

# Athlete Submissiveness: Understanding Behavior & Impact

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## The Conceptualization of Athlete Submissive Behavior

Athlete submissive behavior refers to a consistent pattern of psychological and behavioral deference exhibited by athletes toward perceived authority figures, most often coaches, senior teammates, or organizational leadership, resulting in the habitual relinquishing of personal autonomy and decision-making capacity. This concept extends beyond simple obedience, which is necessary for executing specific instructions within a structured environment; instead, submissiveness denotes a deep-seated tendency to avoid conflict, suppress personal initiative, and adopt a consistently subordinate role, even when the demands placed upon the athlete may contradict their own judgment or psychological well-being. Understanding this phenomenon requires viewing it not merely as isolated acts of compliance, but as a complex psychological orientation developed within the unique power hierarchies inherent in competitive sport, where success is often linked directly to the approval of those in command.

The core distinction between appropriate deference--such as following game plans or adhering to training schedules--and maladaptive submissiveness lies in the athlete's internal motivation and the degree of psychological safety experienced. Appropriate deference is based on respect for expertise and a shared commitment to team goals, whereas submissive behavior is often driven by powerful external motivators, primarily the fear of negative consequences, such as benching, loss of scholarships, or social exclusion from the team unit. Therefore, submissivity operates as a protective mechanism where the athlete minimizes perceived risk by consistently prioritizing the perceived desires of the authority figure over their own needs or critical assessment of the situation, leading to a diminished sense of self-efficacy and internal locus of control over their athletic career. This orientation can become deeply ingrained, influencing how the athlete interacts not only with the coach but also with the sport itself.

In high-performance settings, the environment frequently normalizes and sometimes actively rewards submissive traits, viewing them synonymously with dedication and discipline, thus masking potentially detrimental psychological outcomes. Organizations may inadvertently cultivate this behavior by establishing rigid, top-down communication structures and performance evaluation systems that heavily penalize disagreement or independent thought. Consequently, athlete submissive behavior can be conceptualized as a coping strategy within an environment characterized by high stakes and asymmetrical power distribution, demanding a critical analysis of the systemic factors that contribute to its prevalence. This pattern of behavior is crucial to study because while it may facilitate short-term structural harmony, it ultimately limits the athlete's capacity for spontaneous adaptation, critical thinking during competition, and long-term psychological health, potentially leading to burnout and premature exit from the sport.

## Theoretical Models Explaining Submissiveness in Sport

Several psychological frameworks help elucidate the development and maintenance of athlete submissive behavior, with Social Learning Theory providing a fundamental explanation. According to this model, athletes learn submissive patterns by observing and internalizing the behaviors of successful peers who are rewarded for compliance, or conversely, by witnessing negative sanctions applied to those who exhibit independent thought or challenge authority. When athletes observe that unquestioning obedience leads to playing time, positive reinforcement, or security within the team structure, they are motivated to model these behaviors, reinforcing the notion that deference is the most reliable path to success and survival in the sporting environment. This learned behavior is particularly powerful during formative years when young athletes are highly impressionable and actively seeking affirmation from respected adult figures, solidifying submissive tendencies as primary interactional strategies.

Agency Theory, often applied in organizational behavior but highly relevant to coaching dynamics, suggests that submissiveness arises from the athlete (the agent) delegating decision-making authority to the coach (the principal). While some level of delegation is essential for efficient team operation, problematic submissiveness occurs when the athlete completely abdicates responsibility for their own development and performance choices, viewing the coach as possessing infallible knowledge. This delegation is often rooted in the athlete's belief that the coach has superior information, experience, and access to resources necessary for achieving elite status, leading to a state of dependency. The agent's primary motivation shifts from mastering the sport to satisfying the principal's expectations, resulting in a performance orientation heavily reliant on external validation rather than internal standards of excellence, thereby creating a vulnerability to psychological manipulation and control.

Furthermore, attributional theories and concepts related to locus of control shed light on the psychological underpinnings of chronic submissiveness. Athletes who exhibit high external locus of control tend to attribute outcomes--both successes and failures--to external forces such as coaching decisions, luck, or environmental factors, rather than their own effort or ability. This external orientation predisposes them to submissive behavior because they perceive their fate as being managed entirely by authority figures, reinforcing the belief that personal initiative is futile or even counterproductive. Conversely, athletes with a strong internal locus of control are more likely to engage in collaborative communication, assert their needs, and take ownership of their training process, demonstrating that the individual's perception of control over their environment is a critical mediating factor in the development of submissive personality traits within the athletic context.

## Manifestations and Behavioral Correlates

Athlete submissive behavior manifests across a spectrum of observable actions, ranging from

subtle non-verbal cues to overt suppression of disagreement. One primary behavioral correlate is the consistent, unquestioning adherence to instructions, even when those instructions are clearly suboptimal, physically harmful, or contrary to established best practices. This adherence goes beyond professional compliance; it includes a failure to seek clarification, a reluctance to offer constructive feedback, and a general emotional suppression characterized by masking frustration or injury to maintain a façade of resilience and dedication. In team settings, this can lead to a culture of groupthink, where innovative ideas are stifled and critical evaluation of strategies is avoided for fear of disrupting the perceived harmony established by the authority figure.

Another significant manifestation is the avoidance of conflict and the passive acceptance of unfair treatment or criticism. Submissive athletes often exhibit hyper-vigilance towards the coach's mood and expectations, modifying their behavior preemptively to avoid potential confrontation, which consumes significant cognitive resources that would otherwise be dedicated to performance preparation. This passive acceptance extends to intra-team dynamics, where submissive athletes may fail to advocate for themselves or teammates who are being marginalized, thus perpetuating a cycle of dominance and subordination within the group structure. The consistent inability to assert personal boundaries or needs results in a chronic state of psychological distress, as the athlete's authentic self is continually subjugated to the demands of the athletic identity dictated by external powers.

In decision-making contexts, submissive athletes frequently demonstrate a profound reliance on external direction, exhibiting an inability to adapt spontaneously during competitive situations that require immediate, independent problem-solving. While cooperation relies on shared responsibility, submissiveness involves the complete delegation of responsibility, meaning that when the authority figure is not present or provides ambiguous direction, the submissive athlete struggles to transition into an autonomous decision-maker. This deficit in executive function during high-pressure moments can severely compromise performance, particularly in dynamic sports where environmental variables change rapidly. Furthermore, the reliance on external validation means the athlete's motivation is highly volatile, fluctuating dramatically based on the immediate feedback or approval received from the coach, rather than being sustained by intrinsic rewards derived from mastery and effort.

## **The Role of Coaching Dynamics and Authoritarian Structures**

The structure of the coach-athlete relationship is perhaps the most critical determinant in either mitigating or exacerbating submissive behavior. Autocratic or highly authoritarian coaching styles, characterized by unilateral decision-making, minimal athlete input, and the use of fear or punishment as primary motivators, create an environment where submission is not merely encouraged but often mandatory for survival. Coaches who equate dissent with disloyalty, or who utilize transactional leadership focused solely on results without regard for process, inadvertently

train athletes to prioritize obedience over critical engagement. In these dynamics, the coach's power is absolute, often extending beyond the playing field into the athlete's academic, social, and personal life, reinforcing the perception that the athlete's entire identity and future prospects are contingent upon the coach's favor.

Institutional structures within organized sport further solidify these power imbalances, making it incredibly difficult for athletes to challenge authority without risking severe professional repercussions. For instance, the dependency created by athletic scholarships, professional contracts, and selection processes provides coaches and organizations with significant leverage. An athlete facing the potential loss of their scholarship or career trajectory due to speaking out is highly incentivized to adopt a submissive posture, regardless of the ethical or health implications of the demands placed upon them. This institutionalized asymmetry of power transforms the coach-athlete relationship from a collaborative partnership into an employer-employee dynamic, where the athlete's voice is systematically devalued, and submission becomes a rational economic and professional choice, despite its psychological costs.

Effective leadership, in contrast, involves fostering psychological safety, defined as an environment where athletes feel safe to take interpersonal risks, such as questioning strategies or admitting errors, without fear of retribution. When psychological safety is absent, athletes resort to submissive silence and defensive behaviors. Conversely, coaches employing democratic or transformational leadership styles actively solicit athlete input, delegate appropriate responsibilities, and value the athlete's intrinsic motivation and expertise regarding their own body and performance. This collaborative approach recognizes that while the coach provides structure and knowledge, the athlete maintains agency over their experience, transforming simple compliance into authentic engagement and ultimately leading to higher levels of sustained performance and well-being, directly counteracting the pressures that drive chronic submissiveness.

## Psychological Drivers: Fear, Dependency, and Motivation

The primary psychological driver of athlete submissive behavior is often **fear**, operating on multiple levels. Athletes frequently experience a profound fear of failure, leading them to adhere strictly to prescribed methods, believing that deviation increases the risk of error and subsequent punishment or public humiliation. More potent is the fear of exclusion or abandonment--the terror of losing their place on the team, their scholarship, or the identity derived from their athletic participation. Because the athletic identity is often all-encompassing, particularly at elite levels, the threat of losing this identity compels athletes to prioritize the maintenance of the relationship with the authority figure above all else, including their physical health or personal ethics, resulting in extreme acts of self-subordination to secure their place within the hierarchy.

Related to fear is the development of profound **dependency**, where the athlete's locus of control shifts almost entirely externally. This dependency is not merely functional--relying on the coach for logistical support--but psychological, where the athlete relies on the coach to define their self-worth and validate their actions. In highly dependent relationships, the athlete may struggle to make even minor decisions independently, consistently seeking approval before taking action. This dependency stunts the development of necessary self-regulatory skills, such as self-monitoring, goal setting, and autonomous problem-solving, skills crucial for transitioning successfully into professional or post-athletic life. The coach becomes a psychological crutch, and the athlete's sense of agency erodes under the weight of perpetual external reliance.

Furthermore, the type of achievement motivation prevalent in the athlete significantly influences submissive tendencies. Athletes driven primarily by **extrinsic motivation**--rewards, trophies, public acclaim, or pleasing others--are far more susceptible to submissive behavior than those driven by intrinsic motivation. When motivation is external, the athlete's primary goal is to satisfy the demands of the external source of validation (the coach). Conversely, athletes focused on mastery orientation and intrinsic motivation are driven by the joy of improvement, skill development, and personal challenge. These athletes are more resilient to manipulative coaching tactics because their self-worth is internally derived, allowing them to engage critically with instruction and assert their needs without fearing the loss of their core motivational structure.

## Differentiating Submission from Cooperation and Compliance

It is crucial in sport psychology to distinguish true submissive behavior from the healthy and necessary concepts of **cooperation** and **compliance**, as all three involve following instructions but differ fundamentally in the underlying psychological mechanism and the athlete's level of voluntary engagement. Compliance refers to the act of following a specific rule or directive, typically applied across all team members, such as adhering to curfew or submitting paperwork. Compliance is behavioral and context-specific, and while it may be involuntary, it does not necessarily imply a generalized psychological posture of subordination. A compliant athlete may follow rules but still maintain a strong sense of autonomy and critical thought regarding performance strategies.

Cooperation, conversely, is defined by voluntary, mutually beneficial action based on shared goals and open communication. A cooperative athlete contributes actively to decision-making, offers feedback, and follows instructions because they have rationally agreed upon the value of those instructions for the collective good. Cooperation implies equality and shared ownership of outcomes. For example, an athlete who cooperatively executes a game plan has weighed the strategy, offered input, and willingly chosen to execute it. In contrast, the submissive athlete executes the game plan without critical review, solely because the authority figure mandated it, suppressing any internal doubts about its efficacy to avoid confrontation or scrutiny.

The key differentiator lies in **autonomy** and **intrinsic motivation**. Submissive behavior involves the sacrifice of autonomy, often driven by fear or dependency, resulting in a performance that is inherently constrained by the need for external approval. Cooperation maintains autonomy; the athlete chooses to align their actions with the team's needs while retaining the capacity to assert their perspective. Recognizing this distinction is vital for coaches and researchers; fostering cooperation strengthens team efficacy and psychological safety, while encouraging submissiveness leads to fragile, dependent athletes who lack the capacity for resilient, autonomous performance under pressure.

## Impact on Athletic Performance and Mental Health

The long-term effects of chronic athlete submissive behavior are detrimental to both competitive performance and holistic mental health. Performance suffers because submissiveness stifles **creativity, spontaneity, and adaptive intelligence**. Competitive environments often require split-second deviations from a pre-determined plan; the submissive athlete, trained to wait for explicit direction, struggles significantly in these moments, lacking the initiative to take necessary risks or make independent adjustments. This dependence limits their ceiling of performance, particularly in sports requiring high levels of individual improvisation and tactical awareness. Furthermore, the constant suppression of personal judgment reduces the athlete's sense of ownership over their performance, leading to decreased motivation and effort when external supervision is absent.

The impact on mental health is equally severe. Athletes who chronically subordinate their needs and suppress their emotions are at significantly higher risk for developing symptoms of **anxiety, depression, and burnout**. The psychological dissonance created by acting against one's own judgment while striving to satisfy an external authority generates chronic stress. This stress is compounded by the phenomenon of identity foreclosure, where the athlete's identity is narrowly defined by their athletic role and the expectations of the coach, preventing the development of a resilient, multifaceted self. This makes the athlete profoundly vulnerable when their career ends or when they face injury, as they lack the internal resources and autonomous identity necessary to cope with transitions.

Moreover, submissiveness often prevents athletes from reporting injuries or addressing concerns regarding overtraining, fearing that such reports will be perceived as weakness or disloyalty, thus risking exclusion. This physical self-neglect contributes directly to chronic injury cycles and long-term health complications. The normalization of silence and the inability to voice dissent within the sporting environment creates a toxic culture where emotional and physical well-being are consistently sacrificed for perceived competitive advantage, necessitating interventions that focus not just on behavioral change, but on rebuilding the athlete's sense of self-worth and internal validation mechanisms.

## Ethical Considerations and Strategies for Intervention

Ethically, sporting organizations have a fundamental duty to ensure athlete well-being, which includes protecting the athlete's autonomy and mitigating conditions that foster maladaptive submissive behavior. The reliance on fear and control to achieve performance outcomes represents an ethical breach, prioritizing short-term results over the athlete's long-term psychological development. Organizations must establish clear ethical codes of conduct that define and prohibit abusive or excessively authoritarian coaching practices, ensuring mechanisms for anonymous reporting and independent investigation of power abuses. Transparency in selection criteria and decision-making processes can significantly reduce the uncertainty and fear that drive athletes to adopt submissive roles.

Intervention strategies must be multi-pronged, targeting both the athlete's psychological framework and the systemic coaching environment. For the athlete, interventions should focus on **autonomy support training**, utilizing cognitive behavioral techniques to challenge catastrophic thinking associated with asserting oneself, and developing effective communication skills for expressing needs and boundaries constructively. Athletes should be encouraged to set self-referenced goals and engage in reflective practice that reinforces an internal locus of control and intrinsic motivation, helping them derive self-worth from effort and mastery rather than external approval.

For coaches and organizations, intervention requires comprehensive educational programs focused on transformational and democratic leadership models. Coaches must be trained to understand the psychological impact of their leadership style, emphasizing the benefits of shared decision-making and the creation of a psychologically safe environment. Strategies include implementing athlete leadership councils, utilizing collaborative goal-setting methods, and providing avenues for athletes to contribute substantively to training and tactical choices. Ultimately, reducing athlete submissive behavior requires a cultural shift within sport, moving away from models based on absolute control and toward partnerships built on mutual respect, intellectual engagement, and the maximization of the athlete's individual potential and self-efficacy.