part V

The Athlete in the Wider Sport Environment

Within the world of sport, there are numerous social-cognitive and cultural factors that can influence dyadic relationships and group dynamics. Some of these factors have become more prominent within the sport psychology literature in recent years. Supportive social networks, for example, have been found to play a crucial role in the lives of athletes across their careers. The influence of factors such as passion and morality on behavior in sport settings is also important, as well as the degree to which these behaviors and expressions are a function of culture. The final part of this volume includes five chapters that focus on the athlete and environment: social support, the role of parents during different stages of an athlete’s career, passion in sport, morality, and cross-cultural concerns.

In chapter 16, Tim Rees focuses on social support and its implications in sporting contexts. Social support is defined, and the stress-buffering and main effects models, which identify the conditions under which different kinds of social support influence outcomes, are reviewed. Both the positive and negative aspects of social support are highlighted for researchers and practitioners.

In chapter 17, Paul Wylleman, Paul De Knop, Marie-Christine Verdet, and Sasa Cecic-Erpic consider the roles played by parents throughout the career of an elite athlete. These authors take a life-span perspective on transitions faced by athletes at sport, individual, psychosocial, and academic or vocational levels, and they present a developmental model that guides an overview of research on parental involvement across these levels. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research as well as strategies that can help ensure that parental involvement during and after the athletic career has a positive impact on the development of athletes.

In chapter 18, Robert Vallerand and Paule Miquelon consider the concept of passion, which they refer to as a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy. The chapter focuses on the applicability of passion within sport, and key research findings are woven throughout their review of the relevant theories. Future research directions on passion in sport are presented, along with practical implications for developing passion for sport.

In chapter 19, Maria Kavussanu offers a review of theories of morality as they apply to sport. Research based on these theories is then considered, with a focus on the effects of sport type, social context, motivation, and gender on moral behavior. The unanswered questions associated with morality in sport, such as whether certain aspects of sport participation are related to the processes involved in moral thought and action, are the focus of the section on future research. The chapter concludes with recommended implications for practice based on existing knowledge.

In chapter 20, Gangyan Si and Hing Chu Lee consider cultural contexts in understanding human psychological processes. The developments of cross-cultural research in sport psychology are reviewed, with a focus on relevant theories, methods, and implications for practice. A three-step framework is proposed for researchers interested in designing cross-cultural research within the context of sport.
chapter 16

Influence of Social Support on Athletes

Tim Rees, PhD

Learning Objectives

On completion of this chapter, the reader should have

1. understanding of social support and its implications for sport;
2. understanding of the two principal models that explain how social support may affect outcomes in sport;
3. understanding of the differences between structural and functional elements of social support;
4. familiarity with optimal matching of social support with stressors;
5. appreciation for the negative side of social support; and
6. awareness of avenues for future research on social support in sport.
I think it would be difficult if you were just totally on your own and never had anyone really helping you out and giving you support, basically. I think it’s a big difference... I can’t see how you can totally do it on your own... You do need encouragement and advice, and, good times, bad times, you need people to help you out. I think it’s pretty hard to do it without them.

Davis Cup tennis player (Rees & Hardy, 2000, p. 342)

Comments such as this one from a British tennis player are not universal among those involved with sport. As noted by Hardy, Jones, and Gould (1996), the prevailing attitude is that some athletes feel they must “go it alone” (p. 234) in their pursuit of success and not seek out social support in times of need. The recommendation from the sport psychology literature is that athletes should be encouraged to be proactive in harnessing social support from those around them (e.g., Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993; Hardy & Crace, 1991; Richman, Hardy, Rosenfeld, & Callanan, 1989; Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997). In part, this recommendation is based upon evidence that low social support is associated with increased vulnerability to injury and increased risk of burnout while high social support is associated with better coping with stress and better performance.

What Is Social Support?

Two definitions of social support are often used: “Knowing that one is loved and that others will do all they can when a problem arises” (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990, p. 119), and “an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient” (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984, p. 13). Neither of these definitions encompasses a full understanding of social support, and there is little consensus on an exact definition of this construct. As Veiel and Baumann (1992a) noted, “If asked, almost every researcher in the field will present a more or less precise definition of support, but, more than likely, it will be different from that of his or her colleagues” (p. 3).

Various terms have been used to describe social support, including social network size, social integration, quantity and quality of relationships, social resources, satisfaction with support, perceived and received support, and structural and functional elements of support (for reviews, see Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Heitzmann & Kaplan, 1988; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990a; Veiel & Baumann, 1992c). Various approaches to the study of social support have been used (see Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000), including the sociological tradition, the cognitive tradition and the stress-buffering hypothesis, the interpersonal process tradition, and the intervention tradition.

Lahey and Cohen (2000) outlined three key theoretical perspectives in research on social support: (a) the stress and coping perspective, (b) the social constructionist perspective, and (c) the relationship perspective. Such diversity leads to difficulty in stating simply what should constitute social support, what should be measured, how it should be measured, and how social support should affect outcomes.

It appears that social support involves a complex combination of multiple processes. In sport, this means that the existence of a caring and supportive network, including family, friends, teammates, coaches, managers, fitness trainers, physiotherapists, and psychologists, should have a positive effect on an athlete’s cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. The athlete should also be helped by the perception that others are available to provide help and support in times of need and by the actual receipt of help and support. The quality and type of social support an athlete perceives or receives could presumably affect such things as performance level, resistance to dropping out, enjoyment, and ability to cope with and recover from injury.

Awareness of social support became more explicit in the general psychology research of the 1970s. Subsequently, social support has been the most frequently studied psychosocial resource and has been noted alongside stress and coping as one of the three most important constructs in mental health research (Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000; Heitzmann & Kaplan, 1988; Sarason et al., 1990a; Thoits, 1995; Veiel, & Baumann, 1992a). Relationships have also been observed between physiological processes (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996), and physical disease and mortality (Cohen, 1988). Despite this research base, varied definitions, a plethora of measures, and a proliferation of atheoretical research led to comments that the literature on social support was typified by work demonstrating a “conceptual agnosticism” (Veiel & Baumann, 1992b, p. 317). It was Veiel and Baumann’s view that there had been an enthusiastic acceptance of simple research paradigms that did not deal with intricate mechanisms or processes:

As tends to happen when ideas and concepts turn into scientific paradigms, the support paradigm has ceased to be seen as needing justification, and support measures are now routinely included in assessment batteries for no other reason than to “cover” it. (p. 1-2)
Today, despite social support remaining “more a promising concept than an established, fleshed-out fact” (Reis & Collins, 2000, p. 182), there is sufficiently developed theory upon which to base empirical investigations.

Principal Theoretical Frameworks

Two principal models that identify the conditions under which social support influences outcomes have evolved: the stress-buffering model and the main effect model (see Cohen & Wills, 1985). The stress-buffering model proposes that support is related to outcomes only for those persons under stress. The main effect model, also known as the direct effect model, proposes that social resources have a beneficial effect regardless of whether individuals are under stress.

Main Effects

The main effect model proposes that increases in social support are associated with increases in positive outcomes. For example, being part of a supportive social network might lead to increased positive affect, which might in turn lead to a greater likelihood of experiencing flow states, represented by experiences of peak performance and peak experience (cf. Cohen, 1988; Rees, Ingledew, & Hardy, 1999). Structural elements of social support (e.g., Cohen & Syme, 1985) are most commonly associated with main effects and refer to social-network characteristics such as the following:

- Social integration—the extent to which the athlete participates in a broad range of social relationships and activities
- Network size—the number of friends, family, and sport-related personnel (e.g., coaches, trainers, teammates) supporting the athlete
- Frequency of social contact—how often the athlete is in contact with each person in her social network

Research on structural elements of social support notes that integration in a supportive social network may positively influence cognitions, emotions, and behaviors through interactions that are not explicitly intended to give help or support. Belonging to a supportive network can lead to positive outcomes such as improved self-concept, feelings of self-worth, and personal control. It may also lead to the adoption of behavioral patterns that lead to positive outcomes in sport. The main effect model is shown in the first part of figure 16.1, with social support having a possible direct effect on performance.

Stress Buffering

The stress-buffering model suggests that high levels of social support protect one from the harmful effects of stress but that level of social support is relatively unimportant for those not experiencing stress. For example, given the extensive literature on stress and performance in sport (Woodman & Hardy, 2001), it would seem reasonable to examine whether support buffers the effect of stress upon performance. This is shown in the second part of figure 16.1). Functional elements of social support (e.g., Cohen & Syme, 1985) are most commonly associated with stress-buffering effects. Functional support refers to types of social support that protect people from the negative effects of specific stressors. Esteem and informational support are examples of functional support an athlete may receive; for example, a coach might provide esteem support by bolstering a team’s confidence. The same coach might also provide informational support by giving technical and tactical input.

Functional social support may be divided into perceived and received support. Perceived support is the perception of available support, and received support

![Figure 16.1](image-url) Main and stress-buffering effects of social support.
is the actual receipt of social support, often referred to as enacted support (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990; Helgeson, 1993; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). Although empirically perceived support has been most consistently linked with the stress-buffering hypothesis (Cohen, 1988; Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Wills & Shinar, 2000), theoretically both perceived and received support should aid stress buffering (Lakey & Cohen, 2000).

The notion of stress buffering is tied to models of the stress process, appraisal, and coping (e.g., Cox, 1978; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); stress arises when a person appraises a demand as threatening or otherwise and does not have an appropriate coping response. The protective (stress-buffering) influence of social support might operate via a number of mechanisms; for example, by leading to benign appraisal of the stressful events, by a direct transfer of resources (e.g., giving financial aid), or by promoting better coping behaviors (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Wills & Shinar, 2000).

A key concern for stress buffering is the need for a match between specific types of social support and stressors (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Carefully matched social support–stressor combinations that produce significant results in empirical studies will aid understanding of the types of social support that protect people from the harmful effects of specific stressors (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Wills & Shinar, 2000); conversely, matched social support–stressor combinations that produce nonsignificant interactions will aid understanding of which types of social support do not help or when support is not useful (cf. Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Rook, 1992). For example, if research were to find that athletes facing pressure to beat tough opponents achieve the most stress reduction and performance benefits from encouragement from coaches rather than technical advice, this knowledge would be extremely useful.

Theoretically, structural forms of social support, such as social integration, are most commonly associated with main effects, and functional forms of social support (perceived and received support) are most commonly associated with stress-buffering effects. Empirically, however, there are examples of main effects of perceived support, and even stress-buffering effects of social integration. The most common procedure for testing stress-buffering effects of functional social support is moderated hierarchical regression analysis (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990), in which there are tests for both main and interactive (stress-buffering) effects. Here, main effects of perceived support might occur because the security provided by the perception that others are available in times of need leads to positive affective and cognitive states.

Social Support in Sport

Despite encouragement for athletes to use social support (e.g., Gould et al., 1993; Hardy & Crace, 1991; Richman et al., 1989; Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997) and recommendations for research (e.g., Hardy & Jones, 1994; Sarason et al., 1990), there has been comparatively little research on social support. The following examples give insight into research on social support in sport to date.

Seeking social support has been considered a coping strategy for dealing with competitive stress (Crocker, 1992) and slumps in performance (Madden, Kirkby, & McDonald, 1989). Social support has figured in the burnout literature: Gould, Tuffey, Udry, and Loehr (1996) found that as the competitive nature of tennis increased, players’ support diminished, leading to a decreased ability to combat stress. In studies of coach leadership (for a review, see Chelladurai, 1993; see also chapter 5), players’ perceptions of the supportive behaviors of their coach have been found to have an effect on players’ satisfaction with the coach’s leadership. Social support has also been empirically linked to group cohesion. Westre and Weiss (1991) found that players who considered their coaches to provide high levels of social support also perceived their teams to have higher levels of task cohesion.

Where research has been most prevalent is in relation to sport injury, including the study of social support and injury vulnerability, etiology of injury, recovery from injury, and subsequent return to fully competitive sport (for reviews, see, Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Brewer, 2001; Hardy, Burke, & Crace, 1999; Udry, 1996; Williams, 2001). There is also recent work documenting the role of social support for those coping with a spinal-cord injury suffered though sport (Rees, Smith, & Sparkes, 2003).

A crucial area is performance. Sarason et al. (1990) convincingly argued that social support might directly affect sport performance. For example, they suggested that a performer might pull out of a batting slump simply due to the knowledge that a coach would be available to provide technical support. Until recently (Rees & Hardy, 2004; Rees, Hardy, & Freeman, in press; Rees et al., 1999), however, there has been little empirical evidence to support such a link, although Weiss and Friedrichs (1986) did find that the dimension of social support in the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS) (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978, 1980) was negatively associated with win–loss percentage. The studies of Rees and colleagues found main (direct) and stress-buffering (interactive) effects of social support upon processes underpinning performance, with main effects accounting for as much as 20% of the variance in performance. As one of the aims of sport is high-level performance, this is notable, suggesting a great potential for social support in sport psychology research.
Dimensions of Social Support

An important question surrounds the functional dimensionality of social support. Is social support about a general sense of being supported, or could it be broken down into more specific functional elements, such as emotional support, informational advice, and tangible aid? Although there is wider agreement that social support should be viewed as a multidimensional construct, diversity exists over how many dimensions comprise social support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990).

The belief of some that social support is a general sense of being loved and cared for is bolstered by concerns regarding the psychometric properties of the majority of functional measures, which frequently contain overly high correlations among dimensions (e.g., B.R. Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990b; Sarason, Shearin, Pierce, & Sarason, 1987). It has been demonstrated in confirmatory factor analysis with the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) (Cohen, Mermelstein, Kamarck, & Hoberman, 1985) that such correlations may be accounted for by the introduction of a higher-order factor (Brookings & Bolton, 1988).

At a conceptual level, there is still evidence that support should be broken down into dimensional components. For example, Cohen (1992) noted that “having someone who would loan you money may be useful in the face of a temporary job loss, but useless in the face of the death of a friend” (p. 112), and in sport, Rees and colleagues (Rees & Hardy, 2004; Rees et al., 1999) have found differential relationships among different support dimensions and performance components. For example, with high levels of esteem support, participants experience greater levels of flow. With high levels of tangible support, participants experience greater levels of flow and feel less flat, sluggish, and mentally tired.

Measurement Issues

In summarizing the state of research on social support at that time, House and Kahn (1985) wrote, “Measurement in this area is still in a fairly primitive state” (p. 102). Some years later, Vaux (1992) expressed concerns regarding the psychometric properties of measures of social support and the plethora of different measures, which have made synthesis of findings difficult. Underpinning all these points is the difficulty of measuring a construct that has no clear definition.

Despite the association of social support with tennis performance found by Rees et al. (1999), their findings were tempered by questions regarding the applied relevance to sport of the instrument they used to measure social support. Rees and colleagues used the ISEL (Cohen et al., 1985), a measure of perceived functional social support with a confirmed factor structure (Brookings & Bolton, 1988). The basic concern in using the ISEL in a sport setting is content validity; the questions posed by the ISEL relate to general support
and do not account for the specific support issues that might be relevant to high-level athletes. Although it is undoubtedly necessary for a measure of social support to have structural validity, taking a measure directly from general psychology may not help in understanding the specific experiences of athletes.

In sport, there is a need to look at the support transactions an athlete might experience with family, friends, teammates, coaches, managers, fitness trainers, physiotherapists, and psychologists in dealing with the stresses and strains of high-level sport. The structure of one multidimensional measure of social support, the Social Support Survey (SSS) (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Hardy, 1993), may be used to generate this sort of information. In sport psychology, Richman et al.’s model of social support is increasingly used as a framework for researching social support, particularly in relation to sport injury (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Brewer, 2001; Hardy et al., 1999), and the SSS is based upon this model.

Despite some validation work with college athletes (see Richman et al., 1993), Rees, Hardy, Ingledew, and Evans (2000) raised concerns about the content and structural validity of the SSS. For example, Rees et al. questioned the assumption that it is meaningful and appropriate to consider the SSS as comprising eight separate dimensions of social support, despite previous conceptualizations regarding the construct as unidimensional or comprising just three, four, or five dimensions (see Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Heitzmann & Kaplan, 1988; Vaux, 1992). Confirmatory factor analyses of the SSS (Rees et al., 2000) also revealed that the items on the scales might be ambiguous indicators of the latent constructs, leading to difficulties in pinpointing the eight dimensions in the SSS with certainty.

In light of concerns over the content validity, structural validity, and applied relevance to sport of many measures of social support, Rees and Hardy (2000) conducted interviews with high-level athletes about their social support. Through this process, four dimensions of sport-relevant social support were generated: emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support. Rees and Hardy used the definitions of Cutrona and Russell (1990) to reflect the nature of the social support found in their study. Thus, in their simplest forms,

- **emotional support** refers to being there for comfort and security, leading to a person feeling loved and cared for;
- **esteem support** refers to bolstering a person’s sense of competence or self-esteem;
- **informational support** refers to providing advice or guidance; and
- **tangible support** refers to providing concrete instrumental assistance.

Subsequently, these four dimensions of support have been used to frame research on spinal-cord injury (Rees et al., 2003) and the main and stress-buffering effects of social support on sport performance (Rees & Hardy, 2004; Rees et al., 2005).

### Providers of Social Support

As Bianco (2001) noted in the context of injury, various network members tend to engage in the provision of various types of social support. Unfortunately, these people do not always provide their support well (Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986), and people may differ in their expertise in providing specific types of support (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997). In relation to sport injury and spinal-cord injury, Rees et al. (2003) and Johnston and Carroll (1998) noted that informational support, whether beneficial or negatively received, was generally provided by medical personnel or others with a similar injury.

Participants have been shown to have preferences regarding who provides them with specific types of support (Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Warwick, Joseph, Cordle, & Ashworth, 2004), and differences have been noted between providers and recipients regarding what they see as useful (Correll & Cohen, 1995). So, although the quality of support should depend upon its functional effectiveness and how well it is matched to stressors, one might need to consider more closely the providers of support. There may, then, be an interaction between the best-suited provider of support and the quality of the provision. Research has indicated that individuals’ appraisals of others’ supportiveness may reflect a unique matching (interaction) between the individual and the person providing the support (Lakey, McCabe, Fisicaro, & Drew, 1996).

### Negative Aspects of Social Support

Despite the sport psychology literature encouraging the use of social support, not all support is beneficial. For example, Gould et al. (1996) found that, although friends were important for maintaining motivation, pressure from others, especially parents, played a major role in the burnout of junior tennis players. Udry, Gould, Bridges, and Tuffey (1997) demonstrated in a sport-injury setting how athletes tended to view their social support as more negative than positive. In particular, they noted examples of inappropriate or insufficient rehabilitation guidance, lack of sensitivity to the injury, and lack of concern. Both Dakof and Taylor (1990) and Rees et al. (2003) noted similar results, with participants listing unhelpful actions by physicians as the following: expressed little concern, empathy, or affection; provided...
insufficient information; and provided technically incompetent medical care.

This touches upon issues related to the term non-support (e.g., Rook, 1992; Harris, 1992) and the discrepancies observed between the perceptions of supporters and the supported on what is useful. Such discrepancies have been demonstrated with students taking exams (Coriell & Cohen, 1995), cancer patients (Dakof & Taylor, 1990), the bereaved (Lehman et al., 1986), and sufferers of headaches and irritable bowel syndrome (Martin, Davis, Baron, Suls, & Blanchard, 1994).

Future Research

Understanding how social support affects outcomes in sport is important for research in sport psychology. Research should move beyond mere description of social networks and simple correlational designs to well-designed studies that test specific hypotheses related to the main and stress-buffering effects of social support on various outcomes in sport. In this regard, the measurement of social support is a key concern, and researchers should consider the psychometric properties and content relevance of the measures they use.

As an example, before testing main effect and stress-buffering models, Rees and colleagues (Rees & Hardy, 2004; Rees et al., 2005) constructed and refined their measurement of four sport-relevant dimensions of social support (emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support), the purpose of which was to ensure context-specific and accurate measurement of social support, not to develop and validate a scale. This followed two recommendations from the social support literature: measures of social support should be relevant to the situational context; and researchers should write new items to capture the specific support needs of the target population (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; House & Kahn, 1985; Wills & Shinar, 2000). This is akin to the measurement strategy of self-efficacy research (Bandura, 1997), for which it has been noted that a “one measure fits all” approach has only limited explanatory and predictive value.

Specification of models might be guided by the optimal matching hypothesis, whereby specific types of social support are carefully matched to the demands elicited by specific stressors (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Wills & Shinar, 2000). In this regard, three strategies might be employed. First, consider the relative controllability of the stressors (Cutrona & Russell, 1990): Uncontrollable stressors, such as sustaining an injury, lead to a need for social support that fosters emotion-focused forms of coping (e.g., emotional support). Controllable stressors, such as technical problems in training, lead to a need for social support that fosters problem-focused coping (e.g., informational support). Second, pay close attention to the content of the items on the support scales in relation to the stressors. Third, as recommended by Wills and Shinar (2000), make use of previous knowledge of the target population.

Within such studies, researchers should attempt to examine the differential impact of specific dimensions of social support. Studies should also examine the differential impact of perceived and received support within the same study and should further explore the mechanisms by which stress buffering occurs. For example, both perceived and received support might play specific roles at several points along the causal chain, linking stressors to outcomes in sport through appraisal and coping mechanisms (see figure 16.2).

Given the differential expertise of support providers and the negative aspects of social support, research might also focus on the interaction between the person being supported and the person providing the support and the consequences of this interaction. This might involve exploration of poorly matched, inappropriate, or negatively received support. It might also involve exploration of the effects of supportive interactions on the support providers.

This chapter’s discussion of models and measures may appear to have ignored qualitative research on social support in sport. Regardless of method, however, researchers should carefully consider the type of social support they wish to focus on (e.g., social integration, perceived support, received support) as well as the

![Figure 16.2](image-url)  
**Figure 16.2** Potential effects of perceived and received support and appraisal and coping mechanisms on performance.
model of social support they use to frame their research. Future qualitative research might then also shed light on the pressing concerns for social support in sport, using alternative forms of analysis and representation (Sparkes, 2002).

**Practical Implications**

The literature on social support has important implications for athletes and for all those involved with them. Important others can play a crucial role in the athlete’s life, and the consequences of being isolated from support can be damaging. Therefore, the oft-hailed ideal of going it alone in pursuit of success rather than seeking out social support in times of need is outdated and limiting. Athletes should be encouraged to be proactive in their use of social support, and along with all those in their support network, they should be helped to understand that such action is not a sign of weakness (Hardy et al., 1996).

Such comments might lead important others to the conclusion that they should actively provide support. Herein lies a complex issue in that unskilled others are often poor providers of support, basing their understanding of what the person needs solely on intuition. For example, Lehman et al. (1986) noted that people can provide unhelpful support by trying, among other things, to minimize the importance of an event, avoid open communication about the event, criticize attempts at coping, encourage quicker coping, and give inappropriate advice. Understanding the need to match the correct support to the needs arising from stressors (Cutrona & Russell, 1990) would be important for family, friends, teammates, coaches, managers, fitness trainers, physiotherapists, and psychologists.

In their study of tennis players, Rees and Hardy (2004) found that informational support (in the form of technical advice) did not buffer the negative effects of technical problems in training upon performance, but tangible support did. It was tangible support in the form of someone to plan, organize, and set training sessions that helped. So, although many coaches might naturally offer informational support when approached about technical problems, such support might not always be beneficial for alleviating this particular stressor.

Interventions might, therefore, focus on helping providers improve the quality and aptness of their support. Interventions might also focus on helping athletes fully understand how they can maximize the available support in their network and to learn the skills necessary to be proactive in using this resource. The concept of matching support with stressors implies that performers might be taught to recognize their needs and to understand that specific problems and stressors require specific types of support.

As Richman et al. (1989) noted, social support might be best considered “within a proactive model, one requiring the athlete to assume the responsibility for recognizing support needs and taking action to satisfy them” (p. 158). As applied practitioners, sport psychologists could then help provide a context for empowering individuals to purposefully develop and nurture their social support. Certainly, intervention work in social support is different from most other types of applied practice in that the benefits of social support are not received from direct contact with the practitioner (except in the case of the athlete needing psychological support); the beneficial effects are realized through the performers’ subsequent interaction with their social environment (Gottlieb, 1992).

**Summary**

Although there is no simple definition of social support, it appears that athletes may benefit from being part of a supportive social network, from perceiving that support is available to them, and from receiving support from others. There are two principal models of social support: the main effect model and the stress-buffering model. Key issues are the distinctions between structural and functional elements of support, the distinctions between perceived and received support, and the matching of social support with stressors. Consideration should also be paid to the dimensions of support, measurement of support, providers of support, and negative aspects of support.

Future theory-driven research is warranted in which researchers carefully consider the models and methods they choose to frame their research. In applied settings, important others can play a crucial role in the life of athletes, and athletes and their family, friends, teammates, coaches, managers, fitness trainers, physiotherapists, psychologists, and others should be aware of the need to carefully match social support to the needs arising from stressors. Given that social support has been shown to account for as much as 20% of the variance in performance over and above the effects of stress (Rees et al., in press), social support should become a key variable in future research in sport psychology.
**Discussion Questions**

1. What, in general, does social support encompass?
2. What are the two principal models that explain effects of social support on outcomes? Which model do you think offers the best explanation of these effects? Why?
3. What are the differences between structural and functional elements of social support?
4. What does optimal matching (Cutrona & Russell, 1990) refer to? Do you think this is an important consideration for sport psychologists to be aware of?
5. What are some of the future research issues for social support in sport? How do you envisage research progressing? What are some potential links between social support and other variables in sport psychology?