



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

The social influence of emotions within sports teams

Friesen, A.P.; Wolf, S.A.; van Kleef, G.A.

DOI

[10.4324/9781003052012-7](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003052012-7)

Publication date

2021

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Feelings in Sport

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care>)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Friesen, A. P., Wolf, S. A., & van Kleef, G. A. (2021). The social influence of emotions within sports teams. In M. C. Ruiz, & C. Robazza (Eds.), *Feelings in Sport: Theory, Research, and Practical Implications for Performance and Well-being* (pp. 49-57). (Routledge Psychology of Sport, Exercise and Physical Activity). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003052012-7>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

5 The Social Influence of Emotions within Sports Teams

*Andrew P. Friesen, Svenja A. Wolf,
and Gerben A. van Kleef*

Theoretical Considerations

Personal involvement and perceived stakes are ubiquitous in sports, and they can generate intense emotional reactions. Both anecdotal accounts and a wealth of scientific evidence support the relationship between emotions and performance (Beedie, Terry, & Lane, 2000; Hanin, 2003, 2010; Lazarus, 2000). Moreover, regulating or managing emotions to bring about an ideal emotional state has been demonstrated to have beneficial effects on sports performance (e.g. Lane et al., 2016; Rathschlag & Memmert, 2013; Robazza, Pellizzari, & Hanin, 2004).

Whilst emotion regulation is often under the charge of the athlete, the inherent social nature of sports provides an opportunity for others to influence an athlete's emotional state. Indeed, coaches (e.g. van Kleef, Cheshin, Koning, & Wolf, 2019), captains (e.g. Friesen, Devonport, Sellars, & Lane, 2013), referees (e.g. Friesen, Devonport, & Lane, 2017), and teammates (e.g. Wolf, Harenberg, Tamminen, & Schmitz, 2018) have been found to exert an influence on athletes' emotions. Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is especially coaches', captains', referees', and players' own emotional expressions through which they exert this influence. However, to date no concerted efforts have been made to delineate when and how such emotional expressions influence sports performance. Especially for those in leadership positions (e.g. captains, coaches, managers), the question, "How can I influence my players' emotions?" needs further theoretical development.

There is growing scholarly awareness that emotions influence not only those who experience them, but also those who observe them. According to social-functional perspectives, emotions serve to coordinate interaction between individuals (Fischer & Manstead, 2016; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Parkinson, 1996; van Kleef, 2009), an idea that is clearly relevant to sport settings (e.g. Friesen et al., 2013; Wolf et al., 2018). In particular, the emotions as social information (EASI) theory (van Kleef, 2009, 2016) contends that emotional expressions can elicit affective, cognitive, and behavioural responses from others, which facilitate social coordination. Whereas most support for EASI theory stems from research on social and organisational

psychology (for reviews see, for example, van Kleef & Côté, 2018; van Kleef, Heerdink, & Homan, 2017; van Kleef, Homan, & Cheshin, 2012), initial evidence suggests that EASI theory also applies to sports, particularly to integrated team sport contexts. In this chapter, we review emerging work on the application of EASI theory to sports and outline ensuing practical implications.

Emotions as Social Information (EASI) Theory

Central to EASI theory (see Figure 5.1) is the idea that expressions of emotion(s) can elicit affective and/or inferential processes in other people, which in turn shape behaviour and, in the context of sports, performance (van Kleef, 2009, 2016). Regarding affective processes, EASI theory builds on and extends classic work on emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994) by suggesting that emotional expressions can elicit reciprocal or complementary emotional reactions in others, which may influence coordination and performance. For example, coaches might deliberately portray a confident demeanour for the benefit of their players who are feeling tentative before a championship competition in the hope that the players will start to feel confident as well. This confidence subsequently serves to enhance the players’ performance. Regarding inferential processes, EASI theory stipulates that observers can draw inferences about the meaning and performance implications of someone’s expressed emotions (van Kleef, 2009). Given that emotions result from cognitive appraisal processes, athletes can “reversely appraise” their coaches’ emotion expressions (Hareli & Hess, 2010) to infer how they evaluate a situation. For example, a coach who exhibits happiness or contentment may lead his or her athletes to appraise the situation as likely to result in success, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy.

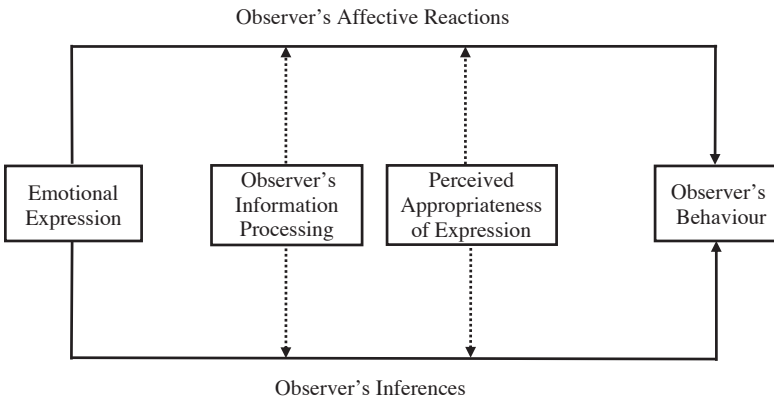


Figure 5.1 A schematic depiction of emotions as social information (EASI) theory. Source: adapted with permission from Van Kleef (2010).

Thus, emotional expressions may influence others by eliciting affective and/or inferential processes in them. Importantly, affective and inferential processes may drive different behavioural consequences, and this has implications for understanding the effects of emotional expressions on athletes' performance. For instance, expressions of anger may undermine motivation and performance by evoking negative affect and dislike in others, but they may also enhance motivation and performance by signalling that current performance is subpar (van Kleef et al., 2009). Consider for example a speed skater who is not following the race plan laid out by his coach. The frustrated coach might express her disappointment and anger at the skater. The skater might infer that his divergent tactics are not respectful to the coach's expertise and prompt him to comply with the coach's tactics at the next opportunity. Alternatively, the coach's anger might upset the skater, whose resulting bodily tension might sabotage his skating technique. Understanding and using the effects of emotional expressions on others therefore requires understanding the relative prominence of affective and inferential processes triggered by emotional expressions.

EASI theory posits that the relative potency of these affective and inferential processes depends on observers' information processing motivation and/or ability as well as on the perceived appropriateness of emotional displays (van Kleef, 2016). Specifically, the relative predictive strength of inferential processes (compared with affective processes) increases to the degree that observers are more motivated and able to engage in thorough information processing and/or perceive the emotional expression as appropriate for the situation; conversely, the relative predictive strength of affective processes (compared with inferential processes) increases to the degree that observers are less motivated and able to engage in thorough information processing and/or perceive the emotional expression as inappropriate.

EASI Theory Applied to Sports

Lately, sport psychology researchers have increasingly advocated for incorporating EASI theory or psychological processes outlined therein in the domain of sports. For example, in a study on the effects of nonverbal behaviour on team outcome confidence, Seiler, Schweizer, and Seiler (2018) observed that others' emotional expressions could indeed transport social information that influences one's own behaviour and performance. Conversely, Stebbings, Taylor, and Spray (2016) studied emotion contagion within coach-athlete dyads and found some support for an affect transfer effect. However, whereas athletes seemed to catch their coaches' affect, coaches were not able to catch the good or ill will of their athletes over the course of a season. Citing the moderating factors pertaining to the capacity for inferential processing, the authors suggested that their coaches might not have been able to detect the emotional expressions of their athletes due to training in a noisy and crowded environment as well as due to players wearing

helmets that distort or hide facial expressions, which would have impeded inferential processing. Furthermore, Friesen, Devonport, and Lane (2017) obtained evidence for the role of perceived appropriateness of emotional expressions, showing that different strategies were used by lacrosse referees depending on whether they were attempting to influence the emotions of their fellow referees or players and coaches. Specifically, the embedded authority imbalance between referee and player or coach dictated certain expectations of appropriate emotional expression that were not present between referees. These findings suggest that the mediating mechanisms (affective and inferential processes) and contingencies (information processing and perceived appropriateness) delineated in EASI theory also apply to sport contexts.

However, to date, only a handful of studies have directly examined the applicability of EASI theory to sports. In one such study, Furley, Moll, and Memmert (2015) investigated the interpersonal effects of post-performance expressions of pride and shame on opponents and teammates in soccer penalty shootouts. They found that nonverbal displays of these emotions influenced players' own pride, happiness, stress, confidence, perceptions of control, focus, comfort, and performance expectations. The direction of effect was contingent on whether these emotions were expressed by teammates or by opponents. Also using EASI theory as a guiding framework, Cheshin, Heerdink, Kossakowski, and van Kleef (2016) studied the interpersonal effects of emotional expressions in professional baseball. Specifically, they investigated how pitchers' facial expressions of anger, happiness, or worry might be used by observers to predict characteristics of the pitch and ensuing batter behaviour. Participants expected happy looking pitchers to throw more accurate balls, angry looking pitchers to throw faster and more difficult balls, and worried looking pitchers to throw slower and less accurate balls. Batters were expected to swing when faced with a happy looking pitcher, and to avoid swinging when faced with a worried looking pitcher. These findings are consistent with the possibility that athletes use others' emotional expressions to inform their interpretation of and responses to relevant events in sports settings.

In a more recent investigation drawing on EASI theory, van Kleef et al. (2019) conducted two studies among baseball and soccer teams examining how coaches' emotional expressions influence their players' affect, cognitions, and subsequent performance. They found evidence for emotion linkage between coaches and players, with coaches' expressions of happiness and anger predicting players' experienced happiness and anger, respectively, also when controlling for the score of the game. Additionally, when coaches expressed anger, players inferred that their team was performing poorly, whereas when coaches expressed happiness players inferred that their team was performing well. Lastly, coaches' expressions of happiness as compared with anger prior to the game were associated with better team performance.

Staw, DeCelles and de Goeij (2019) sought to resolve the paradox that leaders' unpleasant affective displays can both improve and harm team performance.

They studied this effect in basketball coaches' half-time speeches. Drawing on EASI theory (van Kleef et al., 2012), they predicted and found that the intensity of the expressed emotion – a direct antecedent of perceived appropriateness – is a key factor in social influence in sports. That is, if a coach is unhappy with the team's performance and expresses that frustration with too little intensity, the team will not perceive their performance as particularly unsatisfactory. Conversely, if the coach's negative expressions are too intense, the players become distracted by the coach and lose the message that the coach had intended to communicate. Accordingly, moderate expressions of negative emotion by the coach elicited better team performance than low or high levels of negative emotion.

Friesen, Devonport, Sellars, and Lane (2015) drew on EASI theory to examine moderating factors that govern the effects of emotional expressions in ice hockey. Players in qualitative interviews suggested the following factors affected the inferential processing ability and/or motivation of the targeted player. (a) Understanding the coach's appraisal of the situation. Influence is more likely to occur when the targeted player shares the appraisal of the situation that triggered the coach's emotions. (b) The importance of the situation. The more important the moment is to the athletes (e.g. playoffs), the more motivated they are to coordinate their behaviour in any way that they perceive increases likelihood of success. (c) Poor performance. When confronted with poor team or individual performance, players will be more motivated to coordinate with their coach to ensure that players are experiencing wanted emotions that are expected to facilitate improved performance.

Additionally, Friesen, Devonport, Sellars, and Lane (2015) identified several social-relational factors that might moderate social influence as well. (a) Appropriateness of the regulation strategy. Based on the sub-cultural norms of the sport, players might resist any attempt at influence if the strategy is perceived to be inappropriate. (b) Appropriateness of the evoked emotion. Athletes hold individualised beliefs about which emotions can help their performance and which hinder performance. Therefore, there will be resistance against any attempt to make an athlete feel an emotion that is not perceived to be beneficial to performance. (c) Perceived status of the coach. Coaches or players who are held in high regard by the players will have a greater capacity to influence the players around them. (d) Role. Players hold expectations associated with the different informal team roles pertaining to social influence. For example, goaltenders in hockey are not expected to play a significant role in regulating others' emotions, whereas captains are often charged with that responsibility.

Lastly, Friesen, Devonport, Lane, and Sellars (2015) followed EASI theory in applying an intervention to improve deliberate social influence within a professional ice hockey team. They measured emotional intelligence before and after the intervention and targeted naturally occurring instances of interpersonal emotion regulation that transpired during dressing room debriefing sessions and brief contact interventions with coaches and players. A significant

improvement in the players' ability to appraise their teammates' emotional states was reported as well as a positive, though not significant, improvement in the ability to regulate others' emotional states. Supporting EASI theory, two moderating factors appeared to influence the efficacy of the intervention, namely sub-cultural norms pertaining to how emotions are expressed in ice hockey as well as the extent to which the influencer was perceived to be a member of the group's inner core.

Applied Recommendations

The application of EASI theory to sports yields a number of recommendations. First, coaches and team leaders should be mindful of the informational content and potential impact of nonverbal (e.g. facial, bodily) and verbal emotional expressions. Given that research suggests emotional expressions can influence sports performance, it would be important for coaches and team leaders to know how their emotional expressions might influence players around them. In a way, emotional expressions may help to coordinate player behaviour just as a proposed game tactic or strategy might coordinate behaviour. Therefore, it would be good practice for coaches to debrief how their emotional expressions might be influencing team performance. In the case of deliberate social influence, coaches might elicit feedback from assistant coaches, sports science staff, or team leaders as to whether their regulation strategy achieved its intended effect. In the case of unconscious emotional expressions, coaches could use video-assisted procedures to debrief their emotional expressions and discuss the expected consequences of their emotional expressions with a sports psychologist.

Second, coaches should consider the characteristics and confines of the training and performance environment. Specifically, the cognitive and time-constraints in the context of competitions (e.g. amount of tactical information to retain, brevity of time-outs and breaks) may reduce athletes' processing ability, rendering well-intended expressions (e.g. of anger as a means to confer performance stimulating information (van Kleef et al., 2009) ineffective or even harmful (van Kleef et al., 2019). In addition to the content of any message, the manner in which it is communicated matters. Sports facilities (e.g. gymnasiums, pools, fields) often have poor acoustic characteristics. This can result in coaches and players shouting at each other to be heard. Shouting is often associated with negative emotions and can trigger unwanted interpersonal effects by eliciting negative affective reactions. It is recommended that coaches and players consider ways to deliver their messages that maximise effectiveness but minimise unwanted consequences.

Third, coaches, players, and officials should consider the sub-culture of the sport when attempting to influence others' emotions given that perceived social norms pertaining to emotional displays can determine the success of social influence. For example, emotions that would be deemed appropriate to

express in ice hockey are likely not the same as those that are appropriate in synchronised swimming.

Finally, given the importance of emotional influence in shaping team performance, it would be useful for team captains and other formal or informal leaders to recognise the potential influence of their emotional expressions, and to practice strategies for successful interpersonal emotion regulation. These types of strategies are receiving increased attention in sport psychology (see Tamminen & Neely, 2020). It would be useful for team leaders to develop these skills as part of their mental skills toolkit.

Conclusion

Coaches and athletes alike are interested in influencing teammates to perform better. One way to do this is by expressing emotions in order to evoke affective, cognitive, and behavioural responses in players and bring about coordinated performance. In this chapter, we have proposed that EASI theory can elucidate how emotional expressions might be used to influence the performance of teammates. EASI theory explains not only the channels through which emotional influence occurs, but also proposes key moderating factors that affect the mediating pathways that shape the ultimate success of such influence.

While research on EASI theory has flourished in social and organisational psychology, only a handful of research articles have explicitly applied the model in the context of sports. Despite this paucity of research, EASI theory provides a sound theoretical basis for further investigations and applied interventions in sport. Based on the insights emerging from this theoretical framework, we encourage coaches and other leaders to be aware of the social consequences of their emotional expressions, to develop an understanding of the role of contextual factors in shaping those consequences, and ultimately to learn to regulate their emotional expressions so as to stimulate optimal performance.

References

- Beedie, C. J., Terry, P. C., & Lane, A. M. (2000). The profile of mood states and athletic performance: Two meta-analyses. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 12*, 49–68. doi:10.1080/10413200008404213.
- Cheshin, A., Heerdink, M. W., Kossakowski, J. J., & van Kleef, G. A. (2016). Pitching emotions: The interpersonal effects of emotions in professional baseball. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*, 178. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00178.
- Fischer, A. H., & Manstead, A. S. (2016). Social functions of emotion and emotion regulation. In M. Lewis, J. Haviland-Jones & L. F. Barrett (Eds.), *Handbook of Emotions* (4th ed.). New York: Guilford.
- Friesen, A. P., Devonport, T. J., & Lane, A. M. (2017). Beyond the technical: The role of emotion regulation in lacrosse officiating. *Journal of Sports Sciences, 35*, 579–586. doi:10.1080/02640414.2016.1180419.

- Friesen, A. P., Devonport, T. J., Sellars, C. N., & Lane, A. M. (2013). A narrative account of decision-making and interpersonal emotion regulation using a social-functional approach to emotions. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *11*, 203–214. doi:10.1080/1612197X.2013.773664.
- Friesen, A. P., Devonport, T. J., Lane, A. M., & Sellars, C. N. (2015). Interpersonal emotion regulation: An intervention case study with a professional ice hockey team. *Athletic Insight*, *7*, 129–142.
- Friesen, A. P., Devonport, T. J., Sellars, C. N., & Lane, A. M. (2015). Examining interpersonal emotion regulation strategies and moderating factors in ice hockey. *Athletic Insight*, *7*, 143–160.
- Furley, P., Moll, T., & Memmert, D. (2015). “Put your hands up in the air”? The interpersonal effects of pride and shame expressions on opponents and teammates. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *6*, 1361. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01361.
- Hanin, Y. L. (2003). Performance related emotional states in sport: A qualitative Analysis [48 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal], *4* (1). doi:10.17169/fqs-4.1.747.
- Hanin, Y. L. (2010). Coping with anxiety in sport. In Nicholls, A. R. (Ed.), *Coping in sport: Theory, methods, and related constructs* (pp. 159–175). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers.
- Hareli, S., & Hess, U. (2010). What emotional reactions can tell us about the nature of others: An appraisal perspective on person perception. *Cognition and Emotion*, *24*, 128–140. doi:10.1080/02699930802613828.
- Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Rapson, R. L. (1994). *Emotional contagion: Cambridge studies in emotion and social interaction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Keltner, D., & Haidt, J. (1999). Social functions of emotions at four levels of analysis. *Cognition & Emotion*, *13*, 505–521. doi:10.1080/026999399379168.
- Lane, A. M., Devonport, T. J., Friesen, A. P., Beedie, C. J., Fullerton, C. L., & Stanley, D. M. (2016). How should I regulate my emotions if I want to run faster? *European Journal of Sport Science*, *16*, 465–472. doi:10.1080/17461391.2015.1080305.
- Lazarus, R. S. (2000). How emotions influence performance in competitive sports. *The Sport Psychologist*, *14*, 229–252. doi:10.1123/tsp.14.3.229.
- Parkinson, B. (1996). Emotions are social. *British Journal of Psychology*, *87*, 663–683. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8295.1996.tb02615.x.
- Rathschlag, M., & Memmert, D. (2013). The influence of self-generated emotions on physical performance: An investigation of happiness, anger, anxiety, and sadness. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *35*, 197–210. doi:10.1123/jsep.35.2.197.
- Robazza, C., Pellizzari, M., & Hanin, Y. (2004). Emotion self-regulation and athletic performance: An application of the IZOF model. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *5*, 379–404. doi:10.1016/S1469-0292(03)00034-7.
- Seiler, K., Schweizer, G., & Seiler, R. (2018). Do the effects of nonverbal behaviour on team outcome confidence in team sports depend on the availability of additional performance information? *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *36*, 29–40. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2017.12.007.
- Staw, B. M., DeCelles, K. A., & de Goey, P. (2019). Leadership in the locker room: How the intensity of leaders’ unpleasant affective displays shapes team performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Advanced Online Publication. doi:10.1037/apl0000418.
- Stebbins, J., Taylor, I. M., & Spray, C. M. (2016). Interpersonal mechanisms explaining the transfer of well-and ill-being in coach–athlete dyads. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *38*, 292–304. doi:10.1123/jsep.2015-0172.

- Tamminen, K. A., & Neely, K. C. (2021). We're in this together: Dyadic and interpersonal aspects of emotions, coping, and emotion regulation in sport. In this book.
- van Kleef, G. A. (2009). How emotions regulate social life: The emotions as social information (EASI) model. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *18*, 184–188. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01633.x.
- van Kleef, G. A. (2010). The emerging view of emotion as social information. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *4*, 331–343. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00262.x.
- van Kleef, G. A. (2016). *The interpersonal dynamics of emotion*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- van Kleef, G. A., Cheshin, A., Koning, L. F., & Wolf, S. A. (2019). Emotional games: How coaches' emotional expressions shape players' emotions, inferences, and team performance. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *41*, 1–11. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.11.004.
- van Kleef, G. A., & Côté, S. (2018). Emotional dynamics in conflict and negotiation: Individual, dyadic, and group processes. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, *5*, 437–464. doi:10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104714.
- van Kleef, G. A., Heerdink, M. W., & Homan, A. C. (2017). Emotional influence in groups: The dynamic nexus of affect, cognition, and behavior. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *17*, 156–161. doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.07.017.
- van Kleef, G. A., Homan, A. C., Beersma, B., Van Knippenberg, D., Van Knippenberg, B., & Damen, F. (2009). Searing sentiment or cold calculation? The effects of leader emotional displays on team performance depend on follower episodic motivation. *Academy of Management Journal*, *52*, 562–580. doi:10.5465/amj.2009.41331253.
- van Kleef, G. A., Homan, A. C., & Cheshin, A. (2012). Emotional influence at work: Take it EASI. *Organizational Psychology Review*, *2*, 311–339. doi:10.1177/2041386612454911.
- Wolf, S. A., Harenberg, S., Tamminen, K., & Schmitz, H. (2018). “‘Cause you can't play this by yourself”: athletes' perceptions of team influence on their precompetitive psychological states. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *30*, 185–203. doi:10.1080/10413200.2017.1347965.