“Put up there on a pedestal and expected to be the star...But nobody really knows how difficult it is”:  
An in-depth analysis of media-constructed expectations within elite sport.

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Introduction

Sport has become a global industry, and as a result, more demands are being placed on elite athletes than ever before (Fletcher et al., 2006). One particular demand that has been mentioned within the literature (e.g., Kristiansen et al., 2011; Mellalieu et al., 2009) is the intensified expectations regarding performance outcomes that are reported and constructed by the media. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that these “media expectations” represent a specific type of stressor which can potentially have well-being and career ending consequences for elite athletes (e.g., Carter, 2013; Crutchley, 2014). Despite this assertion, there is limited research that has attempted to understand the influence of these media-constructed performance expectations on elite athletes.

Purpose & Method

**PURPOSE:** To explore the presence and content of media expectations within athlete-referent media reports.

**SOURCES:** Newspaper and internet reports (n = 9238) on 97 elite athletes (Mage = 23 years, SD = 2.67) who competed in the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games were collected and analysed.

**PROCEDURES:** Articles were selected based on popularity. The media reports were collected for the time frame of 6 months prior to 1 month after the London 2012 Olympic/Paralympic Games.

**DATA ANALYSIS:** Inductive Content Analysis

**Key Findings**

**Content associated with the performance expectations reported in the news media**

- "Poster Boy/Girl"
- "Golden Boy/Girl"
- "Hero"
- "Greatest Hope"
- "Champion"
- "Leader"
- "Magnificent"
- "Queen"
- "Sensation"
- "Sporting Immortality"
- "Superhuman"

**Content associated with the athletes cognitive, affective and behavioural responses to the performance expectations reported in the news media**

- "Expectation to be selected for the games"
- "Expectation to win events prior to the games"
- "Score expectation Psychological effects"

**Athlete’s Response to Expectations**

- The expectation is a stressor for the athletes
- Performance expectations conveyed by the media reports were a potential source of stress for the athletes. The athletes appeared to be having difficulty in managing the expectation.

- "I’m so worried it’s unbelievable, the amount of weight on my shoulders is killing me"
- "I’m not afraid to admit that I was scared of losing in front of all that many people. I was billed as a top medal prospect before I even pinned on my numbers and I found that a lot to deal with"
- "[athlete] will not crumble under the weight of the nation’s expectation"
- "Pressure is always there before competition and even during. There’s a lot of expectation with the home Olympic Games. But you’re just trying not to think about that and concentrate on what you can control, and what I can control is how much effort I put into training every day"

**Conclusions**

The media regularly construct performance expectations regarding elite athletes.

- These expectations are a stressor that elite athletes have to deal with.
- The media reports outlined that this stressor had the potential to have maladaptive effects on the elite athletes (e.g., influenced performance).
- Numerous coping strategies were referred to within the media reports which may help reduce maladaptive effects associated with media expectations.

References


Mellalieu, S. D., Neil, R., Hanton, S., & Fletcher, D. (2009). The media regularly construct performance expectations regarding elite athletes. The media reports outlined that this stressor had the potential to have maladaptive effects on the elite athletes (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2006). One particular demand that has been mentioned within the literature (e.g., Kristiansen et al., 2011; Mellalieu et al., 2009) is the intensified expectations regarding performance outcomes that are reported and constructed by the media. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that these “media expectations” represent a specific type of stressor which can potentially have well-being and career ending consequences for elite athletes (e.g., Carter, 2013; Crutchley, 2014). Despite this assertion, there is limited research that has attempted to understand the influence of these media-constructed performance expectations on elite athletes.

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