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The Social Construction of 'Mental Toughness' - a Fascistoid Ideology?

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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS – A FASCISTOID IDEOLOGY?

Nick Caddick and Emily Ryall

This article considers the social construction of mental toughness in line with prevailing social attitudes towards success and dominance in elite sport. Critical attention is drawn to the research literature which has sought to conceptualise mental toughness and the idealistic rhetoric and metaphor with which it has done so. The concept of mental toughness currently reflects an elitist ideal, constructed along the lines of the romantic narrative of the 'Hollywood hero' athlete. In contrast, the mental and moral virtues which should form the basis of mental toughness are often neglected when an athlete 'fails'. Currently, mental toughness exists as a characteristic used to describe successful athletes and is only applied in hindsight. Finally, we recommend that the morally problematic association of mental toughness (within the media, society, and the research community) with ultimate success needs to be removed in order to rescue the concept from the elitist discourses which currently surround and suffocate it.

KEYWORDS mental toughness; elitism; idealism; sport psychology

The Social Construction of 'Mental Toughness' – a Fascistoid¹ Ideology?

Sport, at its highest levels, demands from its participants a set of mental qualities which enables one to compete. In order to be competitive with the elite of any sporting discipline, athletes must possess the capacity to perform complex skills under intense pressure and with a high degree of proficiency. Indeed, 'mental talent' is often exalted above physical attributes as the most fundamental contributor to elite sporting success (Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton, 2002; Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock 2008): a mental meritocracy of sorts.

Practitioners and researchers within the discipline of sport psychology have devoted much of their energies toward understanding what it takes to 'be the best'. Traditionally, characteristics associated with successful performances include self-confidence, concentration and focus, stress/anxiety management, motivation and desire, resilience, and control. Recently, researchers have suggested the term 'mental toughness' to describe an assemblage of many of these attributes and more, purported to hold the key to ultimate 'world champion' type success.

However, a great deal of conceptual ambiguity surrounds the notion of mental toughness (Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2002). What do we mean when we talk

of someone being 'mentally tough', or demonstrating 'mental toughness'? Only relatively recently has this question been considered in an academic context. Of the numerous definitions recently made available, two of the most comprehensive are as follows:

Mental toughness is having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to: generally, cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places upon the performer; specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure. (Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2002, 209)

Mental toughness is a collection of experientially developed and inherent sport-specific and sport-general values, attitudes, emotions, and cognitions that influence the way in which an individual approaches, responds to, and appraises both negatively and positively construed pressures, challenges, and adversities to consistently achieve his or her goals. (Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock 2009, 67)

Despite these attempts at a definition, it appears as though an appropriately concise and satisfactory description of mental toughness evades us. These descriptions appear to be overly inclusive, making reference to several different aspects of the sport experience without satisfactorily clarifying the fundamental nature of the concept (Crust 2007, 2008), or what makes it so special. Furthermore, a vast collection of psychological attributes have been referred to within the literature as characteristics of those who possess mental toughness.² References to mental toughness as an 'elusive phenomenon' (e.g., Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock 2009) seem to capture both the conceptual confusion in which it is shrouded, and the lofty pedestal upon which sport psychology has placed it (whatever 'it' is).

The issue is a topical one. The recent conceptual emergence of mental toughness as an empirically measurable attribute to be honed and developed by athletes and coaches in order to attain success in sport demands philosophical attention concerning the appropriateness of its presentation and description. In this paper, we argue that mental toughness is a far more opaque theoretical construct than described in the literature and in the way it is often used in the character assessment of an athlete. As such, it has developed into a pseudoscientific rhetorical construction, characterised by romantic notions of sporting idealism, elitist values, and metaphorical images of triumph and victory. In making this case, we draw upon various philosophical arguments while also making critical reference to the recent body of literature which links mental toughness with sporting success.

Our critique focuses upon the rhetoric and metaphors used to construct mental toughness as an almost super-human quality held by the most elite of sporting contestants. In it, we examine some of the attributes purported to comprise mental toughness and consider their construction in line with dominant sporting ideals. Recent discussion on the concept of elitism in sport is used to illustrate the moral consequences which stem from the elitist values³ which have given mental toughness its ostensible shape. The paper concludes by suggesting a more promising way of thinking about mental toughness and its place in modern professional sport.

Mental Toughness and Sporting Idealism

Recent literature is replete with descriptions of the idealistic and heroic qualities that mentally tough athletes supposedly possess. These descriptions are primarily presented as a multitude of mental attributes that allow an individual to achieve among the sporting elite (Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2002; Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2007; Bull et al. 2005; Thelwell, Weston, and Greenlees 2005; Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock 2008). Common to most of these studies is an importance placed upon self-belief, encapsulated in the following descriptions:

Having an unshakeable self-belief in your ability to achieve your competition goals. (Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2002, 211)

Having an unshakeable self-belief that you possess unique qualities and abilities that make you better than your opponents. (Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2002, 211)

Self-belief in your mental and physical ability under pressure, and in your ability to persevere and overcome any obstacle and/or challenge that you may face during your [football] career. (Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock 2008, 269)

Descriptions of an unshakeable self-belief that allows one to overcome any perceivable obstacle help to construct mental toughness as a thoroughly elitist quality, unattainable to the majority who might fail to overcome these obstacles. The problem here is an epistemological one, since 'self-belief' as an accurate description of a mentally tough character can only be applied *after* the event. An athlete who has unshakeable self-belief (and therefore according to the description, is mentally tough) but who ultimately fails in her sporting goal is considered self-deluded or arrogant. Consider, for example, the recent heavyweight boxing match between David Haye and Wladimir Klitschko. For months prior to the fight, Haye constantly trash-talked Klitschko, confidently predicting Klitschko's inevitable demise. On the day of the fight, readers may recall the way Haye sang and danced his way into the ring – only to lose to Klitschko on points in a rather uninspiring contest. In contrast, an athlete who is plagued by self-doubt but still succeeds may reflect differently in hindsight; 'I knew I had it in me somewhere'. As both Winch (1990) and Ryle (1990) noted, reasons are different to causes.

Further allusions to the characteristics of mental toughness relate to an 'unbelievable determination', 'insatiable desire', an 'unshakeable tough attitude', an 'inner arrogance', and the ability to push oneself to one's physical, mental, and emotional limits in pursuit of victory (e.g., Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2002, 2007; Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock 2008). The metaphor of mental toughness as an 'unshakeable' object that cannot be moved or displaced, alongside the phenomenal and almost mystical nature of these qualities as 'unbelievable' or 'insatiable' work to create a very specific image of the ideal sporting hero.⁴ This romanticised and idealised image of the doggedly determined individual who is able to rise up and overcome anything that is thrown at her is perhaps best captured by Hollywood-style fantasy. Let us call this phenomenon the 'Hollywood hero athlete'. As an example, consider actor Sylvester Stallone as boxer Rocky Balboa in the popular Rocky series of films. After being initially defeated by his

rival, Rocky undergoes hours of intense, arduous training in which his trainer pushes him to his physical, mental, and emotional limits. During a gruelling and intense rematch, Rocky calls upon all the strength he can muster to defeat his rival in the final round and achieve ultimate success.

The Hollywood saga of the gritty underdog whose perseverance results in eventual glory connects with a number of sporting values which are shared in the conceptualisation of mental toughness. In the process, an ideal is created for all potential athletes to aspire to. The values underpinning this ideal include complete dedication, unwavering commitment to the goal, and a work ethic unmatched by any of one's competitors.⁵ In addition, the ability to rise up and overcome adversity features prominently in both the Hollywood hero saga, and the mental toughness ideal.

Alternatively, consider the story of Lance Armstrong offered to us in the form of his autobiography (Armstrong and Jenkins 2000). Armstrong chronicles how he was able to become an elite athlete despite his modest upbringing in Plano, Texas. After suffering through a severe chronic illness in the form of testicular cancer, Armstrong tells how he was able to overcome this adversity and, through sheer determination and against everybody's expectations, achieve unrivalled success in the sport of cycling.⁶ Thus, Armstrong's story connects with the romantic narrative of the hero who must face a series of gruelling tests and challenges en route to eventual victory (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998; Sparkes 2004). Indeed, the narrative represents a powerful cultural archetype against which athletes compare their experiences (Sparkes, Perez-Samaniego, and Smith in press). Furthermore, this story creates the romantic ideal that is the epitome of the 'mentally tough' hero athlete.

Descriptions of mental toughness provided in the sport psychology literature serve to reinforce the power and value of the Hollywood hero athlete as the ideal image for all athletes to aspire to. Indeed, it is important to reiterate that the application of the term 'mentally tough' is applied in both examples *after* adversity overcome and success attained. They are ascribed with 'mental toughness' only in hindsight; had Rocky or Armstrong 'failed', this characteristic simply would not have been given (and the film unmade and life unremarked). This highlights an important ethical point in the way in which we assess a person's character and worth.

All of us are probably familiar with stories of success-against-the-odds and tales of struggle and glory such as the one offered by Armstrong. Such stories are often well-publicised and cherished by many as lasting testaments to human endeavour.⁷ But what of those who fail to achieve success in this fashion? The Hollywood story of mental toughness is denied to the majority of sports participants, reserved for only the most elite of all athletes. The elitist nature of top-level sport is designed to reward the successes of only a very small minority of athletes in this way (Messner 1992). What the literature upon mental toughness appears to be describing is an individual quality which, given adequate physical skill, genetic potential, and access to necessary resources (tactical, technical, financial, etc.), will allow a small minority of the 'mentally toughest' athletes to 'become the best'.

Indeed, the proposed definitions of mental toughness certainly suggest that the possession of 'mental toughness' allows ultimate objective success in terms of beating one's opponents, or success as consistent achievement of one's personal goals (which in the context of elite sport is usually ultimate success). In Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton (2002) conception, mental toughness is necessary for victory. In Gucciardi,

Gordon, and Dimmock (2009) description, mental toughness allows the consistent achievement of one's goals. Essentially, what these definitions appear to be describing is some form of mental capacity that will (after appropriate levels of striving and athletic endeavour) result in victorious achievements. Whether sporting success is consistently attained or temporarily deferred whilst one battles with adversity, ultimately mental toughness is proposed to play a central role in success.⁸ This relationship between mental toughness and success is what transforms the construct from an expression of human capacity for resilience and determination into an elitist ideal.

Mental Toughness and Elitism

In order to elaborate upon the moral consequences associated with mental toughness as an elitist ideal, it is useful to draw upon two arguments about the moral dimensions of elite sport praise and criticism made by Tännsjö (2000) and later, Holowchak (2005). Tännsjö argued that our fascination with winners at the elite level stems from a 'fascistoid' ideology. That is, when we sincerely admire the winners of sporting competitions, we do so out of a fascist love of strength. In his critique of the enthusiasm we show towards the winners of Olympic contests, Tännsjö states:

Our feeling is based on a value judgment: those who win the game, if the competition is fair, are *excellent*, and their excellence makes them *valuable*, which is why we admire them. Their excellence is, in an obvious manner, based on the strength they exhibit in the competition. (Tännsjö 2000, 20, emphasis in original)

Tännsjö further argues that we should resist the temptation to conflate the winner's excellence with the strength they exhibit. Moreover, when we show such great enthusiasm toward the strength of the winner, Tännsjö argues, we also feel contempt for the weakness of all non-winners. The contempt we show towards the non-winners makes them less valuable in our eyes, which further entails treating them with a lack of respect. They are not treated as 'full persons'. Herein lies Tännsjö's issue with the praise and criticism of elite sportspeople: the enthusiasm with which most of us regard the achievements of elite athletes stems from the core of fascist ideology; that is, a love of strength and contempt for weakness. Correspondingly, our ascription of the term 'mentally tough' to athletes for their successful performances could be seen as part of this fascistoid ideology, since those that fail are often labelled as lacking in mental toughness and are therefore weak and devalued in our esteem.

Tännsjö's view is certainly controversial, and was challenged by Tamburrini (2000). As Tamburrini rightly points out, admiring the performances of winners does not necessarily mean we feel contempt for losers. More often than not, we simply celebrate the 'excellent' achievement of elite winners, whilst non-winners ('loser' admittedly contains particular connotations) might be confronted with disappointment and criticism for their lack of skill (physical and mental) and/or effort (physical and mental), but this is not necessarily the same as contempt. Moreover, Tamburrini contends that appropriately directed praise and criticism outweighs any negative consequences (for society in general) caused by a minority of spectators who may indeed align themselves with a 'fascistoid' ideology and a contempt for losers. However, he does concede that certain aspects of our enthusiasm for the sporting elite appear to be morally 'dubious'.

Specifically, he questioned the manner in which elite athletes are raised to hero status by adoring fans, only to be discarded by them as soon as they fail to deliver results. One example in particular springs to mind: that of the English national football team. At each major international tournament, the English media and their fans closely scrutinise every move of their football 'heroes' who will once again bring sporting glory to the nation, only for them to be subjected to a barrage of criticism when they return after (inevitably!) failing to bring home the trophy.⁹

More recently, Holowchak (2005) offered an alternative position in the debate about elitism in sport. Holowchak states that our attitudes toward elite-level sport and the athletes that take part are in a state of crisis. Indeed, whilst conceding that Tännsjö goes too far in associating sporting elitism with a fascistoid ideology, Holowchak finds cause to resurrect Tännsjö's basic argument as follows:

In his remarks on contempt, what Tännsjö seems to have correctly identified is the tendency today to treat winners differently from non-winners in one morally significant manner. Only winners are deserving of full respect; all others are, in some sense, not to deserving of full respect as 'full persons'. Winners are awarded a fully human (perhaps even at times an undeserved superhuman) status; non-winners, having failed to achieve what the winners have achieved, are to a person morally substandard or deficient. (Holowchak 2005, 102)

Thus, non-winners are deprived of the respect reserved only for elite winners, who are often unjustifiably respected for their 'superhuman' or god-like qualities and achievements. Holowchak terms this his 'moral-instrumental thesis' and frames it as follows: 'much, if not most, of the praise and condemnation of elite athletes today is a matter of treating all non-winners as less than full human beings' (ibid., 102). Drawing upon Kantian ethical principles regarding the treatment of others never merely as means but always as ends, and affording them the respect they are due as persons, Holowchak finds cause for concern with current practices of praise and criticism in elite sport. Losers in elite sport are treated as morally and axiologically inferior to winners. As such, our attitudes toward elite sportspeople are in need of reform.

Holowchak's moral-instrumental thesis also applies to the concept of mental toughness as it is currently conceived in the sport psychology literature and applied in the media. Individuals who fail to live up the mentally tough ideal are treated as morally inferior to those who are viewed to display such self-belief, determination, courage, focus, resilience, etc. This is especially clear in Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock (2008) conceptualisation, whereby mental toughness is framed explicitly in the context of what it is not (i.e., self-doubt, laziness, poor integrity, unmotivated/extrinsically motivated, having a weak attitude, being easily distracted, having a fragile mindset, choking under pressure, having a weak emotional make-up, lacking sporting knowledge, and avoiding physically demanding situations). Indeed, when mental toughness is heralded as the key to athletic success, those who fail to achieve might be accused of the above 'weak' characteristics. This situation seems especially problematic given that very few individuals are able to achieve ultimate success at the elite level, and where at such levels of competition, placing third or fourth (etc.) is often an outstanding personal accomplishment deserving of the praise and respect reserved only for the outright winner.¹⁰ Accordingly, when 'second bests' in elite sport are regarded as not as tough (i.e., not as strong/valuable) as the outright winner, we not only deprive them of the respect due

to full persons, we also fail to recognise the profound personal and mental excellence required to even be an elite athlete in the first place (Holowchak 2005).

Whilst the critiques of elitism by Tännsjö and Holowchak deal more with general public reactions to athletes' various successes and failures than with sport psychology's invention of mental toughness *per se*, they usefully illustrate the moral consequences that flow from the manner in which sport psychology has equated toughness with elitist values, and with the Hollywood hero story. Specifically, all those who fail to live up to the unrealistic ideal set out by this narrative might be considered weak in the eyes of others, or worse – consider themselves to be weak (cf. Douglas and Carless 2009).

Furthermore, the language used to describe the construct of mental toughness certainly seems to reinforce these elitist attitudes towards success. For example, several attributes reflect the dominance required to be considered mentally tough:

Thriving on opportunities to beat other people in training. (Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2007, 250)

An unshakeable, tough attitude directed towards becoming a champion of the game. (Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock 2008, 271)

An inner arrogance that makes you believe that you can achieve anything you set your mind to. (Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2007, 250)

Such language explicitly associates the concept of mental toughness with success and Tännsjö's fascistoid ideology. Not only this, these attributes once again work to conjure up inspirational images of the doggedly determined Hollywood hero athlete. In a similar manner, mental toughness is rhetorically and idealistically constructed as a battle in which the valiant hero is victorious. For example, several attributes refer to having a 'never-say-die' attitude, 'grinding oneself out of trouble', having a 'killer instinct', 'punching through any obstacle', 'going for the jugular', and 'doing battle' (Bull et al. 2005; Thelwell, Weston, and Greenlees 2005; Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2007; Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock 2008). Such a way of talking about sport has previously been described as a 'privileged and institutionalized struggle language' (Smith and Sparkes 2004, 616) that often becomes a more powerful way of describing the sport experience. This metaphor of SPORT AS WAR¹¹ also contributes to the mental toughness ideal created in the sport psychology literature. It furthers the image of the mentally tough athlete as heroic warrior, and it seems to reinforce the high-stakes, must-win culture of elitism in sport in general. Consider the example of England's exit on penalties (once again!) in the 2011 women's football World Cup. England coach, Powell, criticised her players in not volunteering to step up to the spot.

Three times I had to ask [for volunteers] before anyone stepped forward.... You've got to want to take a penalty, but other players should have come forward and they didn't. That's weak, it's cowardice. (Ashdown 2011)

That the players that refused to step forward were labelled as weak and cowardly makes sense in light of the application of the SPORT AS WAR metaphor whereby those players didn't fulfil the (strong and brave) characteristics that players ought to have in a

war situation. These players weren't prepared to 'do battle' with the opposition or 'put their body on the line', to choose a couple of relevant phrases. However, to ascribe mental weakness to these players may be a conceptual mistake. They may have judged their (and others') skills appropriately. An alternative interpretation would be to view their resistance as an example of mental toughness in withstanding the pressure to come forward to take the place of others who were more skilful in that area.

This obsession with winning and being the best has been termed the 'Lombardian' ethic, after legendary American football coach Vince Lombardi, supposedly said 'winning isn't everything; it's the only thing'.¹² Consistent with the Lombardian ethic, athletes are expected to display the characteristics of mental toughness in the fullest, in order to facilitate the pursuit of ultimate success. Those who do not measure up are regarded as failures and mentally weak. Thus, individuals who fail to display characteristics attributed to mental toughness are denigrated and undeserving of the respect due to full persons. Even if ultimate success is taken out of consideration, when mental toughness is framed explicitly in the context of what it is not (e.g., Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock 2008), the failure of individuals to live up to the standards expected of a mentally tough athlete results in our failure to treat them with the respect due to full persons. As such, the crisis state in which Holowchak finds attitudes toward elite sport fully extends to the concept of mental toughness.

The concept of mental toughness thus demands complicity with particular values and sporting ideals. In the current climate of elite 'do-or-die' sport, athletes are expected to demonstrate their mental strength as total commitment to absolute success and those who do not achieve success are labelled as weak. Equally, those who are perceived to be weak or lacking in mental toughness may also be considered not worthy of success. Almost certainly, the mentally 'weak' will then be deprived of the respect due to full persons. Compare, for example, the case of US gymnast Kerri Strug with that of NBA basketball star Tracey McGrady. At the 1996 Atlanta Olympics under Romanian coach Béla Károlyi, Strug was required to perform one final vault routine after badly injuring her ankle on a previous attempt, in order to defeat the Russians and secure team gold for the United States. After being convinced by Károlyi that she would need to perform once more, Strug landed her final vault before collapsing onto her knees. This was depicted as a clear display of mental toughness and courage by Strug, and was celebrated as such by the American public. In contrast, Tracy McGrady was heavily criticised in 2008/2009 by the American media who labelled him 'soft' after struggling to come back from a knee injury (see Barry 2009). McGrady's character and mental toughness were called into question, supposedly because he was unwilling to 'play through the pain' (rather than accepting that he simply did not want to risk re-injury and believed other aspects of his life and future deserved to take priority over his sporting endeavours). Indeed, the concept of mental toughness dictates that athletes should be capable of 'pushing back the boundaries of physical and emotional pain, while still maintaining technique and effort under distress' (Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton 2007, 221). Moreover, within this ideology and consistent with the SPORT AS WAR metaphor, athletes are also encouraged to perform 'to the best of [their] ability whilst carrying an injury...pushing [their] body through extreme physical fatigue' (Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock 2008, 273). Therefore, behaviour which contradicts these standards may be considered as mental weakness. As anyone who has suffered a knee injury in sport will understand, they can often be very serious, sometimes even

career-ending. Therefore, applying the term 'mentally weak' to athletes who treat such injuries with due caution, rather than hastily rushing themselves back to full health and risking re-injury is guilty of succumbing to a fascistoid ideology. In a parallel universe, the same athletes who struggled to compete through injury might have been praised for suffering the wilderness of ignominy for a few years whilst they regained full fitness in order to achieve a greater level of success at a later time. The problem with mental toughness is that it is only applied to an individual in hindsight and depending on outcome. Indeed, had Strug failed to 'overcome the obstacle' of her injured ankle by winning the gold, she would have more likely been considered a vulnerable and 'weak' victim of Károlyi's admittedly dubious (perhaps at times, even borderline abusive) coaching practices (see Ryan 2000).

Consistent with this fascistoid ideology, the 'weak' are considered expendable. This is perhaps no more abundantly clear than in the way players, coaches and managers are so often dismissed as soon as a team starts to experience a poor run of form (attributed to mental weakness). Consider the example of England cricketer Kevin Pietersen. In 2010, Pietersen was dropped from the England side after a period of poor performances, and continues to face harsh criticism and questions over his mental toughness and international calibre despite being praised in his early career as a man of formidable strength and talent (Brenkley 2011). Similarly, one of Pietersen's predecessors, Mark Ramprakash, was derided for allowing his mental weakness to asphyxiate his natural talent and skill (Smith 2009). Consistent with Holowchak's moral-instrumental thesis, this type and level of criticism leads to these individuals being regarded with less than the respect due to them as full persons. Moreover, when those who display signs of weakness are considered expendable, we perhaps come closest to what Tännsjö considered contempt. Whilst we wish to reject the idea that elite sport is inherently as fascist as Tännsjö believes, one could argue that the way in which professional elite athletes and managers are disparaged and dismissed for poor performance shows a contempt for weakness that is at least partially reminiscent of a fascistoid ideology.

However, before we condemn elite sport on the charge of being a fascistoid institution, we must once again call attention to the fact that the arguments made by Tännsjö and Holowchak contra-elitism deal mostly with general public reactions. As such, part of our critique concerning the media's portrayal of various athletes as 'tough' or 'weak' based on their successes and failures might be considered somewhat speculative. Indeed, the opposite argument could probably be made that athletes who do their best and take defeat with dignity are admired for their mental strength whilst the arrogant winner comes through as the less developed personality.¹³ As such, there exists a multitude of different responses people may give to elite athletes' particular endeavours.

Accordingly, an important future consideration may be to examine in more detail the way people respond to stories of 'Hollywood hero athletes' in a variety of sporting contexts. As Smith and Sparkes (2011) remind us, people's responses to such stories matter because of the way they effect and affect others (e.g., the impact of various responses upon athletes themselves and on other listeners of heroic stories). Via a critique of responses, we can 'draw attention to the complex assumptions that inform their construction' (Smith and Sparkes 2011, 50), thereby creating a more sophisticated appreciation of how mental toughness is understood both by the public and by individual athletes in relation to the romantic-hero narrative. Future projects might prof-

itably undertake a philosophically informed critique of people's general responses to media portrayals of athletes as mentally tough or weak. Such research may benefit from the present argument concerning the romantic-hero narrative of the mentally tough athlete.

The Issue with Mental Toughness

Though an analytic definition of mental toughness will remain elusive, it can be usefully applied when we wish to gesture towards particular characteristics, personality traits or virtues; such as tenacity, resilience and determination. And there is no criticism to be made against athletes striving to develop many of the qualities associated with mental toughness; qualities that are commended in Aristotle's pentathlete for example (Reid 2010). In fact, the mental qualities proposed to constitute mental toughness (e.g., a strong sense of self-belief, resilience, focused concentration, courage and persistence in the face of adversity, and powerful intrinsic motivation) may well contribute to the achievement of human excellence, or indeed, be considered excellences in their own right. We can refer to these qualities as 'mental excellences'. However, the problem exists in the way these mental excellences are regarded as avenues to ultimate success and subsequently, the way in which the concept is utilised by sports psychologists in particular. As we demonstrated earlier, it is this association with success that transforms mental toughness from an expression of human excellence into an elitist ideal; a product of a society that demands winners and adulates successful heroes. Indeed, mental toughness as it is often utilised by sport psychologists currently suffers from an overemphasis on winning that is rife within modern sport in general (Hundley 2002).

Consistent with the premise that sports are valuable in and of themselves for the experience they provide (e.g., Loland 2002), we maintain that the traits generally associated with the concept of mental toughness are of value in and of themselves, independent of their association with winning. The mental excellences proposed to constitute mental toughness are important as ends in themselves, rather than simply as means.¹⁴ It is the experience of excellence that counts, not whether the experience will lead to ultimate victory. Taking such a view of mental toughness places value back on the sport experience itself, rather than on simply 'being the best'. Indeed, as Hundley put it:

Competition can therefore be regarded as something more than the will to dominate an opponent or to win at any cost. Rather, competition may be more correctly regarded as an activity in which competitors aid each other in the act of striving for excellence. Even within a highly competitive situation, it is how you play the game. (Hundley 2002, 207)

However, when the Lombardian ethic and 'winning is everything' approach takes precedence, the pursuit of mental excellence is undermined in the pursuit of domination. When mental toughness is seen as the key to ultimate success, the danger is that we will only value the mental excellence involved when athletes *achieve* success, which is a mistake. As a further example, consider the particularly high stakes nature of professional grand slam tennis (Harwood 2009). A talented player can defeat several tough opponents only to get blown away in the semis or the final by a Williams or a Nadal. Having failed to achieve ultimate success, the considerable mental excellences this player showed in reaching the final may be quickly forgotten in light of his or her one

failure. Such a lack of recognition fails to celebrate this player's excellence, whilst the winner is praised for the dominance he or she showed as champion. When the mental excellences of the winner are valued, and all non-winners are criticised for their (mental) weaknesses, we again fall foul of Holowchak's moral-instrumental thesis and fail to treat non-winners as full persons.

Finally, one last issue remains regarding the current conceptualisation of mental toughness. Whilst the excellences of mental toughness are virtuous in their own right, they too become problematic when, through idealistic rhetoric and metaphor, they are transformed into a glorified Hollywood story of struggle and success-against-the-odds. The heroic qualities often ascribed to mentally tough athletes provide an inspirational ideal image for young athletes to aspire to (Sparkes, Perez-Samaniego, and Smith in press). Such is the cultural power of this narrative. However, ultimately the hero story can only be available to a select few individuals. Indeed, the exclusionary nature of professional sport dictates that only a small proportion of individuals will ever enter the professional ranks, and an even fewer amount will achieve ultimate success. As a result the heroic story of the mentally tough athlete as the valiant and triumphant warrior is denied to the vast majority of sports participants, and ought not to be perpetuated as a key component of the experience of mental toughness. For a young athlete to attempt to force their experience to fit within the narrowly defined contours of the mental toughness - Hollywood hero - story may be too unrealistic a possibility (cf. Sparkes and Smith 2002; Douglas and Carless 2009). As inspirational and glamorous as it may seem, the romantic-hero narrative of the mentally tough warrior will only ever apply to a few of the most elite of sporting contestants.

Conclusion

The concept of mental toughness has considerable potential to influence the sport psychology literature in a valuable way. However, the current view of mental toughness as the key to success and the (over)emphasis it places on winning undermine the mental excellences and moral virtues which form the basis of the construct. Furthermore, when mental toughness is framed explicitly in the context of what it is not, athletes who are unable to conform with the many standards of toughness expected of the 'heroic warrior' athlete will likely be labelled as weak. At the levels of criticism seen in professional sport, the judgement of people in this way often equates with a moral failure to treat these individuals with the respect due to full persons. It seems that the concept of mental toughness currently corresponds with problematic elitist attitudes towards success in sport that are very widely spread and culturally ingrained throughout society.

The pseudo-concept that mental toughness seems to have become might be understood not as a sound psychological construct, but as a rhetorically constructed vision of an inspirational sporting ideal, created to help satisfy our continuing desire for, and fascination with, sporting heroes. Critical analysis demonstrates that the concept of mental toughness is infused with heroic metaphors and elitist discourse about what it means to be successful in sport. Indeed, it certainly seems that the current conceptualisation of mental toughness reflects the heroism for which champion athletes are exalted above the rest of society. Instead, the emphasis on success ought to be removed from the concept of mental toughness in order to highlight a broader range

of virtues which should really be at the core of mental toughness. Shifting the focus back onto the development of a virtuous soul and the internal goods associated with sport¹⁵ might therefore relieve the concept of its morally problematic association with elitism and the external goods derived from outcome. Furthermore, a reconceptualisation should be made to the way in which mental toughness is described along the lines of the 'Hollywood hero' story in order to make it more applicable to sporting contestants at all levels of competition.

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Notes

1. 'Fascistoid' refers to Torbjörn Tännjö's neologism concerning something tending to or resembling fascism. See Tännjö (2000).
2. These attributes and characteristics encompass a very vast array of traits and concepts and it is beyond the scope of this paper to list them all or address them all fully. Nevertheless, throughout the paper we intend to give the reader a flavour of the sort of characteristics that have come to shape the concept of 'mental toughness'.
3. The elitist values which underpin the current conceptualisation of mental toughness also clearly have their roots in dominant masculine sporting values of strength, power, and superiority over others, thereby helping to forge mental toughness into a gendered social construction.
4. Reid (2010) reminds us of the way in which heroic athletic qualities were celebrated as god-like traits in the heroes of ancient Greek mythology. In modern times, athletes are often highly regarded for their heroic qualities, which seem to be reflected in the way mental toughness is referred to as 'unshakeable', 'insatiable', and 'unbelievable'. Reid further questioned whether it is acceptable for athletes to be regarded as heroes in this manner; a question which applies equally to athletes who are celebrated as heroes for their 'heroic' mental toughness.
5. Many of the qualities and values promoted by the construct of mental toughness represent very positive human characteristics which can enrich the lives of those who hold them. However, problems exist when such characteristics are linked with elitism and absolute success, as appears to be the case with mental toughness. Such problems are the focus of later sections of this essay.
6. Sparkes (2004) demonstrated how Armstrong's story parallels the classical monomyth – the story of the brave hero who undertakes a noble quest – a story particularly valorised by Western culture, and which provides the template for the 'Hollywood hero' narrative being critiqued here as a primary component of mental toughness.
7. Izod (2002) contends that one of the reasons for our adulation of sporting heroes and their stories is that we seek to gain something personally from our identification with their image and their glory. 'A hero's triumphs and failures are our own' (Izod 2002, 371). Similarly, it is because of our intense fascination with winners that the heroic stories of champion athletes are so well publicised (Messner 1992).

8. Crust (2008) also takes issue with the way in which mental toughness is overtly associated with success in current definitions. Owing to the fact that all athletes possess differing levels of skills and abilities, Crust suggests that conceiving mental toughness in absolute, rather than relative terms may be a mistake.
9. This example also relates well to another point which Tännsjö (2000) makes about nationalism (although this theme will not be developed further in this essay). Specifically, Tännsjö argued that elitism directed towards national sports teams reflects a potentially dangerous form of nationalism (particularly at times when political nationalism is strong), which is also associated with a 'fascistoid' ideology.
10. Messner (1992) makes a similar point in his book 'Power at Play', suggesting that it is possible for athletes to develop their own definitions of success whereby they may celebrate their greatest achievements, yet are often prevented from fully doing so by the dominant and prevailing social attitude towards success in sports.
11. An analysis of the metaphor of SPORT AS WAR has recently been considered in more detail by Shields and Bredemeier (2011).
12. Once again, Messner (1992) takes issue with this attitude toward success and failure. He argues that the Lombardian ethic creates a structured system of failure that is evident at all levels of sports competition, from elite level, right through to organised children's sport.
13. Our thanks to an anonymous reviewer to alerting us to this possibility.
14. Indeed, when it comes to elite level sport, sport psychology seems to have all but forgotten its lessons surrounding the adaptive properties of a 'mastery oriented motivational climate', in which athletes are praised for effort and determination, and for the mastery of various sporting skills - rather than for objective success and superiority (Harwood, Spray, and Keegan 2008). However, rather than suggest that sport psychology return to recommendations often directed toward grass roots sport, we argue that the core of mental toughness should emphasise 'mental excellences' that resonate with Aristotle's call to strive for the achievement of one's highest potential.
15. As illustrated by the Ancient Greek concepts of *arête*, *sophrosyne* and *askesis* (Dombrowski 2009).

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