

# Achievement goals and sportsmanlike attitudes in young soccer players and its association with perceived pressure from significant social agents

## *Orientações motivacionais e atitudes desportivas em jovens futebolistas e suas associações com as pressões percebidas de agentes sociais significativos*

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**Abstract** – The purposes of this study were to characterize the achievement goals and sportsmanlike attitudes in young soccer players and their association with perceived pressure from different significant social agents (parents/family, coaches, teammates and friends). The sample of the study was comprised of 118 young soccer players, aged between 11 and 19 years ( $M= 14.68$ ,  $SD= 2.16$ ). Athletes had  $5.40 \pm 2.39$  years of sport experience and 71 (60.2%) of the athletes had competed at a regional level, while 47 (39.8%) had participated in national competitions. Participants completed a socio-demographic survey, the Task and Ego Orientation in Sports Questionnaire and the Sports Values Questionnaire. The statistical analyses involved univariate normality and descriptive, comparative and correlational analyses. Results revealed that task orientation was positively correlated with sportsmanlike attitudes ( $r= 0.47$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and negatively associated with unsportsmanlike attitudes ( $r= -0.46$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), whereas ego orientation effects were contrary (sportsmanlike attitudes:  $r= -0.33$ ,  $p<0.01$  and unsportsmanlike attitudes:  $r= 0.42$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Perceived pressures from all significant social agents were positively and significantly associated with unsportsmanlike attitudes ( $p<0.05$ ), with perceived pressure from coaches also being associated with higher ego orientation scores and with lower task orientation and sportsmanlike attitudes in young soccer players. In summary, these results indicate the need for coaches and other social agents to promote a competition climate that reinforces self-referenced improvements and the expression of positive social attitudes in sports contexts.

**Key words:** Adolescents; Attitudes; Motivation; Soccer.

**Resumo** – Os objetivos do estudo foram caracterizar as orientações motivacionais e as atitudes (anti)desportivas de jovens futebolistas e suas associações com as pressões percebidas de distintos agentes sociais (pais/família, treinadores, colegas de equipa e amigos). A amostra foi constituída por um total de 118 futebolistas masculinos, com idades entre os 11 e os 19 anos ( $M= 14.68$ ,  $DP= 2.16$ ). Os atletas tinham  $5.40 \pm 2.39$  anos de experiência federada, sendo que 71 (60.2%) atletas competiam em nível regional e 47 (39.8%) em competições nacionais. Os participantes responderam a um questionário sociodemográfico, ao Questionário de Orientação Motivacional no Desporto e ao Questionário de Valores no Desporto. A análise estatística envolveu procedimentos de normalidade univariada e análise descritiva, comparativa e correlacional. Os resultados indicaram que a orientação para a tarefa correlacionou-se positivamente com as atitudes desportivas ( $r= 0.47$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) e negativamente com as atitudes antidesportivas ( $r= -0.46$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), enquanto a orientação para o ego exerceu um efeito contrário (atitudes desportivas:  $r= -0.33$ ,  $p<0.01$  e atitudes antidesportivas:  $r= 0.42$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). As pressões percebidas por parte de todos os agentes de socialização associaram-se positiva e significativamente com as atitudes antidesportivas ( $p<0.05$ ), sendo os treinadores as principais fontes de pressão promotoras de níveis superiores de orientação para o ego e menores níveis de orientação para a tarefa e atitudes desportivas nos atletas. Em suma, estes resultados indicam a necessidade dos treinadores e outros agentes sociais promoverem um clima de competição orientado para o autoaperfeiçoamento e para a expressão de atitudes socialmente positivas no contexto desportivo.

**Palavras-chave:** Adolescentes; Atitudes; Futebol; Motivação

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## INTRODUCTION

The practice of sports activities by children and young people, namely soccer, is a matter that focuses the attention of various sectors and social agents. Teachers, coaches, parents, government leaders and ordinary citizens attribute significant importance to this sports activity, both as part of sports training and as a means of transmitting social values and attitudes. So it is important to underline that the formation of children and young people should comply with a holistic and integrated perspective where the acquisition of knowledge, habits and experiences only makes sense based on an established and significant relationship between these factors, respecting the individuals' phases of development<sup>1,2</sup>. The practice of physical and sporting activities, as an influential factor in children's and adolescents' personality development, transports a hierarchy of values to the field of sporting activities that influences the involved social agents' selection of objectives, contents and methods of teaching and learning. And these selections are expected to result in values that are compatible with a set of socio-cultural, bodily and psychological purposes<sup>3,4</sup>.

In general, the motivational factors consist of the processes that lead people to act or to remain inert in face of certain situations, and one of the main theoretical references used in the sports context is the Achievement Goal Theory<sup>5</sup>, which suggests two approaches/perspectives that focus on the demonstration of a competence in the performance of a task in a given context of achievement. Intrinsic motivational or mastery orientation is associated with the process of sports participation (such as the development of skills, affiliation, physical fitness or fun) whereas the extrinsic or ego-oriented motivation is mainly related to the outcome of the participation (such as social approval, rewards, social status or winning)<sup>6,7</sup>. Generally speaking, these two approaches reflect the orientation of an athlete to "be better" (task orientation) or to "be the best" (ego orientation). If individuals adopt an intrinsic/mastery orientation, they tend to choose and head for challenging activities that are difficult but realistic, assuming the commitment to work in the best way possible and, if necessary, for long periods of time until they reach the desired objectives. On the other hand, individuals with an ego orientation tend to choose activities with easy or very difficult goals, in order to demonstrate high levels of skill or to avoid demonstrating low ability, respectively<sup>6,8</sup>.

Previous studies have shown that ego orientation tends to be associated with a perception of success focused on victory; these athletes tend to more easily reveal antisocial behaviors in the sports context and accept these behaviors as legitimate, since they allow them to win a game or a competition, or they help them to avoid demonstrating incompetence<sup>9</sup>. Although several authors and entities have recommended that sports activities be understood as social practices that reinforce pro-social behaviors and discourage anti-social attitudes<sup>10-14</sup>, several unsportsmanlike behaviors and actions have been observed and documented in a somehow

consistent way across a variety of sports and exercise contexts<sup>9,10</sup>. Some behaviors that have been identified as the most frequent are cheating, practicing aggression, adopting violent behaviors, and disrespecting opponents and referees. Although the most frequent and visible occurrences are mainly observable in professional sports, an increasing number of anti-social behaviors have also been observed in youth sports and in physical education lessons<sup>10,12</sup>. In these contexts, the analysis of various conceptual and theoretical<sup>15</sup> models suggests that the multiple attitudinal and behavioral aspects proposed and investigated can be grouped into two dimensions: sportsmanlike (pro-social) and unsportsmanlike (antisocial) attitudes and behaviors. These dimensions tend to be negatively correlated and show different associations with other variables<sup>3,12,13</sup>.

With this in mind, in the present research is aimed at characterizing goal orientations and (un)sportsmanlike attitudes and behaviors in young soccer players of different ages and at different competition levels. This general purpose is to answer a set of questions and problems that emerge in this achievement context, which comprises a considerable number of young athletes throughout the world and that, as far as we know, has not yet received sufficient and adequate empirical discussion<sup>11,13</sup>. Sports is a quintessential context for the social learning of beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. According to the social learning theory<sup>16</sup>, the cognitions and behaviors involved in sports and other contexts tend to be influenced by direct experiences and also by the influences of significant social others, and the socialization process of acquiring these cognitions and behaviors is crucial during childhood and adolescence. With respect to the sports context, Harwood and Swain<sup>17</sup> concluded that it would be of great interest to evaluate the influence/importance of each of the social agents (coaches, parents, peers and others) in the motivational responses of young athletes. This understanding as well as a knowledge of the different origins and types of pressures that young soccer players are subjected to during their practices and sporting careers will be of great relevance toward identifying the specific influences in the psychosocial dimensions studied on the different social agents' perceived pressures on the players to win.

Thus, the objectives of the study were to characterize the goal orientations and the young soccer players' (un)sportsmanlike attitudes and behaviors, according to age, years of experience and competitive level, and also to analyze the associations of these characteristics with the different social agents' (parents/family, coaches, team mates and friends) perceived pressures on the players to win.

## METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

### Participants

The sample of this study was comprised of 118 young, federated male soccer players, with a mean age of  $14.68 \pm 2.16$  years. Their ages ranged from 11 to 19 years. The athletes had  $5.40 \pm 2.39$  years of competitive experience and

71 of them (60.2%) had competed at a regional level, while 47 (39.8%) had participated in national competitions. When differentiated by age groups, the following distribution was obtained: U13 - under 13 = 23 (19.5%); U15 - under 15 = 32 (27.1%); U17 - under 17 = 38 (32.2%); and U19 - under 19 = 25 (21.2%).

The sample was chosen intentionally from ten clubs of the central region of Portugal, according to the athletes' availability and observance of the following inclusion criteria: competitive practice for more than six months on the same team and with the same coach; absence of lesions or interruption of sports practice in the last two months; and compliance with all procedures of the study.

Signed informed consents were obtained from the legal guardians of the participants who were minors, or by the athletes themselves who were aged 18 or over. In all the processes of the study, the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki were respected.

## Procedures

Initially all club presidents were contacted in order to obtain authorization to collect data. After obtaining these authorizations, we proceeded to the administration of the questionnaires, which took place at team training sessions and were applied in groups of three or four elements, in calm and quiet places. The study administrators explained to the participants the study's objectives and the proper way to fill out the scales. All necessary precautions were taken to guarantee and protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the athletes.

## Instruments

First, the data collection instrument included a group of questions that aimed to characterize the athletes' ages, their competitive level and their years of competitive soccer experience.

The specific influence of the different significant social agents was measured using the following question: "To what extent do you feel pressured by the following people to win a competition?". The athletes indicated their perceived pressure for each of the following individuals/groups: parents/family, coaches, teammates and friends. The answers were given according to a Likert type scale of 4 points (1 = Never; 4 = Always), in which higher values represented higher levels of perceived pressure by the athletes. The internal consistency of the four items was adequate ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ).

The goal orientations were measured using the Portuguese version<sup>7</sup> of the "Task and Ego Orientation in Sports Questionnaire" (TEOSQ), which is a questionnaire consisting of 13 items about the perception of success in sports, which are answered according to a Likert type scale of 5 points (1=completely disagree to 5=completely agree). The validation study of the Portuguese version supported a two factor structure (task and ego), with good psychometric properties (factorial validity and internal consistency). In the present study, the scales of the instrument showed good reliability (ego orientation = 0.88 and task orientation = 0.74).

The Sports Values Questionnaire (QVD: “Questionário de Valores no Desporto”) <sup>12</sup> was used to measure the behaviors and attitudes concerning the demonstration of (un)sportsmanlike values. It consists of 12 items that are answered according to a Likert scale of 5 points, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This instrument has revealed a two-dimensional factorial structure with good estimates of internal consistency. As in the study by Fernandes et al.<sup>12</sup>, item 9 was found to decrease the internal consistency estimate of the sportsmanlike attitudes’ scale and thus was eliminated from future analyses. Both factors revealed acceptable levels of internal consistency (sportsmanlike attitudes = 0.68 and unsportsmanlike attitudes = 0.73).

## Data analysis

Data were reported as mean (M) and standard deviation (SD). Univariate normality was assessed through the use of skewness and kurtosis coefficients. The internal consistencies of the dimensions were assessed by calculating the Cronbach’s alpha. In order to investigate the linear relationship between variables, we used the Pearson coefficient. Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed in order to investigate the effect of age groups and the competitive level in the dependent variables. The values of “partial eta squared” ( $\eta^2$ ) were reported as measures of effect size, using the following cut-off points<sup>18</sup>: >0.01 (small effect), >0.06 (medium effect), and >0.14 (large effect). The significance level was maintained at 5% ( $p < 0.05$ ).

## RESULTS

The descriptive and correlation analyses are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations between motivational orientations and (un)sportsmanlike attitudes

	M ± SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	EO	SA	UA
Task orientation	4.11 ± 0.51	-0.52	-0.51	-0.29**	0.47**	-0.46**
Ego orientation	2.34 ± 0.88	0.32	-0.63	—	-0.33**	0.42**
Sportsmanlike attitudes	3.92 ± 0.57	-0.34	-0.25	—	—	-0.54**
Unsportsmanlike attitudes	2.24 ± 0.72	0.21	-0.16	—	—	—

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; EO: Ego Orientation, SA: Sportsmanlike Attitudes, UA: Unsportsmanlike Attitudes

The descriptive results indicated that athletes revealed a higher task orientation and a greater tendency to demonstrate sportsmanlike attitudes during the competition. With respect to the normality analysis, results showed skewness and kurtosis values ranging between -0.63 and 0.32, which satisfies the assumption of parametric statistics. Correlation coefficients indicated positive relations between task orientation and sportsmanlike attitudes, and among ego orientation and unsportsmanlike attitudes. Negative relationships were found between task orientation and unsportsmanlike attitudes, and among ego orientation and sportsmanlike attitudes.

The correlation results between age, years of competitive experience and the dependent variables are reported in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Correlation results between age, years of competitive experience and the dependent variables

	Task orientation	Ego orientation	Sportsmanlike attitudes	Unsportsmanlike attitudes
Age	0.04	0.30**	-0.16	0.23*
Competitive experience	0.06	0.22*	-0.02	0.06

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

The results indicated that age was positively associated with ego orientation and with unsportsmanlike attitudes, while years of competitive experience correlated positively only with ego orientation.

The results of the comparison of the motivational orientations and (un)sportsmanlike attitudes by competitive levels are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Comparative analysis of the motivational orientations and (un)sportsmanlike attitudes between regional- and national-level athletes

	Regional M $\pm$ SD	National M $\pm$ SD	F	$\eta_p^2$
Task orientation	4.20 $\pm$ 0.47	3.94 $\pm$ 0.52	5.42*	0.07
Ego orientation	2.22 $\pm$ 0.73	2.54 $\pm$ 1.02	2.97	0.03
Sportsmanlike attitudes	4.08 $\pm$ 0.47	3.76 $\pm$ 0.61	8.61**	0.08
Unsportsmanlike attitudes	2.10 $\pm$ 0.64	2.39 $\pm$ 0.78	3.64	0.04

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

The results indicated that athletes who competed at the regional level reported higher scores of task orientation ( $p < 0.05$ ) and sportsmanlike attitudes ( $p < 0.01$ ).

The results of the correlational analysis between sources of pressure (parents/family, coaches, teammates and friends) as perceived by the athletes and the dependent variables are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Correlation results between sources of perceived pressures to win and the dependent variables

	Task orientation	Ego orientation	Sportsmanlike attitudes	Unsportsmanlike attitudes
Parents/family	-0.04	0.19*	-0.03	0.18*
Coaches	-0.18*	0.24**	-0.21*	0.19*
Team mates	-0.05	0.13	-0.09	0.18*
Friends	0.02	0.12	-0.21*	0.26**

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

The results of the correlation analyses showed that all sources of pressure to win contributed to an increase in the demonstration of unsportsmanlike attitudes, whereas the pressures of coaches and friends also promoted a decrease in sportsmanlike attitudes. In turn, the pressures to win from the coaches and parents/family were positively associated with

ego orientation, whereas task orientation was only negatively associated with perceived pressure from the coaches.

## DISCUSSION

The present study was aimed at investigating and understanding the effects of various factors (age, years of competitive experience, competitive level and pressures to win from significant social others) on the motivational orientations and (un)sportsmanlike attitudes in young soccer players. The main results suggested that an increase in age and competitive experience and a participation in higher (national-) competitive levels result in a motivational profile characterized by higher ego orientation and lower task orientation scores, as well as a greater concordance in demonstrating attitudes and behaviors contrary to sportsmanlike values. Additionally, pressures to win a competition from coaches, parents, teammates and friends also tended to promote higher levels of unsportsmanlike attitudes and ego orientation, with pressures from coaches also negatively influencing the young athletes' task orientation levels and their demonstration of sportsmanlike attitudes during competitions. Although these results are based on correlation analyses that do not include the establishment of causal inferences between variables, we would like to emphasize that the obtained evidence in this study is in agreement with theoretical predictions and previous empirical evidence that support the prediction effect of motivational orientations and social pressures in other studied variables<sup>8,12,13,19,20</sup>.

Results of the present study showed that, in general, the young soccer player participants revealed higher task orientation levels and greater tendencies to demonstrate sportsmanlike attitudes during the competition, whereas the correlation coefficients supported hypothetical relationships between the motivational orientations and (un)sportsmanlike attitudes<sup>2,3,13-15</sup>. In this context, it should be noted that task-oriented individuals tend to attribute their success to effort (process-oriented) in contrast to primarily ego-oriented individuals, who mainly attribute their success to their superior abilities and to their abilities to win (outcome-oriented). Thus, task-mastery-oriented athletes tend to define success in self-referential terms, such as goals seeking, thus, in their improving their abilities, learning new skills, and demonstrating mastery of various tasks<sup>5,7,8,13</sup>. Previous studies conducted in the sports context have also suggested that the promotion of a task/mastery motivational climate among young athletes tends to be associated with better emotional experiences and with more adaptive responses<sup>8,15,19,20</sup>.

This study also revealed that age was positively associated with ego orientation and with unsportsmanlike attitudes, whereas years of competitive experience only showed a positive correlation with ego orientation. With regard to the competitive level, results indicated that national-level athletes reported lower levels of task orientation and of the demonstration

of sportsmanlike attitudes. These data can be explained by an excessive valuation of the competition and the outcome/winning in soccer competition, i.e., as young athletes get older and participate in leagues of higher competitive levels, they feel a greater acceptance when demonstrating unsportsmanlike attitudes alongside higher levels of ego orientation. This evidence tends to support previous studies that have suggested that older athletes and/or athletes competing at higher competitive levels perceive certain unsportsmanlike attitudes and behaviors as more legitimate, provided that the behaviors allow them to achieve victory and to demonstrate superiority against their opponents<sup>10,11,21,22</sup>. This evidence in young soccer players is somehow concerning given that it demonstrates a growing acceptance and internalization of individualistic and negative (antisocial) values, based on the notion of winning at all costs rather than on the demonstration of fair play and respect for others<sup>11,21,23</sup>. Similarly, these results tend to provide some support for a greater observance of antisocial attitudes and behaviors in the sports context, compared with pro-social attitudes and behaviors, on the part of older soccer players<sup>24</sup>. Thus, this set of evidence reinforces the need for further research among soccer players, namely through the analysis of older and higher level athletes, as well as the study on the social influences (positive or negative) that different significant others may have on the attitudes and behaviors of young athletes in practice and competition settings<sup>19,25</sup>.

One of the main contributions of this study was finding that all pressure sources from the investigated significant others contributed to the decrease of the athletes' sportsmanlike attitudes and, conversely, to the demonstration of more unsportsmanlike attitudes by the young soccer players. In turn, pressures from coaches and parents/family were also positively associated with the athletes' ego orientation, while task orientation was negatively influenced by the pressure from the coaches to win. The fact that the coaches were the only source of pressure that related significantly with all the dependent variables suggests that these agents of socialization play a critical role in these psychosocial aspects, and the way they communicate with their athletes or reveal certain behaviors extensively influences the positive or negative impact of the sports practice and of the related emotional and behavioral consequences<sup>15,19,20,25,26</sup>. Because of this, in the context of training and competition, soccer coaches should also aim to identify their young athletes' personality characteristics and behaviors in an effort to articulate the immense individual and collective goals, interests and expectations that may exist within a team, considering the competition and possible outcome (losing vs. winning) as an important pedagogical tool in the process of sports training<sup>3</sup>. Still with regard to coaches, who were identified as significant socialization agents during adolescence, some of the main objectives that they endeavor to promote during the training of young athletes may concern the transmission of positive social values and success achievement, often as a synonymous with winning<sup>27</sup>. However, these two goals might not always be compatible in the context of achievement



because some coaches, when involved in pressure situations and conflict between both goals (transmission of values and success), tend to favor the adoption and demonstration of unethical behaviors rather than the defense of attitudes of fair play and sportsmanship, as a way to achieve what they consider more important at that time, i.e., winning.

With regard to the pressures by parents/family, the influence found in the ego motivational orientation may be explained by the fact that these agents of socialization encourage young athletes mainly to achieve results and to demonstrate individual abilities/competence, rather than to experience the physical, social and emotional benefits that sports and physical activity can provide. According to Weinberg and Gould<sup>28</sup>, parents tend to emphasize the importance of achievement and competence demonstration, especially when they are male. Previous studies have also shown that there is a relationship between the sportsmanship demonstrated by young people and the perception that they have of their parents' behaviors and expectations in sports' contexts; so, when young athletes perceive greater parental satisfaction with their seasons' performance and less perceived pressure, they tend to report higher levels of enjoyment, pleasure and satisfaction with the sporting experience<sup>29</sup>.

Regarding the influence of friends and teammates, the scarcity of existing literature does not allow for many comparisons to be made. An exception is a recent study<sup>19</sup> that showed that the athletes' perception of an ego-oriented motivational climate promoted by their peers tended to be associated with a greater acceptance of demonstrating antisocial behaviors in the sports context. During adolescence, the influence of the peer group and friends, as well as that of a close parental relationships, in young soccer players' beliefs and behaviors is well documented<sup>30</sup>. Based on the evidence that pressures to win from friends and teammates tend to be negative influences on the athletes' attitudes and behaviors in sports contexts, it is imperative to further analyze and to identify the possible mediators of these social dynamics, especially because these youth may be imitating and/or assuming the negative role models of significant adults (parents and coaches).

The present research presents limitations regarding the sample size and its selection, as well as the cross-sectional nature of the study.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the main results of this study indicate that as young soccer players become older, have more competitive experiences, and participate in higher level competitions, they tend to reveal a motivational profile characterized by higher levels of ego orientation and lower task orientation, as well as a greater concordance in demonstrating unsportsmanlike attitudes and behaviors. It was also found that the pressure from coaches, parents, teammates and friends to win a sports competition are also associated with higher levels of unsportsmanlike attitudes and ego

orientation among athletes, whereas the pressure of coaches to win had an additional negative influence on the athletes' task orientation and demonstration of sportsmanlike attitudes.

Based on these findings, the evidence of the present study indicate the need and relevance of coaches and other significant social agents to promote and to create a task/mastery-oriented youth sports climate by challenging and encouraging the athletes towards self-improvement and the demonstration of positive social attitudes during practices and competitions. Future research should focus on short- and long-term effects of pressures to win from different social agents in the sports dropout rates of athletes of different ages, in different sports and of different competition levels.

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