

Understanding The Development and Functioning of The Winning Attitude: A Longitudinal Study of Student-Athletes

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Abstract

This longitudinal study explores the origins, development, and functioning of the winning attitude among elite student-athletes in a French-Quebec sports education program, following them from adolescence into adulthood. Despite numerous studies on excellence and performance psychology no inductive, unified model of the winning attitude had been established from the participants' perspectives.

Using grounded theory the research analyzed over 100 hours of interviews and 400 pages of transcripts from student-athletes (N=10) (first at age 17, then at 33), their parents (N=10), and coaches (N=8). The findings describe the winning attitude as a psycho-sociological process fostering a positive mindset and full potential through five developmental phases: initiation, interest, engagement, transition, and transfer.

Parents and coaches play a central role in transmitting values, behaviors, and mental strategies through modeling, social comparison, and reinforcement. This long-term social learning process shapes athletes' psychological growth and helps maintain the winning attitude even beyond sports careers.

Psychologically, the model identifies four core mental skills—motivation, confidence, concentration, and relaxation—whose interaction sustains the winning attitude. Successful athletes manage distractions, control effort, and view challenges positively, whereas those who focus on uncontrollable factors experience anxiety and reduced performance.

The study concludes that the winning attitude is not a new concept but a clarified framework explaining how it develops and functions over time. This theoretical model has meaningful implications for education, sports training, and performance psychology research.

Keywords: Student-Athlete, Winning Attitude, Mental Skills, Psychosociological Process, Full Potential