

**Behind Barbed Wire: Baseball's Promotion of Resiliency and Mental Toughness During
WWII Incarceration**

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World War II (WWII) incarceration of Japanese and Japanese Americans presents an important and unique area of study in the realm of sports psychology. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 (EO 9066) in response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, marshaling over 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry residing on the West Coast into forced removal and confinement, to ten concentration camps in the most desolate parts of the United States. Stripped of any sense of identity, humanity, or belonging, American WWII imprisonment established conditions of great psychological and racial trauma and torment for all prisoners (Nagata, Kim, & Nguyen, 2015; Nagata, Kim, & Wu, 2019). Experiences of trauma such as these were the reality for all people of Japanese ancestry at the time (Mullan, 1999; Nagata, Kim, & Nguyen, 2015; Nagata, Kim, & Wu, 2019).

Simultaneously, 1940s American baseball was at the heart of the country's culture (Beschloss, 2014). Although there were concerns of a national halt to Major League Baseball due to the need for men to enter the draft, President Roosevelt expressed the necessity of baseball in giving Americans "a chance for recreation and [taking] their minds off their work" (Beschloss, 2014). Similarly, recreational baseball, among a variety of other coping mechanisms, served this function for the Japanese and Japanese Americans living behind barbed wire (Beschloss, 2014; Mullan, 1999; Regalado, 1992, 2000, 2013).

These coping mechanisms, which aided management of the WWII experiences of racial trauma, demonstrate the broad concepts of psychological resilience and mental toughness that Japanese and Japanese American incarcerated employed throughout their detainment. Professors of sports psychology David Fletcher and Mustafa Sarkar (2013) operationally define

psychological resilience as the influence of psychological factors within the context of the stress process. For resilience to be demonstrated, both adversity and positive adaptation must be present (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). In addition, mental toughness in the field of sport psychology is defined as “an unshakeable perseverance and conviction towards some goal despite pressure or adversity” (Crust, 2007). Mental toughness is typically thought of as a part of one’s state or trait personality (Crust, 2007; Crust & Swann, 2011).

One such example that demonstrates these constructs is seen in the creation of and participation in the American sport of baseball in the camps (Beschloss, 2014; Mullan, 1999). Although there is plenty of anthropological, sociological, historical, and psychological research that recounts the ways in which Japanese and Japanese Americans established a sense of humanity and normalcy during detainment, there is slim work in the field of sports psychology that utilizes a sport model to uncover how sport contributed to everyday survival (Kamp-Whittaker, 2018; Mullan, 1999; Nagata, Kim, & Nguyen, 2015; Nagata, Kim, & Wu, 2019; Regalado, 1992, 2000, 2013; Starke, 2015). For many of the detainees, baseball was the vehicle that aided their survival (Beschloss, 2014; Mullan, 1999; Regalado, 1992, 2000, 2013). The present literature highlights the need for more research discussing the ways in which sport and the psychology of sport can aid everyday mental toughness and psychological resilience in today’s ever-changing social contexts. This case study in racial trauma provides the field of sports psychology an opportunity to close this research gap and better conceptualize the constructs of psychological resilience and mental toughness. The purpose of this literature review was to examine the ways in which American baseball aided in the maintenance of psychological resilience and mental toughness among Japanese and Japanese American WWII detainees.

Literature Review

Terminology

The U.S. government used words such as “relocation,” “assembly centers,” and “internment camps” to describe their unjust actions against Japanese American citizens and those of Japanese ancestry in this country. In this literature review, I use the terms "American concentration camps," "incarceration," "incarcerees," and "prisoners," as recommended by the Japanese American Citizen League's *Power of Words Handbook* (2013). These terms are preferable to longstanding euphemisms including "internment camp" and "relocation center," which diminished and continue to diminish the harsh reality and injustice carried out by the American government (National JAACL Power of Words II Committee, 2013). For these reasons, this paper will utilize such terminology when referring to the incarceration of Japanese and Japanese Americans during WWII.

Stress, Psychological Resilience, and Mental Toughness

Psychological resilience and mental toughness, along with their respective relationships with stress and athletic performance, have previously been studied (Crust, 2007; Crust & Swann, 2011; Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006; Fletcher, & Sarkar, 2013; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Nicholls, Polman, Levy, & Backhouse, 2009; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Most of the research around these constructs has been conducted on athletes at the collegiate or Olympic-caliber elite levels (Crust, 2007; Crust & Swann, 2011; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Nicholls et al., 2009; Sarkar & Fletcher; 2014). Despite numerous concerted efforts to formulate single, holistic definitions of psychological resilience and mental toughness in the field of sports psychology, agreed-upon operational definitions for these constructs remain uncertain (Crust & Swann, 2011; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

Although there are many challenges to accurately and wholly encompass the complexities of these constructs, sports psychologists have gotten closer to attaining more precise definitions. In a review and critique of existing definitions, concepts, and theory surrounding psychological resilience done by Fletcher and Sarkar (2013), the authors characterize psychological resilience as an aspect of one's psychology that may change over time. Throughout their review, they discuss psychological resilience in conjunction with stress and the stress process (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). According to the literature, psychological resilience may be broadly conceptualized "as the role of mental processes and behavior in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors" on a daily basis (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Competitive, organizational, and personal stressors are the three main types of stressors encountered by all athletes (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). One's psychological resilience promotes the following protective factors: positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). These protective factors facilitate one's ability to be resilient in the face of stressors, such as racial discrimination or adversity (Figure 1) (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

In a review done by Crust (2007), mental toughness is acknowledged to have similar dimensions to that of psychological resilience. However, mental toughness differs in that it lacks consistent reference to stress and the stress process in the way that psychological resilience is often defined (Crust, 2007; Crust & Swann, 2011; Fletcher et al., 2006; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Based on this omission, it may be assumed that mental toughness is less of a learned trait like that of psychological resilience and instead may be qualified as being more of an innate personality trait of which someone is either born

with or not (Crust, 2011; Crust & Swann, 2009; Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009; Nicholls et al., 2009). Ultimately, Crust (2011) acknowledges that mental toughness is multidimensional in nature and is most often associated with an unshakeable self-belief stemming from inherited characteristics. For the purposes of this literature review, the aforementioned operational definitions of psychological resilience and mental toughness will be utilized in the discussion of WWII Japanese and Japanese American internment camp baseball.

At present, the lack of clear operational definitions demonstrates a need for more research in the field of sports psychology. In addition, studying mostly collegiate- and elite-level athletes limits the external validity of existing operational definitions of psychological resilience and mental toughness. Moreover, in Sarkar and Fletcher's review on psychological resilience (2014), the researchers suggest that best practices in enhancing psychological resilience are that practitioners expose individuals to stressors sparingly and over time. However, this was not the reality for Japanese and Japanese Americans who were exposed to constant daily stress for a period of three years (Nagata, Kim, & Wu, 2019). For these reasons, the present literature review aims to close this gap in the research by assessing the ways in which recreational-level athletes, such as those who participated in recreational baseball during WWII internment, have the capacity to demonstrate both psychological resilience and mental toughness through sport. Based on the plethora of work detailing experiences of Japanese and Japanese American incarceration, it can be inferred that participation in internment camp baseball enabled everyday survival in the face of unprecedented discrimination in part due to baseball's protective impacts of innate mental toughness and enhanced psychological resilience.

Pre-War Baseball

Long before President Roosevelt's issuing of Executive Order 9066, baseball was not only of mass popularity in the United States, but it was the sport of choice among *Issei* and *Nisei*, first- and second-generation Japanese Americans, respectively (Beschloss, 2014; Mullan, 1999; Regalado, 1992). Historians write of the widespread Japanese and Japanese American love of baseball along the West Coast. In Central California and Seattle, Washington, there were all-Nisei baseball leagues and organized community teams, such as the Livingston Dodgers and the Livingston Peppers (Mullan, 1999; Regalado, 1992, 1995). According to sports historian Michael L. Mullan (1999), Issei and Nisei encouraged participation in all-Nisei leagues "based on the belief that athletics was a vehicle of education and acculturation for the Nisei within American society" (p. 3). Before WWII, baseball was more so a means of identifying with American culture (Beschloss, 2014; Mullan, 1999). During the war, however, the racial trauma resulting from wartime hysteria and unconstitutional detainment necessitated baseball not only as a means of cultural unity but more importantly as a resiliency mechanism (Beschloss, 2014; Mullan, 1999; Nagata, Kim, & Nguyen, 2015; Nagata, Kim, & Wu, 2019; Regalado, 1992).

Baseball in Camp

The creation of and participation in the American prison camps' baseball allowed for the maintenance of existing mental toughness. Prior to forced diaspora from their West Coast homes, many Nisei athletes were exceptional baseball players (Regalado, 1992, 1995). These mentally tough athletes carried the mental skills with them when they were forcibly removed from their homes and into the concentration camps. They were able to remain mentally tough by way of their participation in camp baseball (Mullan, 1999).

As previously stated, the three main stressors experienced by athletes are categorized as either competitive, organizational, or personal (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). From a sports

psychology perspective, Japanese American athletic incarceratedees faced all of these stressors on a daily basis. Sarkar and Fletcher (2014) spell out the various competitive stressors faced by athletes: preparation, injury, pressure, underperformance, performance expectations (internal and external), self-presentation, and rivalry. The incarcerated baseball players particularly grappled with the stress of underperforming and rivalry when playing rival baseball teams within their camp (Mullan, 1999). In addition, various historians and anthropologists highlight fears of adequate self-presentation in the players' desire to demonstrate their ability and seek recognition from "true" American opponents outside of the camps, often from local high schools or community colleges (Mullan, 1999; Regalado, 1992, 2013).

Incarcerated ball players faced a variety of organizational stressors such as logistical, environmental, performance, and personal issues (Mullan, 1999; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). In Regalado's accounts of experiences of baseball in the Amache War Relocation Center in Granada, Colorado (1992), he highlights an account describing the sheer lack of sports facilities: "We had to make the baseball diamond and there were no stands, no seats, no nothing...A lot of times we had sandstorms and sometimes we had to stop playing" (p. 141). Moreover, according to Jensen (1998) and Nagata and colleagues (2019), all incarceratedees consumed diets of primarily highly processed and unfamiliar foods, such as hotdogs and canned peaches over healthy and preferred rice and fresh vegetable diets; these confinement diets were unfit for anyone, let alone a hungry athlete. To compound these organizational hindrances, the call for young men to enter the draft and leave their camp baseball teams posed a frequent challenge to the players, their supporters, and their families (Mullan, 1999). Personal stressors, such as the anxiety of an uncertain future imparted on all incarcees, comprised the majority of the stress that Japanese

American baseball players and spectators alike frequently endured (Mullan, 1999; Nagata, Kim, & Wu, 2019).

In an effort to mitigate these stressors, baseball provided a space for participants to utilize and develop their psychological resilience through enacting protective factors such as positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Participation assisted sport performers' psychological resilience by aiding their reactions and responses to the aforementioned stressors in a positive way. According to Sarkar and Fletcher (2014), a positive personality contains qualities such as adaptive perfectionism, optimism, competitiveness, hope, and proactivity. Sports, and in particular, baseball, created the ideal outlet for male athletes to demonstrate and develop their positive personality traits. For instance, in terms of competitiveness, regional and personal rivalries remained as prevalent as they were from pre-war baseball leagues (Regalado, 2013). Games in which camp all-stars played against neighboring Caucasian squads were reported to be in record-high attendance, with nearly 2,500 to 3,000 spectators, rain or shine (Regalado, 2013). These games against communities outside of the camps highlighted Japanese and Japanese American ethnic pride (Mullan, 1999; Regalado, 2013). In addition, the popularity of camp baseball showcased Issei proactivity and social support in particular. While young Nisei fielded the baseball teams, Issei women and various religious organizations, such as the Women's Christian Fellowship, pitched in their efforts to support the sport by making uniforms and gathering materials when the United States War Relocation Authority would not provide with such materials (Regalado, 2013).

In their review of psychological resilience, Sarkar and Fletcher (2014) note that optimal levels of motivation are a required psychological attribute to withstand stress and pressure in competitive sport. During competitive camp baseball, the motivation to field baseball teams

came from a desire to demonstrate American identity and provide a purpose to a life full of unknowns (Beschloss, 2014; Mullan, 1999; Regalado, 2000, 2013). Confidence on the part of Nisei camp baseball players stemmed largely from their success in semi-pro leagues along the West Coast prior to WWII confinement, and continued community success winning games in camp (Mullan, 1999; Regalado, 1992, 1995). Furthermore, Sarkar and Fletcher (2014) define the protective factor of focus as one's ability to exert deliberate mental effort on what is most important in any given situation. Although participants and fans demonstrated a desire to win, of greater importance was the development of a wide attentional focus and ability to decipher irrelevant versus relevant cues, or in this particular context, focusing on the relevant cues of family, community, and identity (Nagata, Kim, & Wu, 2019; Regalado, 2000, 2013). Those who supported and participated in the American pastime during camp had an outlet—baseball—which enabled them to focus on the importance of family, community, and shared identity (Mullan, 1999; Regalado, 2000, 2013). Taken together, these psychologically resilient protective factors, attained and maintained through baseball, facilitated the incarcerated's ability to withstand psychological stressors and the impending stress of the uncertainty of their future (Beschloss, 2014; Regalado, 2013).

Discussion

Baseball was proclaimed to be a point of unity for all Americans, providing communal identity for players and spectators alike (Beschloss, 2014; Mullan, 1999; Regalado, 1992, 1995). Baseball, the great American pastime, was one such social structure during WWII incarceration that served to unify internees and maintain perseverance in the face of unprecedented adversity. This literature review demonstrates and highlights the ways in which sport is a necessity, not only in everyday life but especially for people experiencing mass incarceration. As the sport of

baseball requires and promotes psychological resilience and fortifies pre-existing levels of mental toughness, baseball played behind barbed wire aided prisoners through their three-year forced removal and isolation.

Future Research

Future iterations of this research could quantitatively assess the mental toughness and psychological resilience of those who participated in WWII camp baseball leagues. Although validated and developing methods to assess mental toughness and psychological resilience exist such as the Mental Toughness 48 Inventory (MT48) and Mental Toughness Inventory (MTI), researchers are skeptical about their construct validity as all information is purely self-reported and lacks robust test-retest reliability testing (Crust, 2011). Moreover, attaining these data from interned individuals who participated in WWII internment baseball undoubtedly poses a challenge as most in this population have since passed away or are in their very old age, which is later-nineties.

To understand the full scope of the impact of WWII baseball, it is essential to research the ways in which Japanese American psychological resilience and mental toughness manifests itself through sport today. Presently among WWII internment-era scholars, there is a plethora of research corroborating how third-, fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-generation Japanese Americans continue traditions of community-building through Japanese and Asian American youth baseball and basketball leagues (Chin, 2016; Regalado, 2013). Perhaps sports psychologists may wish to add to this body of work by contributing to present-day understanding of psychological resilience and mental toughness via a cohort study on the ways in which these psychological constructs are brought out or enhanced through Japanese American participation in baseball and basketball sporting leagues in California and Washington today.

Finally, the mass incarceration of Japanese and Japanese Americans has the potential to effect change in the modern-day criminal justice system. Based on the present literature review, it may be concluded that the everyday person, in addition to high-level Olympic-caliber athletes, exhibits a need for resilient, sport-facilitated psychological characteristics such as psychological resilience and mental toughness to aid survival and promote overall well-being. Moreover, the context of the traumatic environment of a mass confinement setting necessitates these sport-facilitated psychological characteristics. According to the U.S. Department of Justice 2019 Federal Performance Budget, the detailed budget omits a clear statement of allocations toward physical activity programs. This is unsurprising, as there is research to substantiate that there is a lack of adequate physical activity offerings in high-security prisons (Harner & Riley, 2013). Interventions to promote physical activity in high-security prisons are needed (Herbert, Plugge, Foster, & Doll, 2012). Creating healthy competitive environments through adequate sport offerings within sites of mass detention, such as in American high-security prisons and immigrant detention centers, may boost morale and maintain psychological resilience during and after captivity. For these reasons, future research should investigate the presence or lack of true sport offerings in federal sites of mass imprisonment to encourage the notion that access and participation in sport have the power to promote positive psychological well-being, especially in a psychologically traumatic environment.

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Appendix

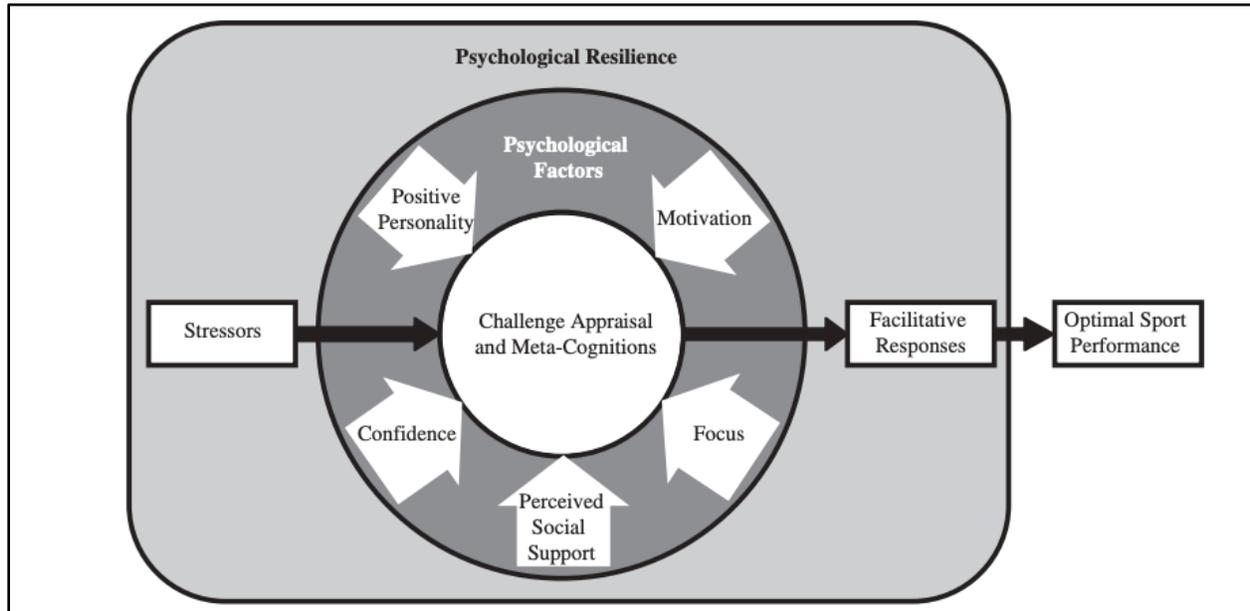


Figure 1. A grounded theory of psychological resilience and optimal sport performance. Adapted from “Psychological resilience in sport performers: A review of stressors and protective factors” by Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014, *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 32(15) p. 1421. Copyright 2014 by Taylor & Francis on behalf of School of Sport, Exercise, and Health Sciences, Loughborough University with permission.