The Effects Of Pressure On Professional Atheletes Essay, Research Paper

January 27, 1991, Tampa Stadium, Tampa Florida. Super Bowl 25, The New York Giants playing the Buffalo Bills in arguably the most exciting game in Super Bowl history. Back and forth the two hulking teams went, every yard a struggle every first down a relief. In front of 73,813 fans and millions watching worldwide, the table is set for a hero or a goat to take form. The Giants score a touchdown to make it 20 to 19 in their favor and their defense holds the kick return to relatively short yards. The bruising New York defense digs in to make its final stand and hopefully become Super Bowl champions. Legendary Bills quarterback Jim Kelly articulates an eighty-yard drive down field with but two seconds left on the clock. The field goal unit is sent on to the field, as millions anxiously await the referee s whistle. Scott Norwood, a local boy, born in Miami, is the Bills field goal kicker. The spot leaves Norwood with a forty-seven yard attempt to win the Super Bowl for the championship starved city of Buffalo. Norwood had made his previous field goal attempt measured at forty-five yards, so this kick is but a formality. With one snap of a football, time stood still for all involved, including I, watching this game at home. The kick is up, and in the air is a sense of calm, the crowd is about to either erupt with joy or sadness. As Al Michaels of ABC sports put it wide right, wide right . And just like that the weight of the game, the city of Buffalo, fell on the shoulders of a kicker from Miami. Scott Norwood will always be remembered for the kick heard round the world , and how he missed the most important kick of his life. What happened to the nearly perfect Scott Norwood that day? Was it a bad hold, could it be he was not ready, or did his nerves get the better of him. The pressures and stress on athletes are numerous and sometimes too much of a load to bear, and can lead to abnormal and sometimes destructive behavior. The dictionary describes pressure as; a compelling or constraining influence, such as a moral force, on the mind or will: pressure to conform; peer-group pressure. It is this that can interfere with the performance of a highly skilled and meticulously trained athlete. They are trained from the beginning to adhere to standards and perform at high levels; they are molded not to fail. Often times the failure of an athlete does not stem from physical malfunctions but mental stress. That is the focus of this paper. Firstly I will briefly discuss the role of the mind in an athlete s performance on the field of play, including competitive anxiety. Secondly, I will discuss the pressures that professional athletes face, outlining the cause and effect. Thirdly, I will discuss the point of positive pressure , where an athlete can use it as motivation, and perhaps propel him or herself to something more. And finally I will discuss the concept of negative pressure and how some cannot cope with it.

Competitive athletics requires a lot more than just physical readiness. The role of the mind in the performance of an athlete is of utmost importance, and has recently gained wide spread attention. With people becoming more physically fit, becoming bigger and stronger every year, the need to gain every advantage possible is important to success. When it was realized the extent to which the mind becomes involved, coaches, specialist, psychologists began to study it extensively, finding cause and effect. This increase in academic study in the field of sport psychology, the topic has grown and many opinions have been put forth. In almost every opinion that I have read the commonality is the idea of the mind playing a very important role on the athlete. It would seem to be a natural environment where stress would manifest. The idea of the sport atmosphere being based on a goal and reward system, where an event or achievement is rewarded and success is good and failure is bad, stress would naturally find a home here. The sport environment provides, therefore, many of the ingredients which invariably create stress in those who participate (Jones and Hardy 1990; 4). And this stress has often been overlooked, as Lee Vander Velden and James H. Humphrey points out, most of the focus of athletes is on biomechanics and physiological factors and little attention has been given to the mental preparation of athletes for competition (Velden and Humphrey 1986; 47-48). It is clear that for the successful athlete it should be important to look at physical training but also preparing for the mental battle on and off the field of play, because the athlete who is better prepared will, in most cases be more successful. To the most cautious viewer the factors in determining performance lie solely on athletic ability and practice. Not may people would acknowledge the mind as a significant aspect of performance but it is not simply the product of physiological (e.g. strength, fitness) and biomechanical (e.g. technique) factors, but that psychological factors also play a crucial role in determining performance (Jones and Hardy 1990; 3). From here we can start to look at how stress in athletics can affect the athlete and how it can alter performance. I refer to the above example of Scott Norwood, who all season missed 2 field goals, but when the pressure was on he did not produce. It could be said that he did suffer from a physical miscue because of the mental stress on him at the time. In front of over seventy thousand people who s eyes are all on you, it may be a bit nerve racking. As Dorcus Susan Butt states; stress in sport is both physical and psychological (Butt 1987; 198) , meaning that athletes have to deal with not only physical stress such as pain and injuries but also psychological affects like fear of failure and the need to succeed. And this stress has been proven to, in some case, alter athletic performance. It has been reported that there seems to be a direct relationship between stress and anxiety and poor performance in complex motor skills (Velden and Humphrey 1986; 48). And Veldon and Humphrey continue on to say that elevated amounts of stress can negatively affect an athlete s performance on the field. And this idea has been put forth by a number of people and has gained acceptance in the sports psychology field. For a professional baseball player concentration is arguably the most important factor when at bat, because they have a split second to hit a small ball coming at them at ninety miles per hour with a thirty-four inch bat. It is of utmost importance for the hitter to be concentrating on the ball and the ball only to ensure he has a good look at the pitch in order to hit it. And studies have proven that athletes have failed to perform to potential because they were unable to maintain their concentration in the face of distraction (Jones and Hardy 1990; 4). The idea of competitive anxiety is relatively new. This term in its most basic form refers to the athlete reaction and subsequent anxiety when in situations of competition. Later on in this paper I will deal the idea of positive pressure and how some athletes have the ability to deal with the stress and turn it into something positive, and how others become tense and tentative when faced with intense competition (Gill 1986; 55). To look at stress in another way we can look at ourselves as a computer. Now a computer can multitask which means can have a number of programs open and running at once, but can only process so much information at once, and often freeze or shut down if too much information is in use at one time. Humans are the same way, we can do many things at once but if so much is happening at once and our attention is not solely on the project at hand and that may cause us to freeze. It s the premise that athletes are processors of information and that the stress of competition has potential, and possibly differential, effects on specific aspects of the information-processing system (Jones and Hardy 1990; 18). It is also important to know what kinds of pressures that athletes face and where they come from.

The area of study revolving around where stress comes from is not bountiful in its information. Being an athlete myself and having been in high-pressure situations I can only give a slight view on where stress comes from. It comes from all around you, the athlete may feel stress coming from parents, coaches, fans and even themselves. Most times the parents do not see themselves as bringers of stress, but often times they are the key component. The child athlete may feel the need to do well to please their parents, and this may be weighing heavy on their mind when up to bat, or behind the football. It is important to note that in some cases it is the parents who are the driving force behind a child playing a sport, but often it the participation in sports is contingent on their own evaluation of their ability (Velden and Humphrey 1996; 141). The parents usually act as the first coach that a child athlete sees and they are the basis of all the skills that the child shows when he or she first plays organized sports. The coach of that organized team may act as another area of pressure, because they are the first one to put rules around the game that they have been playing in their backyard. The athlete must now fit into the system of the team and become just a member of a greater whole rather than an individual. In this there is inherent conflict between the athlete and the coach, which leads to stress. The athlete s teammates may also be involved in the anxiety that a child feels. The peer pressure in the group is arguably the most well known. As an athlete it is natural to want to do well but also to fit in with the other players. It is also important to look at the pressures the athletes feel from the audience watching. The audience can consist of one or more people but even a solitary workout may be accompanied by an unseen audience, a group of people residing psychologically and socially in the mind of the performer (Cratty 1981; 191). For professional athletes this is most prominent in playoff games, where the result of the game can determine your team being a championship team or not. Cratty goes on to state that this audience, the athlete knows, stands ready to judge his or her performance at some future time, harshly or with kindness and praise (Cratty 1981; 191). It is possible to block out the hundreds of thousands watching your every move but it is hard to stop the little voice inside your head. It has been said that sport mirrors society, meaning that the make up of society and its reward system mirrors closely that of the sports world. The only difference is the sports world tends to be viewed on a larger scale than that of society. And so enters the idea of athlete as hero. Basketball superstar Charles Barkley once said; I m not a role model , but with athletes being in the public eye so frequently, how can he not be. This aspect of being an athlete can become a distraction, trying to always do the right thing in the public eye knowing that many people are watching your every move. So what other pressures to the athletes actually face? I have chosen to outline two motivational factors behind athletic involvement. Almost all athletes suffer from any one or all of these pressures. The first is the pressure to succeed in the task they are involved in. This is based on the assumption that he who succeeds is a better athlete. And the second is the pressure involved in trying to avoid failure. This basically means the athlete although may not be winning, he or she has been able to compete in the sport at a high level and they feel good about their achievement. Athletes are training not to fail and this very factor can be a considerable weight on the athletes mind.

It is true that pressure and stress play a part in an athlete s performance but it is not necessarily a negative influence. Many athletes have been known to gather strength and been helped by the pressure they have felt. These heightened states of stress and state anxiety may sometimes enhance performance (Velden and Humphrey 1986; 48). To the average sports observer it should be easy to name at least a couple of athletes who have excelled in times or great pressure and stress. One of my favourite athletes of all time is one of those rare athletes. Michael Jordan is perhaps the greatest basketball player ever and he is known as one of the great pressure players in the history of the game. He got this moniker because when the game was on the line he was always one to demand the ball to try to win the game. He has won six National Basketball Associations championships and numerous other individual awards. Is there such a thing as positive pressure? I am under the impression that there is, because some how, athletes get things done and championships are won. And it is a popular opinion within the athletic community that game day jitters and pressures are a natural occurrence in competitive athletics. Jack Nichlaus who is one of the greatest professional golfers of all time, a six time Masters champion was quoted as saying 90 per cent of the rounds I play in major championships, I play with a bit of a shake (Jones and Hardy 1990; 4). And I remember talking with Johnny Bauer a former Toronto Maple Leafs goaltender and he said to me, son, if you don t have butterflies in your stomach before a big game, there s either something wrong with you, or you re dead. It s unfortunate however that negative pressure seems to get the most attention from the media.

But what exactly are the side effects of pressure? I have discussed how pressure can alter performance on the field but what happens to the athlete off the field? There is a fair bit of evidence and literature about this topic. Many athletes have come and gone without reaching their full potential. The stress and pressure that come with being a household name are sometimes too much of a burden to bear. Just like any athlete, his performance can be affect by what people around him think, and what he reads in the sports papers. A bowler s score can be raised when the opinions of those who are important to him support him, just as it can be lowered when opinion is against him (Butt 1987; 264). To illustrate this, I have chosen to put the spotlight on a baseball player who has yet to meet his hype. Darryl Strawberry was a superstar in high school in California, and was tagged as the next great player in baseball. The pressure on this eighteen-year-old kid was unbelievable, and he said himself that he needed help to deal with this them but did not ask for any. What we can see, as distant armchair psychiatrists, is a scared and lonely kid in a man’s body, getting involved in the wrong crowd and getting in trouble because he was always trying to please everyone. The pressure got to the kid hailed as the black Ted Williams and he eventually turned to substance abuse. The pressure on this young man was unbelievable. Imagine being just nineteen years old in the major leagues and having to live up to heightened expectations or an entire city claiming you as its baseball saviour. There are numerous documented cases of player s failure to deal with the anxiety and stress that comes along with being an athlete. Professional golfer John Daly who before playing professional golf, drank occasionally, became an avid drinker after a couple of years on the PGA tour. This lead to an emotional break down on national television where John Daly was shown crying on the course and had to withdraw from the tournament and enrol in alcohol rehabilitation. It is the stress than not only he put on himself but also the stress from the masses of people watching pulling for him, wanting him to win the tournament. Drug addictions in average citizens are prominent in society and often times are not given the same air and print time as athletes with these problems. The quandary arises when we try to look at athletes as something they are not, they are human and they do make mistakes just like every one else. All to often the pressure of performing everyday can get the better of an athlete and they turn to drugs to help deal with their problems, and with being a national figure when they get caught, the effects seem to snowball. Their credibility is questioned, and their name thrown around, while papers and rumours persist about the secret life of a superstar.

Is there a straight, clear-cut answer for this problem? How can we as the viewing public, help athletes both professional and amateur reach their potential without them having to deal with so much strain and stress? It is a question that many people do not have the answer for and probably never will. Stress and sports are inevitably linked. This is so because of the large part that sports plays in society today. Professional sports are big business all over the world. Overseas in the British premier soccer leagues, teams display proudly on their shirts logos of major corporations, and many teams in North America have sponsorship deals with major companies. With this in mind the money out there for an athlete to make is enormous, and the opportunity to fail just as large. A nine-year-old boy plays basketball in his driveway with his father, when he realizes he has a gift. He explains to his father how he would like to play organized basketball. It is hard as the father not to get excited and try to help you child become as good as he can be and hopefully one day get paid for it. It is important to remember that sports will forever be a facet of society, and it will continue to be played by professional and the weekend hacker. It will be watched repeatedly, and every play, and the people who play it will be analyzed and over-analyzed. The affects of stress and pressure on athletes are numerous and will forever be here, it is the athlete that can better deal with that, who will succeed.