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# Sports as a Mechanism for Reaching Your Potential: The Relationship between Positive Psychology and Sports

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## Abstract

People have been searching for the good life or personal well-being since the ancient Greeks. During this same period, people have been expressing themselves through sport, participating in games of athleticism as a means of discovering who they are and reaching their potential. This chapter examines the relationship between sports and a flourishing life. By examining sports as a mechanism of achieving specific traits of positive psychology associated with flourishing, the researcher is able to determine that sports are a matrix in which human potential can be nourished.

**Keywords:** sports, well-being, flourishing, potential, health

## 1. What is flourishing?

Flourishing is the pinnacle of human potential. Sometimes referred to as self-actualization, excellence, well-being, or happiness, a flourishing life is what people strive to attain. Flourishing is an optimal human functioning. It occurs when an individual fits their environment so they can function more efficiently and effectively. Fitness is a sport-related term regarding how well individuals fit their environment. When it's a good fit, individuals are more able to overcome resistance, hence why the term fitness has been adopted by resistance training athletes. When an individual's fitness is poor, they are not adequately fit for their environment and will have more difficulty facing resistance or adversity.

An individual's fitness is relevant for every aspect of life and easily identifiable in sports. For instance, some athletes are naturally better at power sports, and some are better at endurance sports. When an athlete identifies their innate abilities, if they participate in sports highlighting those abilities, they will be a better fit and reach a higher potential. Flourishing is significantly influenced by how well an individual understands themselves and their situation.

If you go back to the time of the ancient Greeks, the philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) believed that Eudaimonic well-being or engaging in something of value, a long-term investment rather than short-term pleasure, fulfills our potential. Aristotle believed we should do things worth doing, and when we act in such a manner, we may flourish [1]. Things worth doing are opportunities in alignment with our

values. Values are deeply held beliefs that establish our character. When an individual lives in accordance with their values, they fit their environment, they are being their authentic self. Their life is in order and they have a set objective that makes sense for them. Living in this manner is often referred to as living with a purpose.

For the reason that flourishing is specific to the individual, it is considered subjective, i.e., your well-being is specific to you and your needs, it is not a universal constant [1, 2]. What works for you, may not work for anyone else and vice versa. This concept is known as subjective well-being (SWB) and is understood as your life satisfaction is the result of all your positive emotions minus your negative emotions:

$$E_p - E_n = S \quad (1)$$

How you interpret your emotions and come to your unique conclusion is determined by your uniqueness as an individual and how you react as an individual to social and environmental situations. In other words, according to SWB, your well-being is idiosyncratic.

If flourishing is indeed a subjective measure of how well we strive toward things worth doing, then the activities we fill our days with should be purposefully aimed at self-improvement. The argument presented in this chapter is sport is an activity that provides opportunity to invest in developing traits that enrich well-being, and although sports may seem to be a pastime, sports are actually a breeding ground for human flourishing.

The remainder of this chapter will examine three concepts of positive psychology associated with flourishing through the lens of sport in an attempt to highlight the value of engaging in sport as a mechanism for reaching human potential.

### 1.1 Positive psychology and human potential via sport

Sports have deep roots in personal development. The word sport evolved out of the word disport, which is the combination of dis- meaning *away* or *depart* and portare, meaning *carry*. Sport means to carry away from something or break apart (de- and part) from it. Sports, from a philosophical perspective, carry people away from their current sense of self so they can break apart from it then rebuild stronger. Similar to the etymology of sport, the word exercise which is a subdiscipline of sports originated from ex- meaning *out of* and arcere meaning *constraint*. In other words, exercise means to remove our constraints or liberate the body from itself.

Sport and self-improvement are innately linked. Specifically, as a means of replacing our old self with an evolved version through physical effort. During sport, people are burning off their old self through sweat and hard work and replacing it with a stronger body and mind as we adapt to the stimulus. This scientific principle is represented in mythology as the symbolic phoenix burning to ashes in flames and being reborn stronger. Prior to the scientific method, storytelling was the primary way of explaining the world. Powerful stories such as the phoenix stick with us through the generations because they metaphorically represent what individuals are going through. The phoenix is a symbol that athletes enact as they chase their potential, burn off their weaker self, and replace it with a stronger being through sports.

In this chapter, we will examine three concepts of positive psychology that are associated with human potential and flourishing through the lens of sport. These concepts are PERMA, self-determination theory, and core self-evaluation theory [1, 3]. We will then examine underlying denominators between the concepts and discuss a generalized concept for extracting potential out of sport.

## 2. Sports and PERMA

One of the founding fathers of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, in his book *Flourish*, shares a model for flourishing known as PERMA. PERMA is an acronym capturing what Seligman deems to be the five components of human flourishing, positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment [4] (**Figure 1**).

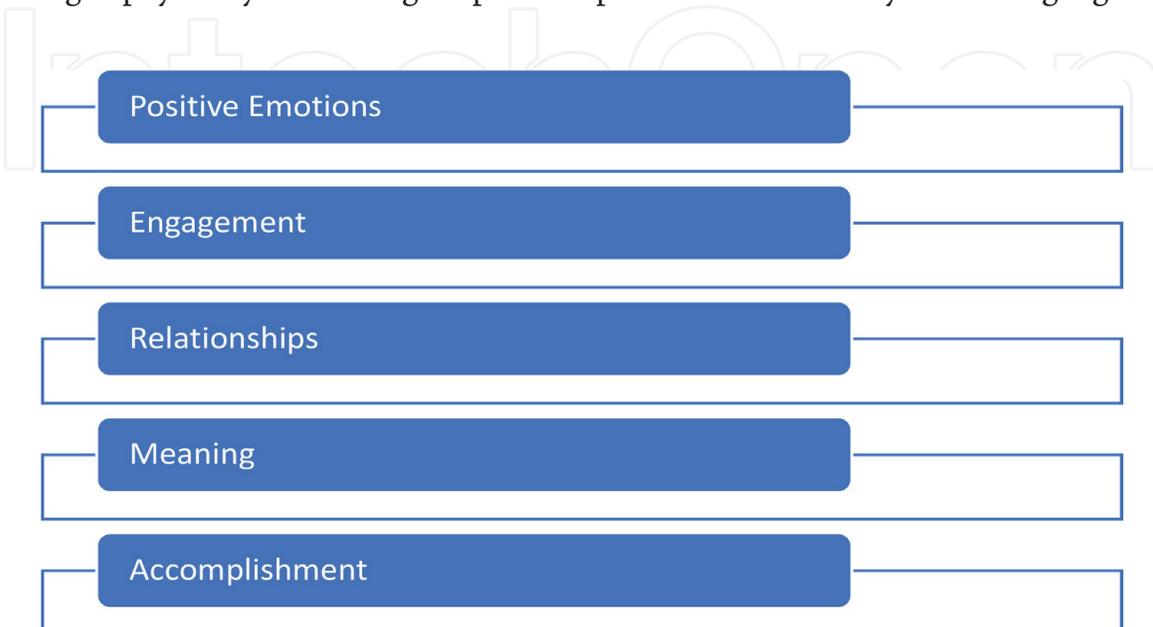
Sports are a catalyst for action. With sports ranging from soccer, rock-climbing, darts, and e-sports, sports are as diverse as the people participating in them. With that said, sports are a means by which people voluntarily create, problem solve, and act within a boundary of agreed upon rules and receive feedback as a result of those actions. This deems sports as an appropriate mechanism to measure the five elements of PERMA.

Uusiautti et al. [5], in an attempt to find a solution to the problem of boys' decline in success and engagement in schoolwork in Finland, examined the implications of sport as a method of increasing the five components of PERMA. Their findings suggest that sports do indeed increase the traits of PERMA and thus well-being. The researchers' aim is by increasing the young males' well-being; the boys will be positive contributors to their families, communities, and society. Using PERMA as a lens by which we can analyze sports' contribution to human well-being is a justifiable means of acknowledging the correlation between sports and human potential [6].

### 2.1 Positive emotions and sports

Positive emotions have been shown to broaden the scope of attention and cognition which increases well-being [7]. These findings are reason to invest in activities that stimulate positive emotions. Sports activate your entire spectrum of emotions. When athletes deem a stressor as within their ability and an opportunity for growth, positive emotions follow. As athletes develop their skills and participate at a level of competition appropriate for their current ability, they will eventually see progress, and positive emotions will arise from seeing an improvement in their sport.

There is a saying, "no one has ever felt bad after a workout." This axiom although anecdotal is a remark regarding the satisfaction people have after engaging in something as physically demanding as sport. People who create a lifestyle involving higher



**Figure 1.**  
*PERMA image.*

frequency of physical activity boost psychological well-being [8]. When people exercise beyond the weekly recommended number of moderate to vigorous activity minutes, they flourish and have positive affect, and their autonomy needs are met [9]. In other words, vigorous exercise produces a favorable emotional state [10].

## **2.2 Engagement and sports**

Engagement or flow is the process of being fully engulfed by the activity. It is described as a state of optimal experience [11]. Athletes commonly find themselves deeply engaged in their sport to the extent that nothing beyond the moment matters. Engagement in sports is often described as “being in the zone.” Engagement occurs when the following characteristics are met [1]:

1. An athlete feels challenged, yet capable of meeting the demands of the challenge.
2. There are clearly defined goals with immediate feedback concerning those goals.
3. The athlete feels engulfed by the activity; they are one with it.
4. The concept of time is lost.
5. They do not feel self-conscious.
6. There is no concern for failing, the athlete is in control.
7. The activity is rewarding in itself.

An athlete must find harmony between their challenge and skills if they want to be engaged. The sport needs to be highly challenging, yet the athlete must have the skills to match. The challenge should be slightly more difficult than what they are used to accomplishing. If the challenge is too far beyond their current skills, the athlete will feel anxious and stressed. If this occurs, the athlete must increase their skill or participate against a lower-level challenge until they reach the skill level appropriate to achieve flow at a higher level [1].

When athletes achieve this optimal state of engagement, they are in a state of mindfulness, when the only thing that matters is the moment and time ceases to exist. On top of scientific literature backing up the benefit of engagement and performance or well-being, philosophical schools of thought such as Buddhism and Stoicism support an idea of living in the moment as a corner stone of living “a good life” or a life worth living. The philosophy of yoga has a saying that the only sin is boredom, because we are not living in order with the universe. In other words, when we are engaged, life is more fulfilling.

## **2.3 Relationships and sport**

Relationships are a fundamental aspect of human flourishing [12, 13]. Team sports (baseball, soccer, lacrosse, basketball, etc.) are opportunities for people to develop relationships that may lead to well-being. Healthy relationships are ones in which people feel challenged yet safe to express themselves and go after those challenges without ridicule. This is a good description of a healthy sports team. A good teammate pushes you to rise to and face obstacles and supports you during setbacks.

A good coach or teammate is an excellent resource for developing relationships. Research shows that engaging in developmentally appropriate team sports helps protect health-related quality of life at every age [14]. The matrix that is sport cultivates opportunities for relationships such as these to manifest.

Sport is also an excellent means of establishing or strengthening an individual's relationship with nature. Nature has been shown to increase well-being by improving physiological and mental health [15, 16]. Many sports are performed outdoors, some of which are performed directly in nature. For some people, this may be the only time they spend in nature and thus their only opportunity to improve their physiological and mental health through nature.

## **2.4 Meaning and sport**

Meaning, purpose, and fulfillment are a core aspect of Eudaimonic or a long-term aim at well-being. Purpose or a goal provides meaning to life, and when we act out that meaning toward achieving our goal and are successful, we feel fulfilled. Sport provides purpose, meaning, and fulfillment by providing people with a foundation from which to build upon via rules by which people need to operate under if they want to be successful. Rules often get a bad reputation as boring, but rules provide the structure by which progress happens. Without the direction and guidance of rules, a problem is not clearly identified, and thus, you cannot have a clearly defined aim.

For instance, being a successful free solo rock climber bases its foundation in being strong and lean and having high muscular endurance and low body fat percentage. This foundation may act as the base of a successful free solo rock climber's life. Everything they do may center around this purpose, and if they fall short, the results may cost them their life. It is for this reason that strict adherence to the rules of the sport provide a direct purpose or foundation by which to live by and meaning or guidance that must be followed for fulfillment to be achieved. Foundations such as this example provide a sense of direction to set goals and aim. This aim gives an athlete meaning to an otherwise potentially undirected life.

Athletes gain meaning and fulfillment from the act of learning their craft and developing their skills. Athletes are motivated to participate in their sport because it promotes positive experiences, which may lead to well-being [17]. The act of pursuing goals, not the achievement at the end, is meaning. In other words, the feedback from progressing toward their purpose provides the substance people need to live meaningfully more than a trophy. Sport by nature of providing a problem within the agreed upon rules or limitations grants a worthwhile quality to life through the act of attempting to solve those problems within the provided confines.

Sports are similar to a word problem in the sense that word problems are meant to teach you how to interpret a problem and answer it and then apply that same problem-solving process to the rest of life. Word problems are not about memorizing formulas and regurgitating answers, they are about recognizing problems then deciding which solution to apply in order to solve it. Sports offer problems as opportunities to learn how to problem solve in areas outside of sport. There is fulfillment in solving your own problems.

## **2.5 Accomplishment and sport**

An achievement is an external reward, such as a trophy, graduate degree, or raise at work, whereas an accomplishment is an intrinsic process that is fulfilling in its own right [1]. An accomplishment is a successful journey or process people undergo in order to reach an achievement. Training hard over the course of a season is an

accomplishment, whereas winning the championship is an achievement. Sticking to a resistance training program for a year is an accomplishment, whereas gaining your goal physique is an achievement.

Research shows that intrinsic motivation is generally more preferable than extrinsic motivation. Seligman's theory suggest that accomplishment is the result of our skill multiplied by our effort. In other words, it is not only how skilled we are, but how we apply those skills [1, 4]. Skill and effort according to Seligman are the byproduct of the speed at which we can think, i.e., we can make choices quickly, as well as the rate at which we can learn, providing us with more knowledge and thus experiences from which to quickly develop solutions to problems [1].

Sports are games in which participants are faced with problems, and in most sports, the goal is to outthink then outact your opponent in order to score a point. Your opponent is the problem or challenge, and you must apply your skills and effort by thinking quickly and having a vast knowledge base from which to draw upon in order to win. If you accomplish this more than your opponent, then you accomplish the goal of the sport. This process is an intrinsic skill you can apply to areas outside of sport.

Accomplishment entails progress toward a goal. A goal is an individual's aim. The very word goal has been adopted by sports as its main objective. American football, soccer, basketball, field hockey, ice hockey, and lacrosse players among other athletes are all attempting to score a goal. They are aiming at something, and if they hit their mark, they are accomplished through the effort and skill that brought them to that point.

Sports by nature always entail a feedback system in the form of a score. Scoreboards and team rankings are indicators of a team's progress toward their goal. Individual sports such as track and field or swimming keep documentation of personal records also known as personal best as feedback of athletes' progress. People need feedback to ensure them they are making progress toward their goal.

It is not the goal itself that grants an individual accomplishment, the goal is the achievement. Accomplishment is in the process of what it takes to develop as an individual or team in order to reach that goal. The accomplishment is the progress toward your potential. Sport is an area in which that progress may be developed.

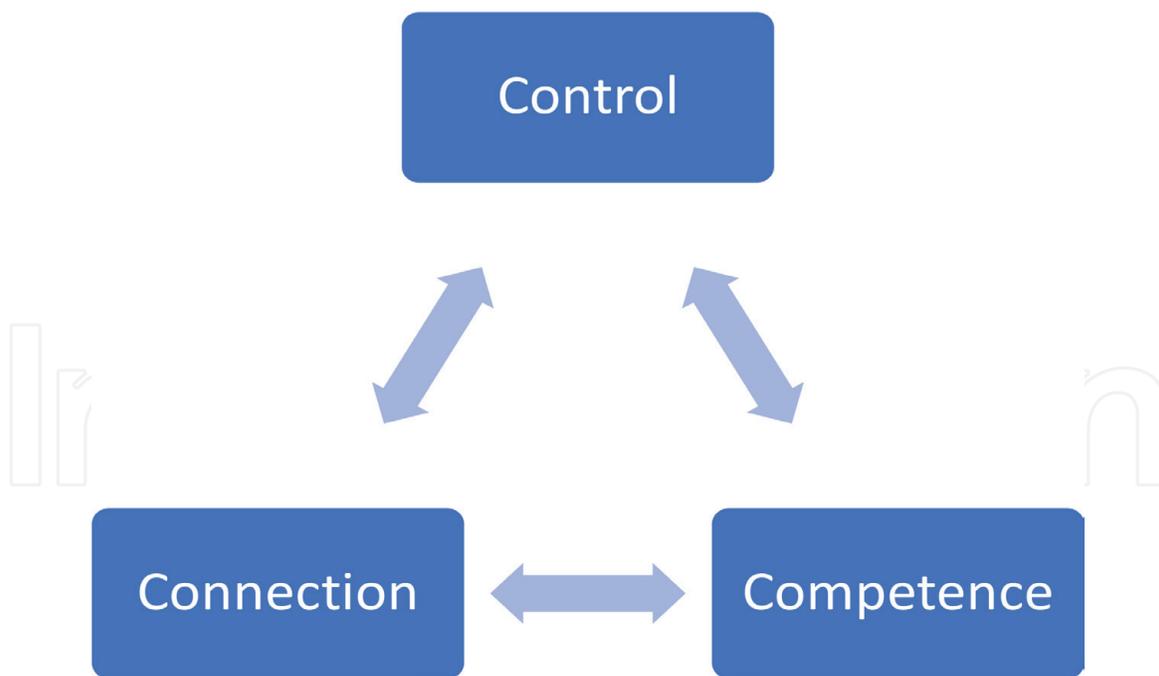
### **3. Sports and self-determination theory of human motivation and behavior**

Similar to PERMA's five elements of well-being, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's self-determination theory is not about achieving an overarching goal; rather ensuring three needs are met while pursuing a goal [13]. Self-determination theory is a process and an accomplishment. These three needs are:

1. Control (autonomy)
2. Competence
3. Connection (relationships)

People must feel in control of their life also known as self-agency, be competent in their craft, and connected or related to people and a purpose beyond themselves (**Figure 2**).

Mallia et al. [18] researched two groups of athletes to determine if the factors of self-determination theory can predict antisocial behavior in young athletes. The



**Figure 2.**  
*Self-determination theory image.*

researchers divided 651 athletes into two samples. Sample one consisted of young team sport athletes (N = 355) and sample two was composed of male futsal players (N = 296). Both samples completed a self-report of self-determination theory. Sample two completed two additional measures:

1. Self-reported number of yellow cards received during competition during the last 6 months
2. The number of yellow cards received from referees in the subsequent 2 months from competition records

The results found a relationship between psychological need satisfaction and self-determination motivation and athletes' moral attitudes in both samples. Sample two indicated attitude toward antisocial behavior predicted athletes' subsequent rule violations. Findings suggest that promoting factors of self-determination theory may foster attitudes toward prosocial behavior and minimize rule transgression in young athletes.

Findings such as the ones in the above study support the notion that self-determination theory is a significant contributor to well-being. Furthermore, sport is an environment in which the factors of self-determination theory effect the attitude of an individual. It is for this reason that the researcher investigated the three factors of self-determination theory as they relate to sport.

### **3.1 Control and sport**

People need to be self-governing or in control of their lives in order to flourish. People do not feel safe enough to attempt at a goal and potentially develop as an individual if they do not feel they are in control of their life. When people feel the situation is under control, they feel less anxious and are more willing to act. People who feel in control of their situation experience more positive emotions and are more likely to perform to their potential [19].

When it comes to growth mindsets versus fixed mindsets, whereas people with a growth mindset believe they can increase the quality of their life through effort, people with a fixed mindset believe that they cannot improve their state and thus fear applying themselves out of concern that their abilities may be questioned [20]. Fixed mindset people live in fear that they cannot control the destiny of their life, which decreases their ability to flourish.

Sports are games and games need to be voluntary [21]. Thus, by choosing to participate in sport, the athlete has autonomy over their life. Enrolling children in a variety of sports during youth aids in their development and exposes them to options from which they can choose when they are older [14]. The ability for an individual to choose the sport that best fits them not only leads to greater long-term success, but it provides a sense of control to the athlete's life [22].

Sport is a voluntary controlled environment in which people can experiment and grow their mindset without repercussions beyond which they are willing to accept. By participating in sports that are the appropriate level of challenge for their ability, people can learn that when they apply themselves, they can control the outcome of a situation by mastering the skills of that situation.

### **3.2 Competence and sport**

Competence is an individual's ability to accomplish a task. By learning the skills of a sport through trial and error as well as observing and mimicking peers, coaches, and elites, athletes grow more competent. This competence in turn feeds back into their control over the situation. People need to feel competent and effective for a healthier personality [23].

Research shows that strong athletic teams and strong individual athletes are predictors of flourishing [24]. By developing an athlete's competence, you are making them a stronger competitor. Stronger competitors are competent in their craft as a result of feedback from their accomplishments. This feedback system of growing more competent in the face of adversity strengthens an athlete's belief in themselves as well as their team (if their team is also competent). The success people experience in one area is the only reason to apply themselves in other areas.

### **3.3 Connection and sport**

Connection as with relationships is a fundamental aspect of flourishing. All mammals are shaped by their environment, social bonds included. People need to feel connected to others and secure in their relationship while maintaining their autonomy for healthy well-being [25].

Being on an appropriate sports team and training with a coach who is a good fit for their competence and personality meets this need. The sport and team an athlete is part of is one aspect of their overall environment. Healthy connections in sport can proliferate into other areas of life. The social skills an athlete develops in sport do not have to end when the game ends; these social skills can be put to use in family, friend, and work settings.

People are social by nature; they need to feel connected and related to other individuals as well as a group [25]. The matrix of sport nourishes these relationships by providing a foundation or unified purpose by which teammates can connect. Athletes are not just connecting to each other but to the sport as a whole. By connecting to the sport as something beyond themselves, athletes are transcending, which is considered the pinnacle of self-actualization [26].

## 4. Sports and the core self-evaluations

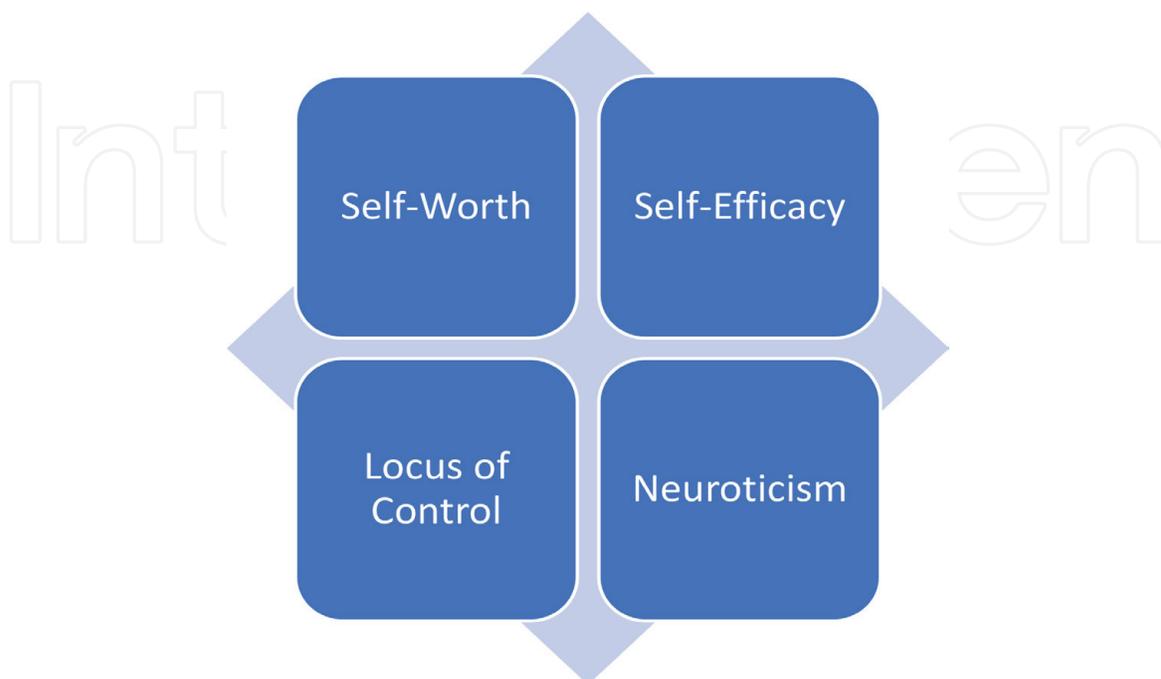
When it comes to satisfaction at work, four traits were found to contribute to higher levels of satisfaction. These four traits are self-worth, self-efficacy, locus of control, and neuroticism (emotional stability) [3] (**Figure 3**).

Self-worth, locus of control, and neuroticism are the three most studied traits in psychology. Self-efficacy is not far behind in terms of being associated with well-being [27]. In a study by Lopez et al. [28], the researchers examined the relationship between the core self-evaluations and abusive leaders. Upon analyzing the results of 67 participants, the researchers determined that “higher levels of core-self evaluations buffer abusive leaders.” With that said, they remind readers that abusive leaders are not a recommended method of increasing core self-evaluations. These results support the recommendation that the four traits associated with core self-evaluations make an individual more resilient. Furthermore, as with PERMA and self-determination theory, they are often associated with flourishing and well-being and for that reason will be examined under the lens of sport.

### 4.1 Self-efficacy and sport

Self-efficacy is a person’s belief in their ability to produce a desired effect [29]. When athletes are challenged in sport and their competency meets the demands of their adversity, they are successful, and their self-efficacy increases in response to their success. This process in turn develops belief in themselves that they can successfully and efficiently accomplish future similar task. In simpler terms, if an athlete purposefully practices, they will improve and believe in their ability to perform well in the future. The notion of “I can do this,” when confronted with a new challenge, is essential for a willingness to engage in novel task where potential resides. This believe in one’s self is self-efficacy and is crucial to engaging in potential developing situations.

Sports provide ample opportunity for people to engage in activities where they are challenged at the appropriate intensity for their skill level. Thus giving athletes



**Figure 3.**  
*Core self-evaluations image.*

opportunities to rise to challenges and overcome them. This act of facing adversity and overcoming it develops self-efficacy and moves athlete's one step closer to their potential. In the words of Michael Jordan, "obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it." Sports allow for skills to develop in a safe environment through trial and error. That is the essence of practice, to try, fail, adapt, and try again until successful. Every sport entails practice; it's an opportunity for growth. Once people understand that they can develop skills in one area, there is no reason to believe they cannot develop skills in another area outside of sport.

#### **4.2 Self-worth and sport**

People need to feel connected to something beyond themselves [25]. For some people, this connection to something beyond themselves may be the military, favorite charity, or their local church, and for others it may be their sport. According to Abraham Maslow, self-actualization involves transcendence or being part of something bigger than themselves [12]. Turn on a television or visit a news website and you are bound to see a sporting event or sports talk show. Sport is a means by which people transcend beyond themselves and achieve self-worth by associating with a group. In the United States of America, sports have reached an ideological level of worship by some fans and participants [30]. People constantly attend sporting events by the thousands dressed in face paint holding giant posters, screaming in support of their team in freezing weather. Fans sacrifice their time and comfort for their team, and if their team wins, they associate the victory with their contribution of support.

When people are provided with the opportunity to participate in an activity that challenges their current skills and demands that they adapt in order to be successful, you are providing them an opportunity to self-actualize. People's self-worth or self-esteem as it is sometimes referred is a self-evaluation of an individual's worth. People need to feel their efforts influence the world and that they make a difference. High self-worth is a predictor of success in many areas from school, happiness, marriage, relationships, and criminal behavior [31–33].

#### **4.3 Locus of control and sport**

Victor Frankel in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* suggested that it would be a good idea to have a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast of the United States since there is a Statue of Liberty on the east coast [34].

*Freedom, however, is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.*

Frankel's point is that freedom and responsibility go hand in hand. If an individual does not take responsibility for their actions, soon all of the freedoms which their freedoms are built will crumble. Furthermore, it is not freedom people should crave, rather the responsibility that is the positive aspect of the balance of society. People should be proud to take on responsibilities and contribute to their society rather than prioritizing freedoms over responsibility.

An internal locus of control is the idea that the outcome of an individual's life is their responsibility. On the extreme end of sports, if a free diver is not responsible

and invest in becoming a master of their craft, it could cost them their life. On the flip side, if the free diver invests in the years of skill development and effort, freedom to accomplish what few people can fathom is possible.

On a smaller scale, if a soccer or basketball player invest in developing their skills, the athlete will successfully score more points than someone who does not take responsibility and practice their craft. If the athlete does not take responsibility for mastering their craft, they will not progress as rapidly, and their progress may diminish. Taking natural talent into account, people who deliberately practice their craft catch up to and surpass those who have natural talent at a young age yet do not invest in developing that talent [22].

Either outcome is the athlete's choice. If an athlete desires to progress their career, they must take responsibility for developing their skills. As an athlete develops their skills, they will feel more competent in their sport and feel more in control of the outcome, which in turn also increases self-esteem. The result begins with taking responsibility of their life.

As an athlete's ability and success rate increase, they are controlling their life by producing a desired outcome. The athlete is proving to themselves that when they take responsibility for their actions, they have greater control over their life's direction. When an athlete feels they are in control of their life, they can trust the process because based on previous experience, it should provide a predictable outcome. Trusting the process allows people to not have to worry about the unexpected, which allows them to be more present in the moment, also known as mindfulness, a concept shown to have a positive relationship with self-actualizers [35].

#### **4.4 Neuroticism and sport**

Neuroticism is an individual's emotional stability or moodiness. Neuroticism is negatively correlated with emotional stability. In other words, highly neurotic people have lower emotional stability. Research by Judge et al. look to find a common factor between self-efficacy, self-worth, locus of control, and neuroticism. The researchers conclude that neuroticism is the common denominator [27]. People who experience emotional stability also experience increased self-efficacy, self-worth, and locus of control.

As mentioned, sports are a mechanism that may increase self-efficacy, self-worth, and locus of control. Increases in these areas may decrease neuroticism. Research shows benefits of exercise, physical activity, and sport for well-being [36], as well as exercise being performed in nature having a positive effect on public health [16]. Furthermore, research shows that sports can encourage the development of psychological factors that could aid in emotional stability [37]. In other words, by improving your environment, it may improve your emotional stability. These findings are indicative of your environment influencing your well-being. Sports are a microcosm in which those positive influences can develop.

### **5. When potential is not reached**

What happens when people do not reach their potential? Individuals can still be successful when they do not reach their potential. The difference between success and flourishing is fit. As mentioned earlier, fitness is more than an exercise physiology term. Fitness is how well an individual fits their environment. It's their ability to meet the required demands of the situation. Fitness training during sport is doing just that, making an individual more fit or better equipped for their sport.

Although training is part of success. The most successful athletes are the ones participating in sports that are physiologically fitted for them. For instance, the muscle physiology of a professional weightlifter and professional marathoner is on opposite ends of the spectrum. The former is primarily fast twitch muscle fibers, and the latter is primarily slow twitch muscle fibers. By participating in the sport that matches their physiology, they became professional (with effort, time, and resources), yet those equivalent results are less likely if the same two athletes switched sports. The athletes may see some success, but they would no longer be participating in the sport that is the best fit for their unique physiology and may not reach their potential.

In order for an individual to flourish, they should aim their efforts at a goal in which their uniqueness matches their environment. In other words, do what you love, what you are innately drawn to, not only what provides financial success and recognition. A Harvard Business Review article by Robert Kaplan [38] focuses on this problem of successful, ambitious, and talented individuals he has taught and coached in management and MBA programs at the Harvard Business School who express deep frustration with their careers. Kaplan mentions a similar problem in that many of these individuals are not doing what they really enjoy. They are successful, but they may be more successful and happier if they apply their efforts to something more meaningful to them.

These individuals Kaplan is referring to are successful. The question is, are they as successful or as happy as they could be? They may be successful, but are they flourishing? If they invested in finding their best fit, would they reach a higher potential? Sports, through trial and error, teach athletes how to test new experiences and see if they are the right fit for us. Sports provide an opportunity to teach us who we are. By participating in an array of sports, we learn how to identify what best fits our uniqueness as individuals. This skill set is applicable for all aspects of life from professional to personal.

## **6. Discussion**

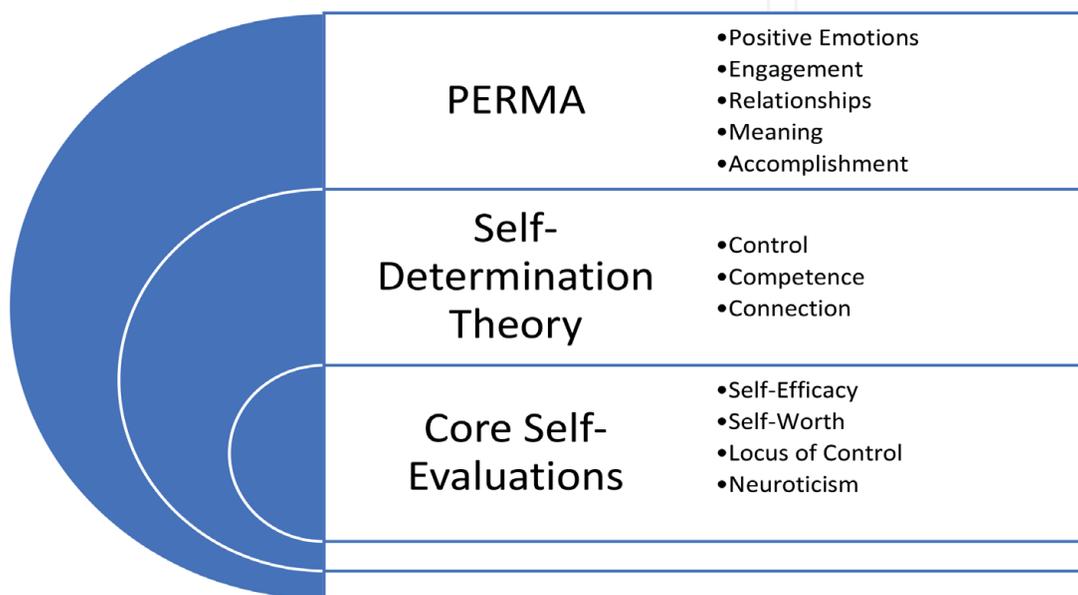
PERMA, self-determination theory, and the core self-evaluations are after closer examination, variations of similar concepts which when met have been shown to increase human flourishing. Each theory may be wording their concepts slightly differently, but they are all searching for a similar result. Flourishing occurs when people voluntarily engage in appropriate challenges and see those challenges as opportunities for growth and are supported during their endeavor.

After examination, the researcher suggests a similar model which he refers to as the sport potential model (SPM). SPM consists of two concepts of sport which may be applied to areas beyond sport. These two concepts result in a process by which all of the traits of PERMA, self-determination theory, and core self-evaluations may be experienced. The following is a deeper look into the two concepts:

1. **Fitness:** fitness is the degree to which individuals fit their environment. It's an athlete's ability to adapt to and meet the demands of the sport. Fitness can be thought of as internal resources. The better fit someone is to their environment, the more likely they are to be successful in that environment.
2. **Play:** a play entails two things, a plan and a player. When athletes perform a play, they are acting upon their ambitions. Players are aiming at a goal and striving for that goal under agreed upon rules with consequences. To play a game well, an individual must play their strengths to the situation while avoiding their weaknesses. The better fit a person is for the play, the higher their likelihood of success. The less fit an individual is for a play, the more resistance they will encounter.

If the two concepts of SPM are in harmony, the game is more likely to go as planned, and athletes will experience most of the traits listed in **Figure 4**. If this process repeats itself overtime, the athlete may reach their potential.

A flourishing individual is more than one with many achievements; it is someone who is able to locate themselves as a node in a web of relationships. Sports are microcosms for testing and discovering our fitness or our relationship to the larger game. It is also worth mentioning that it is not a single game that matters, rather the series of games or overall tournament, i.e., life. To expand upon an old sports saying, “it’s not whether you win or lose that matters, it’s how you play the game,” a single outcome does not matter; rather it is the interaction of all the outcomes combined that determine how well you are doing. In other words, it’s in the process that



**Figure 4.**  
*Flourishing image.*



**Figure 5.**  
*Sport potential model image.*

you reach your potential. Living by a poor process limits your ability to be invited back and play the game; living in accordance with the rules of the game will get you further in the long run (**Figure 5**).

## **7. Conclusions**

In closing, sport is a simulation of life representative of the grander experiment that is “life’s the big tournament” or all the smaller interactions interacting to produce our overall experience. In other words, sports are practice for the “real-world.” Within the limited reality of sport, people can develop traits that have been shown to improve well-being and bring them closer to their potential. There is ample evidence that the abovementioned traits associated with PERMA, self-determination theory, and the core self-evaluation theory can all be developed through sport and the sport potential model then applied elsewhere to enhance people’s quality of life in other areas. It is for this reason that the researcher highly recommends sport as a mechanism for personal development and reaching human potential.

## **Conflict of interest**

None.

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Thanks to Noah Johnson for sparking my interest in flourishing.

## **Appendices and nomenclature**

None.

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