to cinch a win. Aggression, defined as purposely harming another person (Coakley, 2004), is linked to the motivational climate created by the coach. Aggressive tendencies in female athletes are most likely when they perceived their coach to adopt an ego orientation (Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996) and when they thought such behavior was supported by their coach (Guivernau & Duda, 2002; Stephens, 2001). Furthermore, some evidence suggests that acceptance of aggressive behavior increases at higher competitive levels in women’s sport (Stephens, 2001). Taken together, these findings support that an ego orientation and perceptions of an ego-involving climate influence athletes’ penchant toward aggression.

Consideration of athletes’ aggressive behavior also includes off-the-court behaviors. Researchers often have contemplated the connection between participation in contact sports and off-field violent behavior in male athletes. It is believed that the assertiveness, toughness, and sense of entitlement garnered through adherence to the sport ethic may lead to involvement in bar fights or assaults against women (Crossett, 2000; Curry, 2000). Nixon (1997) included female athletes in his examination of the degree to which athletes valued toughness (i.e., playing in pain or while injured) and anti-social, aggressive actions out of sport. While the males valued toughness more and engaged in more aggressive actions than did the females, approximately 20% ($n = 74$) of the female athletes highly valued toughness.
Similar to the males, female athletes in contact sports were more likely to engage in aggression outside of sport (although the total number of female athletes reporting being aggressive outside of sport was low).

When athletes consider their bodies as a machine, they tend to ignore injury or disregard pain. While machines can run low on gas and be fixed when broken, the same is not always true of human bodies. When bodies are considered machines, athletes’ minds and bodies become disconnected. While the mind focuses on winning at any cost, the body can be compromised for the good of the cause. Thus “real athletes” endure pain and take risks, such as diving into the stands to save the ball, to garner a win. Sacrificing the body, a major precept of the sport ethic, seems to be accepted by some sportswomen. In Baird’s (2001) study, the ruggers took pride in playing while injured and rebuffing medical attention. Young and White (1999), in interviews with former elite female athletes, found that they, too, accepted injury and complied with “what remains a central component of high level sport—‘no pain, no gain’” (p. 205). These athletes endorsed hiding their pain through “an attitude of irreverence,” in which they ignored chronic pain. In these settings, female athletes appear to be co-opting at least some values of the power and performance sport model.

Theoretically, there should be a relationship between perceptions of an ego-involving climate and the desire to sacrifice one’s body for the team. As Reinboth and Duda (2004) showed, such a sacrifice is problematic. They examined male, adolescent athletes and found that perceptions of an ego-involving climate predicted the incidence of self-reported physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, stomach pain, runny or congested nose, sore muscles) and physical exhaustion. Reinboth and Duda concluded that “a possible explanation for the positive relationship between perceptions of an ego-involving climate and the reporting of physical strain and symptoms could be a presumed greater willingness for athletes to ‘do anything to win’ in such an atmosphere” (p. 18). Although this study examined adolescent males, it is likely that adolescent females in highly ego-involving motivational climates would have similar reactions (cf. Weiss et al., 2000). For example, a case study of an elite, female gymnast revealed how the ego motivational climate contributed to her refusal to listen to medical advice when she needed to rest injured joints and to her adherence to self-imposed punishments of excessive repetitions of skills on which she made mistakes during practices or competitions (Krane, Greenleaf, & Snow, 1997). Altogether, there is growing evidence that female athletes who participate in ego-involving climates will overconform to the sport ethic, sacrifice their bodies, and perceive their body as a machine to be used rather than a body that needs care and revitalization.

Unhealthy Eating

Another way in which female athletes may overconform to the sport ethic is by manipulating their body size or shape. Athletes often perceive that a lean body is an important component of athletic success and excess fat will lead to poor performance (Davis, 1992). Athletes in sports where judges score their appearance along with performance may be particularly at risk of this type of overconformity. For example, Claessens, Lefevre, Beunen, and Malina (1999) supported that gymnasts with more fat received lower scores in competition. Young athletes may
notice this pattern and attempt unconventional actions to achieve an “ideal body.” For example, the gymnast in the case study revealed that her mother would help her wrap an ace bandage around her developing breasts, flattening them to achieve the “line” that judges tended to rate highly (Krane et al., 1997). Ryan’s (1995) popular press book examining the climate of elite skating and gymnastics detailed many examples where young girls engaged in disordered eating as a mechanism to increase their perceived likelihood of success. Donnelly’s (1993) interviews with retired elite Canadian athletes also revealed that many of the females had struggled with dietary problems. In some cases, the women believed that being smaller was a requirement for success in their sport. Drinking excessive water, purging, fasting, extreme dieting, excessive exercising, and restricting fat have all been used by female athletes trying to change their bodies (Johns, 1998; Krane, Stiles-Shipley et al., 2001; Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, & Stiles-Shipley, 2001).

It appears that ego-oriented athletes and those who perceive an ego-involving climate will do whatever it takes to win and be the best of the best, even if it means putting their health at risk. Recent research has linked body image concerns and disordered eating patterns with an ego orientation and ego motivational climate. Duda and Kim (1997) found perceptions of an ego-involving climate was negatively related to body image and self-esteem in young, elite, female gymnasts. In another study of young female gymnasts, Aimar (2001) found a small positive relationship between perceptions of an ego-involving climate and social physique anxiety. Other studies have found that social physique anxiety is related to unhealthy eating patterns (e.g., Haase, Prapaavessis, & Owen, 2002; Krane, Stiles-Shipley et al., 2001) suggesting that an ego-involving climate may reinforce negative body perceptions and possibly lead to disordered eating. Supporting such a claim, Duda, Benardot, and Kim (2000) found elite gymnasts’ perceptions of a task-involving climate was inversely related to energy deficits. That is, a task-involving climate was associated with a healthy balance between caloric intake and physical activity. Thus, athletes who accept the sport ethic and compete in ego motivational climates are at risk of internalizing a harmful body image and engaging in unhealthy eating patterns.

Supplements and Steroids

As athletes strive to “win at all costs,” they may be tempted to use nutritional supplements or steroids (Coakley, 2004). As the association between an ego orientation and unhealthy weight management practices has been established (Duda & Kim, 1997; Krane et al., 1997), it is not a far stretch to presume that some ego-oriented athletes will resort to using banned supplements or steroids. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness (2001) warned that society’s emphasis on “win at all costs” may tempt young athletes to use nutritional supplements or steroids. Studies have indicated that ego-oriented athletes endorse using illicit training techniques to increase the likelihood of winning (Hom, Duda, & Miller, 1993; Lochbaum & Roberts, 1993). Nutritional supplements and steroids are one illicit “training” mechanism. Although prohibited in sport, the performance benefits of steroids, in particular, entice athletes willing to do whatever it takes to win. Athletes looking to avoid the well-known side effects of steroids may turn to using nutritional supplements in their pursuit of athletic success. While some supplements are beneficial for health and athletic
performance, many have harmful side effects or the long-term effects are not known (Maughan, King, & Lea, 2004).

Sundgot-Borgen, Berglund, and Torstveit (2004) investigated the use of nutritional supplements in all elite Norwegian National Team members, including 660 elite females athletes aged 15-39. They found that 54% of these women reported using some sort of a nutritional supplement (e.g., amino acids, mineral, creatine). When asked who advised them about using supplements, the coach was named most. The coaches, apparently wanting to win at all costs, undoubtedly created an ego-involving climate and influenced the health behaviors of the athletes. Surprisingly, some of the athletes did not even know if the supplements they used were classified as doping (i.e., were banned substances). Miller, Barnes, Sabo, Melnick, and Farrell (2002) suggested that

a win-at-all-costs attitude has increasingly infected all levels of sports competition, spurring young athletes—often encouraged by parents, coaches, and trainers—to take advantage of chemical boosts to size and strength, even if only to keep up with their opponents. (p. 473)

In a large study of middle school students (N girls = 499), Faigenbaum, Zaichkowsky, Gardner, and Micheli (1998) found 2.8% of the females self-reported steroid use. The incidence of using steroids increased most between 10 to 12 years of age in these girls. The highest use of steroids was by girls who participated in weight training, baseball, and hockey. Interestingly, these are all traditionally male dominated sports in which females may engage the male sport ideals. Based on these studies, one may infer that a climate emphasizing a win at all costs attitude also encourages shortcuts to success through supplements and steroids.

Another area of concern regarding steroids is the suggestion that “some young gymnasts may take steroids to stunt their growth because they believe that a small stature is advantageous in gymnastics” (Faigenbaum et al., 1998, discussion section, ¶7). Case studies of a former elite gymnast (Krane et al., 1997) and a rhythmic gymnast (Johns, 1998) corroborated that puberty was very challenging for these athletes because of the body changes they experience. To avoid this predicament, some gymnasts in ego-involving climates may turn to using steroids. Additionally, Miller et al. (2002) believed that “female adolescents may be at particular risk for the combination of steroid use and disordered eating as they are especially susceptible to poor body image, preoccupation with weight, and weight control via pathogenic means” (p. 471). In all, evidence supports that ego-involving climates that reinforce the sport ethic also increase the risk that athletes may use unhealthy nutritional supplements or steroids as they pursue sporting excellence.

Social Goals and the Sport Ethic

Historically, achievement goal theory included three goal orientations (task, ego, and social-approval; Maehr & Nicholls, 1980). The social-approval goal orientation was not considered in subsequent work by Nicholls and until recently (e.g., Allen, 2003; Stuntz & Weiss, 2003) has not been considered in most sport research. However, analysis of athletes’ social goals provides a
compelling explanation as to why some athletes overconform to the sport ethic, particularly when considering off-field antics. Athletes with a social-approval goal orientation strive for sport success to gain acceptance by a social group (Maehr & Nicholls, 1980; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). They feel most positive about their sport involvement when they have the approval of others or if they are a part of the popular group (Allen, 2003). A major reason athletes overconform to the sport ethic is to continually endorse their identity as an athlete and garner the respect of their teammates (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). In overconforming, athletes lose their autonomy and uniqueness; instead, they follow the perceived expectations of the athletes on their team (Messner, 2002). To be accepted as part of the team, athletes may engage in risky behavior, such as overtraining, drinking, and hazing. For example, drinking is standard practice among some sport teams. Athletes who “out-drink” their peers, may do so in an attempt to “fit in” or gain status. Those athletes with the most outrageous drinking escapades, regardless of the final consequence (e.g., getting sick, passing out), gain notoriety among their teammates.

Social approval goals may keep athletes on teams, even once interest in competing has weaned. Studies of young elite athletes revealed that some children remained in their sport long past their interest due to social constraints. Upon interviewing young female gymnasts, Klint and Weiss (1986) found some of the gymnasts, no longer interested in continuing participation, were reluctant to leave the team because they did not want to be labeled a quitter. Klint and Weiss further described “resistant leavers” as gymnasts who were unhappy competing, yet had difficulty deciding to quit due to social pressure. These athletes did not want to disappoint their parents and coaches or lose their friendships with the other gymnasts. Indicative of the strength of social goals, some of these young athletes divulged causing an injury to themselves to create an acceptable reason for leaving the sport. Similarly, Raedeke’s (1997) study of burnout in high level age-group swimmers supported the notion that social responsibility may sway athletes to remain in sport. He described “entrapped” or “obligated” swimmers as those who felt high social constraints to continue competing while also experiencing high costs of participation and only modest enjoyment from swimming. Not surprisingly, these athletes also scored high on burnout. Thus, social approval seems to be a strong motivation for some athletes to participate in sport, even when it is no longer fun or satisfying.

This strong social approval orientation may lead athletes to engage in a variety of health-risk behaviors, especially “within a sport culture that appears to condone some risks” (Miller et al., 2002, p. 474). These behaviors may include unsafe sexual activity, steroid use, binge drinking, and physical aggression. Martin and Leary (2001) found that college students highly motivated to present a positive image or avoid a negative image reported engaging in dangerous stunts, drinking alcohol, and driving dangerously. While these behaviors have been associated with boys’ and men’s sport in the past, there is growing empirical and anecdotal evidence that this dynamic occurs in girls’ and women’s sport as well. For example, binge drinking has become common among female competitive athletes (Gutgesell, Moreau, & Thompson, 2003; Miller, Sabo, Melnick, Farrell, & Barnes, 2000). Additionally, female athletes, as compared to non-athletes and sorority members, were the group least likely to engage in safe sex practices (Lynch, Mowrey, Nesbitt, & O’Neill, 2004). In women’s rugby, vulgarity and drinking often are expected
social behaviors (Baird, 2001). This type of conduct, considered by the players to be unique to the rugby culture, was perceived to develop a unique camaraderie among women across teams.

As shown, the drive for social approval in sport may lead athletes to engage in questionable activities to gain status, or at least avoid social exclusion (Martin Ginis & Leary, 2004; Messner, 2002). Messner provided a fascinating analysis of the social dynamics of male athletes, revealing the power of a strong social approval orientation. The most privileged male athletes form the center of the culture and are the “leaders” who perpetuate the social norms. (Messner used the example of creating a misogynist and heterosexist climate.) This small minority of males may engage in objectionable behaviors, yet they are supported by an “audience” and “marginals.” The audience is composed of “wannabes” who applaud and support the leaders. They are not members of the high status group of boys, yet desperately want to be. The “marginals” are the boys further away, in status, from the leaders. Although they may not agree with the actions of the leaders, marginals remain complicit through their silence or lack of speaking against the leaders. Fear of being rejected from the group, and becoming a target of their taunts, encourage the audience and marginals to sustain their obedient support of the leaders. In other words, highly valued social status comes from “being part of the group.”

One way that leaders may reinforce their privilege and test the audience and marginal members is through hazing. At one time, hazing primarily consisted of relatively inane yet embarrassing activities with the goal of increasing commitment to the team. Today, however, many hazing incidents are verging on criminal behavior and they are occurring in girls’ and women’s sport. A large study of hazing in female and male high school athletes found almost half of the sample had experienced hazing in sport. The incidents in these hazing rituals ranged from being humiliated to being forced to drink large amounts of alcohol to being in fights (Hoover & Pollard, 2000). In a Hawaiian high school, several members of the girls’ soccer team were required to run around their field in their underwear (ESPN.com, 2002). In another hazing incident, a member of a high school gymnastics team was “surrounded by 30 upper class athletes who forced her to engage in a mock sex act” (ESPN.com, 2002). It is likely that many athletes put up with hazing activities to gain the social approval of their teammates. To speak out against even the most horrific incidents would ensure being ostracized from the team.

A highly publicized case of the hazing that occurred during a high school “powder puff” football game exemplifies the dynamic described by Messner (2002). Two teams met under the pretense of competition, but instead engaged in a reprehensible display of hazing (Associated Press, 2003). While the team of younger girls was kneeling on the ground, the older girls punched and slapped them as well as splattered them with mud, paint, and feces. The attacked girls incurred injuries such as a cut head requiring 15 stitches, a broken ankle, hearing loss, and a bacterial infection due to being force-fed excrement. During this ordeal, a large number of athletes and spectators were willing to watch classmates be humiliated and injured rather than speak out against or try to stop the violence. Consistent with Messner’s (2002) analysis, the high status leaders could act out while most of the lower status athletes and classmates did not intervene. Hazing is based on the expectation that the goal of social approval and acceptance will be so strong the victims will acquiesce.
A bizarre example of another potential outcome of a social approval orientation comes from a study of a male college swim team (Snyder, 1994). On this team, swimmers gained status and respect through stealing. Initially, team members dared each other to steal small items for their apartment. The athletes who were willing to take the largest risks to obtain stolen property gained prestige and status (the group Messner called “leaders”). Eventually, the swimmers progressed to stealing stereos, televisions, and computers. In fact, they acquired so much stolen property that they had to rent a storage unit for the items. While not all members of the team were involved in acts of thievery, there were “audience” swimmers who encouraged and reinforced the activity while “marginals” were complicit through silence. Eventually, several team members were arrested and convicted—a considerable price to pay for their desire for social approval.

It appears that social approval is a strong motivation that may lead athletes to engage in illicit and unhealthy behaviors. Fearing a loss of status and wanting continued recognition from teammates may drive athletes to behave in risky behavior or act with a lack of empathy toward others. We provided examples showing that on the field, a social approval orientation may lead to burnout, aggressive behavior, and injury. Off the field, drinking, hazing, and a wide array of risky behaviors can be linked to social approval goals. It is seems clear that a strong desire for acceptance may lead to an assortment of unhealthy behaviors.

**Conclusion**

In today’s “just do it” culture of sport, girls’ and women’s sport is increasingly adopting the power and performance model of sport. Yet as Messner (2002) asked, “just do what?” By thoughtlessly “just doing it,” many girls and women are overconforming to the sport ethic and behaving in ways that place themselves and others at risk. However, not all athletes are in danger of overconformity, and thus we sought to explore under what circumstances female athletes may engage in health-compromising behaviors. Consistent with achievement goal theory, when female athletes adopt an ego orientation or perceive an ego-involving climate, it is likely that they will overconform to the sport ethic. Furthermore, a social goal orientation also may help to explain individual variation in overconformity. A strong need for social approval leads some athletes to engage in risky behaviors.

Because of the health risks to oneself and others that exist when overconformity to the sport ethic occurs, transformation is needed in the sport world. Achievement goal theory provides a framework for creating changes in sport. An obvious beginning is to alter motivational climates to emphasize task goals and deemphasize ego goals. More specifically, youth sport coaches should emphasize learning new skills and personal improvement rather than winning. This strategy already has been adopted in some youth sport leagues where the score is not kept or it returns to zero at the end of each quarter. As athletes mature and move to more competitive levels, winning will become more important. Yet as Weiss et al. (2000) stated, “the key is to keep a perspective on winning so that it does not dominate all other goals” (p. 426).

Knowing that social-approval goals can lead athletes to overconform to the sport ethic, it is important for parents, coaches, and administrators to foster positive team cohesion. For example, ropes courses and other cooperative activities can help
to establish productive team dynamics and norms. At the same time, it also is crucial to discourage risky or unhealthy behaviors and attitudes on teams. Parents, coaches, and administrators cannot turn a blind eye when they hear stories of disordered eating patterns or hazing; they should actively discuss why these behaviors are inappropriate and unacceptable. Finally, athletes should be encouraged to develop interests outside of their sport so that their self-worth does not solely hinge on the successes of their sporting career. As we collectively institute change at the individual and team level, via our understanding of achievement goal theory and the sport ethic, transformations will be reflected in sport, hopefully making sport a healthier place for all athletes.

References


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