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## **Narcissism in Football Players: Stereotype or Reality?**

*Willie F. Elman and Stuart J. McKelvie*

*Department of Psychology  
Bishop's University*

### **ABSTRACT**

This study was conducted in two parts. In the first part, which investigated if university football players are perceived to be narcissistic, 30 undergraduates completed the Narcissism Personality Inventory (NPI) as themselves and as they thought a university football player would. Their scores were much higher when they responded as a football player. In the second part, which investigated self-reported narcissism, a total of 112 university football players, other athletes, and nonathletes completed the NPI, but only as themselves. Scores were higher for football players than for nonathletes, and scores for other athletes did not differ from either group. It is concluded that part of the perceived difference in narcissism between football players and nonathletes is stereotypic, but part is also real. The origin and function of narcissism in football players is also discussed.

### **Introduction**

To understand the psychology of the athlete, researchers have examined personality differences between athletes and nonathletes, and among athletes in various sports. Although no "athletic personality" has been found (Vealey, 1992; Wann, 1997), athletes are generally more extraverted, emotionally stable, tough-minded, assertive, and self-confident than nonathletes (Butt, 1976; Cox, 1998) and, within sports, team players are generally more extraverted, more anxious, more dependent but less sensitive-imaginative than players of individual sports (Cox, 1998). Inconsistent results are often due to methodological and theoretical weaknesses in the studies (Wann, 1997) and, because the research is necessarily descriptive, it is difficult to distinguish whether sport participation causes personality differences (the developmental hypothesis) or whether pre-existing differences draw people into sports (the selection hypothesis)

(Cox, 1998).

The focus of the present investigation is university football players. It has been suggested that they are more aggressive and anxious than other athletes such as golfers or tennis players (Cox, 1998; Singer, 1975). In fact, although football players were more dominant and less steady than nonathletes, they were not different on either trait from baseball players or track team members (Aamodt, Alexander, & Kimbrough, 1982; Valliant, Simpson-Housley, & McKelvie, 1981). Furthermore, they did not differ from nonathletes on any of the 20 personality dimensions of the California Psychological Inventory (Berger & Littlefield, 1969). However, comparing players from various positions on a football team, Cox and Yoo (1995) found differences in anxiety control, concentration, and confidence. Player performance has also been linked to group dependence, cohesion, tough-mindedness, extraversion, emotional stability, mood, aggression, and need for achievement (Garland & Barry, 1988; Granito & Rainey, 1988; Nation & LeUnes, 1983; Teevan & Yalof, 1980).

This study was prompted by the anecdotal observation that football players on campus seemed to be self-centered, self-aggrandizing and demanding of special treatment (e.g., when waiting in line). These behaviors are symptomatic of narcissism, a trait named after the Greek youth Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection (Rathven & Holstrom, 1996). The purpose of the present study was to examine, first, whether this perception was widespread and, second, whether football players actually scored higher than other athletes and nonathletes on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979), which was designed to measure narcissism (Narc) for non-clinical populations. Although there has not been any research on perceived narcissism in athletes, swimmers are seen as more extraverted, assertive, and competitive than nonathletes, but just as friendly, bright, and uninhibited (McMartin & Klay, 1983). While the research on measured narcissism in athletes is limited, Carroll (1989) found that bodybuilders scored higher than other athletes who in turn scored higher than nonathletes.

Why might football players display a higher level of narcissism than others? According to Nelson (1994), football is seen by participants as a "macho" sport, which makes them feel "awesome", "a step above everyone else", and a sense of entitlement. This may occur in part because a player who is intimidating on the field earns respect, which he then thinks he also deserves off the field. A football player also operates under a very tight system of rules, which may lead to immature, childlike behavior in other settings (Butt, 1976). Furthermore, consistent with the social learning hypothesis that narcissism develops as a response to overevaluation (Emmons, 1987), a player's ego may be boosted by fan adulation and publicity. Players report that one of the rewards for playing is a good self-image, part of which is feeling a "big shot" (Stebbins, 1987), and even male high school students obtain high social status from sports (Figler, 1981). In particular, in the university setting in which the present research was conducted, football has a long tradition and a high profile, with strong support from students, faculty, the local community, and alumni.

As noted above, the present study was designed to investigate two issues: whether local university football players are perceived as narcissistic by other undergraduates, and whether the local football players actually score higher on a self-report test of this trait than other athletes and nonathletes. In the first part of the study, undergraduates completed a narcissism inventory as

themselves and as they thought a university football player would. Because the campus was small (about 2000 students), these participants had many opportunities to observe football players off as well as on the field, and to form an impression of them. In the second part of the study, football players, other athletes and another sample of undergraduates who were not athletes completed the narcissism inventory as themselves. Because athletes and nonathletes have differed on extraversion and neuroticism (Cox, 1998; Singer, 1975), and because narcissism has been positively related to extraversion and psychoticism but negatively related to lying (Raskin & Hall, 1981), these traits were also measured.

Because one factor in the development of narcissism may be social reward, participants were sampled from all four years of study, to investigate the possibility that narcissism levels would increase over time for football players. This methodological strategy is recommended by Iso-Ahola & Hatfield (1986), who bemoan the fact that sports personality research often simplistically assumes that trait differences are static. The cross-sectional data have implications for the developmental and selection hypotheses, which have been proposed to account for personality differences in athletes. Increased narcissism over time for football players, but not for others, would support the developmental account.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

In the first part of the study, which was designed to examine the perception of narcissism, 15 male and 15 female nonathlete undergraduates were randomly recruited at various campus locations. In the second part of the study, which was designed to measure self-reported narcissism in various groups, participants were 112 male students: 36 football players on the varsity team roster, 33 other athletes on their team rosters (8 basketball, 19 rugby, 6 soccer), and 43 nonathletes, many of whom were taking psychology courses. The three groups were matched on year of study (one to four).

### **Materials**

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979) is a 40-item self-report narcissism (Narc) inventory patterned after the DSM-III diagnostic criteria for the narcissistic personality disorder. Alternate-form reliability at 8 weeks is .72 (Raskin & Hall, 1981). Information supplied with the test showed internal consistency reliability alpha to be .84 for men. Raskin and Hall also claim validity support from positive correlations between NPI narcissism and the psychoticism and extraversion scales (both .23), and a negative correlation (-.26) with the lie scale of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). In addition, there are theoretically meaningful relationships between NPI scores and MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) scores for mania, depression, psychesthesia, introversion, repression, ego control, and the narcissistic PD overlapping scale (Hilsenroth, Handler, & Blais, 1996; Raskin & Novacek, 1989; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996).

The EPQ is a 90-item inventory, with 1-month test-retest reliabilities of .78 (Psychoticism, P), .89 (Extraversion, E), .86 (Neuroticism, N), and .84 (Lie Scale, L). Internal consistencies were

in the .70s for P and the .80s for E, N and L. Eysenck and Eysenck report a variety of data as evidence for the validity of the scales.

**Procedure**

In the first part of the study, participants completed the NPI in a counterbalanced order under two sets of instructions: answer the questions honestly about yourself and answer questions the way you think a university football player would. In the second part of the study, different participants completed the NPI and EPQ in a counterbalanced order.

**Results**

For the undergraduates who completed the NPI twice in the first part of the study, their mean score was higher under the football instructions than under the self instructions ( $M$ 's = 36.40, 13.03;  $SD$ 's = 3.20, 7.22), repeated measures  $t(29) = 15.26, p < .05$ . The standardized effect size (Cohen, 1977) for this difference was  $d = 3.24$ .

Table 1. Mean Scores for Narcissism, Extraversion, Psychoticism, Neuroticism, and Lie for Footballers, Athletes and Non-athletes.

	Footballers			Athletes			Non-athletes		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Narcissism	36	19.4	8.7	33	17.8	7.0	43	15.2	6.5
Extraversion	36	14.4	5.5	33	15.3	4.7	43	12.7	5.2
Psychoticism	36	8.3	4.9	33	6.4	3.6	43	6.0	3.9
Neuroticism	36	9.4	4.80	33	10.1	5.00	43	10.6	4.80
Lie	36	4.6	3.4	33	5.2	4.0	43	6.1	3.8

Note. Maximum scores: 40 (Narc), 21(E), 23 (N), 25 (P), and 21 (L).

For the second part of the study, Pearson product moment correlation coefficients between Narc and the other three trait measures for all 122 participants were .307 (E), .288 (P), -.263 (L), and -.163 (N). The first three are significant with alpha = .05, indicating positive relationships between Narc and E, and between Narc and P, and a negative relationship between Narc and L.

To examine how the personality traits predicted group membership as a football player, athlete, or nonathlete, this dependent variable was regressed on the scores for Narc, E, P, L, and N. The only significant predictor was Narc ( $R = .237, p < .05$ ). The regression equation (unstandardized coefficient) was  $G = -0.026Narc + 2.517$ , where  $G =$  group.

Scores for Narc, E, P, L, and N were then treated with 3 X 4 (Group X Year) mixed model ANOVAs. Because the effect of year was not significant either as a main effect or as an

interaction, a set of one-way ANOVAS was performed, with data collapsed over year. Consistent with the regression analysis, the only significant effect was group on Narc,  $F(2, 111), 3.31, p < .05$ . Post hoc Newman-Keuls tests showed that scores were significantly higher for football players than for nonathletes (effect size  $d = 0.57$ ), with other athletes in between and not significantly different from the football or nonathlete groups. Because there was a negative correlation between Narc scores and Lie scores, another one-way ANOVA was conducted on the data with high lie scorers ( $> 14$ ) removed, but this did not change the results. Eysenck and Eysenck (1975) do not recommend a specific cutoff for a high lie score, but they suggest correlating L with the measured trait and, if it is significant, removing the "highest-scoring" respondents (perhaps the top 5%), then re-analyzing the data. The top 5% corresponds to approximately 2 *SDs* above the mean, which was 13 here and 14 from their norms for males aged 16 to 19 years. Removing people with lie scores above 14 was consistent with Eysenck and Eysenck's suggestion.

Using Raskin and Novacek's (1989) cutoff of 25 (90th percentile, about 1 *SD* above the mean) on the NPI for "highly narcissistic individuals", the number of cases above 25 and at or below 25 was counted for each group. The number above 25 was 11 out of 36 for footballers, 6 out of 33 for athletes, and 2 out of 43 for nonathletes. This pattern was significant,  $X^2(2, N = 112) = 9.37, p < .01$ . For proportions scoring highly, footballers (.31) exceeded athletes (.18) who exceeded nonathletes (.05) ( $p$ 's  $< .05$ , z-tests). Adopting a stricter criterion for highly narcissistic (30; about 2 *SDs* above the mean), corresponding numbers were 6 footballers (.17), 2 athletes (.06), and 0 nonathletes. This pattern was also significant,  $X^2(2, N = 112) = 8.29, p < .05$ , and the three proportions were significantly different from each other ( $p$ 's  $< .01$ , z-tests).

## Discussion

The significant positive correlations between Narc and E (.288) and between Narc and P (.288), and the significant negative correlation between Narc and L (-.263) replicate the pattern of significance reported by Raskin and Hall (1979), whose corresponding correlations were .23, .23, -.26. The present results therefore provide further support for the validity of the NPI as a measure of narcissism.

In the first part of the study, the nonathlete university students perceived the football players to be higher in narcissism than themselves, and the size of this effect ( $d = 3.24$ ) clearly exceeded Cohen's (1977) guideline of 0.80 for "large." Indeed, the mean score for footballers ( $M = 36.40$ ), was close to the maximum (40) and was greater than Raskin and Novacek's (1989) cutoff of 25 for "highly narcissistic individuals", single-sample  $t(29) = 4.80, p < .01$ , and greater than our 2 *SD* cutoff,  $t(29) = 2.69, p < .05$ . The participants were not asked why they perceived football players to be so high on narcissism, but the anecdotal observations that prompted this study indicated that football players make their presence known around the campus by demanding privileges in various ways that suggest how self-centred they are. For example, they have a reputation for moving directly to the head of the line for entry into university dances and for service at the bar. In future research, judges should be asked to explain their perception of narcissism in athletes, and their answers should be qualitatively analyzed.

When football players were actually tested, only narcissism (not extraversion, neuroticism,

psychoticism, or lie) predicted group membership. The lack of effects of extraversion and neuroticism is inconsistent with previous evidence that they are associated with athletic participation and team sports (Butt, 1976; Cox, 1998). In contrast, self-reported narcissism, which has not been previously investigated with football players, was higher for them than for nonathletes, and other university athletes scored between these two groups. The size of the effect for the difference between football players and nonathletes was 0.57. This is "medium" ( $d = 0.50$ ) in Cohen's (1977) terms, but is considerably less than the effect size ( $d = 3.24$ ) for perceived narcissism. The absolute level of self-reported narcissism in football players ( $M = 19.4$ ) is also much smaller than the level of perceived narcissism ( $M = 36.4$ ). In addition, although the number of people classified as "highly narcissistic" was small, there were more football players than other athletes and more other athletes than nonathletes.

Is the high level of perceived narcissism in football players a stereotype or is it real? If the football players dissimulated, their self-report score may have underestimated their true level of narcissism. However, when people scoring high on the lie scale were removed from the analysis, the pattern of results remained the same, suggesting that the self-reports were not distorted. This implies that part of the very large difference in perceived narcissism between football players and others is stereotypic, but also that part of it is real. The stereotype may have occurred because students had seen some football players acting in a self-aggrandizing manner, and they falsely generalized this behavior to university football players in general. This would be likely if the players had been in a group, which they often are on campus. Other people may also act in this way, but if they did so as individuals, their behavior is less likely to be remembered and generalized to a group. It is also possible that football players' acting out was a function of being with team mates. In future research, participants might be asked to complete the NPI in the role of other athletes (basketball, rugby and soccer players). This would show if they were perceived as intermediate in narcissism, as suggested by their self-reports.

Given that there is a real difference in narcissism between football players and nonathletes, what is its origin and does it serve any purpose? To examine whether narcissism in the football players might develop as a function of the university environment, the data were initially examined with year of study as a factor. In fact, the mean narcissism scores increased slightly over the four years for football players (17.8, 18.8, 21.0, 21.4), somewhat for the nonathletes (12.4, 16.8, 16.1, 16.0), but decreased slightly for the other athletes (20.6, 17.8, 15.5, 15.8). However, neither the main effect of year or the interaction between group and year was significant, indicating that football narcissism scores did not increase selectively over time. Although the present sample size in each group X year cell (about 9) is only sufficient to detect a large interaction effect, this result is similar to findings from another repeated measures study in which personality structure, as measured by the Cattell 16PF scales, did not change as a function of athletic participation between entry to postsecondary education and graduation (Werner & Gottheil, 1966). Together, these results do not support the developmental hypothesis that athletic participation, or a covariate of it, influences personality. Rather, they are more consistent with the selection hypothesis that sports attract certain kinds of people. From the present study, it appears that university football attracts people who are already higher than average in narcissism. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that the narcissism was developed at some prior level of participation. It is possible that the football players had already experienced fan adulation

when playing in high school or college (Figler, 1981).

Does elevated narcissism in university football players serve any useful purpose? Although off-field narcissistic behavior may not reach pathological levels, most writers regard it as immature (e.g. Butt, 1976, 1994), and the anecdotal observations that prompted the present study included feelings of resentment towards the football players. However, if the selection hypothesis is correct, and narcissistic males are attracted to football, narcissism may be an advantage. For example, the narcissistic belief that respect is related to the ability to intimidate (Nelson, 1994) might enhance a player's ability to play an aggressive sport like football. If this is the case, narcissism might also be higher in other physically aggressive sports and lower in non-aggressive sports. A sense of superiority might even allow players to objectify their opponents and to avoid any feelings of guilt that might be associated with victory<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, because narcissists have been found to exaggerate their contribution to a shared activity at the expense of a partner (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides & Elliot, 2000), their presence may disrupt team cohesion.

### **Conclusion**

University football players were perceived to be much higher in narcissism than other students, and the players themselves reported a higher level of narcissism than nonathletes. Part of the perceived difference is likely to be stereotypic, but a portion is real. Given that the other athletes scored between football players and nonathletes, future research might systematically investigate both perceived and self-reported narcissism in different sports, particularly those that vary in physical aggression. The present finding of elevated narcissism in university football players should also be replicated in various settings (e.g., high school, university, professional) with larger sample sizes for players at different stages of their sporting careers. Finally, because narcissism may be encouraged when athletes are in the public or media spotlight, it should be investigated in different cultures that favor different sports (e.g., American football in North America and Europe, soccer in Europe and North America).

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