

PSYC394_07

The Psychology of Athletics: From Elite Performance to Everyday Exercise



COURSE OVERVIEW

Welcome to The Psychology of Athletics: From Elite Performance to Everyday Exercise! Have you ever wondered how a professional baseball player's brain can process a 100-mph fastball in time to swing? Or

why soccer players choke under the pressure of high-stakes penalty kicks more often than it seems a professional athlete should? How do everyday exercisers stay motivated, and how do elite endurance athletes get past the physical fatigue without giving up? Why does it feel so good to exercise, and why do people tend to be able to push themselves harder when others are around? Is there empirical evidence of neurocognitive and mental health benefits of exercise? If any of these questions made you go "oh yeah, how DO they do that?" then this is the course for you!

Class: TTH 9:40–11:10, OLRI 270

Professor: Violet Brown

office: OLRI 357

email: vbrown2@macalester.edu

appointments: tinyurl.com/chatwithvb

Three questions drive this course: **How do elite athletes do it?** We'll explore perceptual and cognitive expertise in athletics, including how experts anticipate, attend to, and interpret information differently from novices, and how the brain and behavior change as skills become automatic. **How do athletes (elite and everyday) keep doing it?** We'll examine the social and motivational forces that sustain athletic effort—how teams, coaching, and social identity shape performance; how habits form; and what neuroscience reveals about effort and fatigue. **Why should we all do it?** We'll conclude by examining the psychological and neurological benefits of exercise, from its effects on stress and mood to evidence that exercise reshapes the very brain systems that mental health depends on.

COURSE FORMAT AND MATERIALS

All important course materials you'll need to access outside of class time—including this syllabus, links to readings, the schedule of topics we'll cover, assignment details, etc.—are available on Moodle. **This is a tech-free classroom** (unless specifically noted otherwise; details on the next page). To make things easier for you, I've printed and spiral-bound all articles you'll need for this course. You're welcome to print your own copies or read the articles on your laptop/tablet, of course, but you should bring a paper copy to class. Sometimes there will be more readings in your spiral-bound packet than I assigned; consult Moodle for your reading assignment.



Additional materials (PowerPoint slides from occasional mini-lectures, handouts, etc.) will be stored and shared via **Google Drive**. (Moodle -> Course Logistics).

WORKING WITH VIOLET

As the professor of this course, I'm eager to help you throughout your learning journey, and I hope you're comfortable reaching out to me with questions and concerns. For quick questions, email is best. For more complicated questions, book a time to meet with me at tinyurl.com/chatwithvb.

That link is intended to make setting up an appointment easy and low stress. Please don't take the fact that I don't have "open" office hours as a sign that I don't want to meet with you. I REALLY DO. The reason I do it this way is that I've found that many students feel more comfortable meeting with me if they know they're guaranteed 100% of my attention and won't have to wait in line. If none of the available times work for you, that doesn't mean I can't meet; I don't have every open hour in my schedule available for appointments, so if you're busy during those times, just send me an email and we'll find a time to meet. That said, **if my office door is open, feel free to pop in!**



<http://tinyurl.com/chatwithvb>

INTERNET-FREE CLASSROOM

As the resident cognitive psychologist in the room, please trust me when I say that laptops, smartphones, tablets, etc. are not doing good things for our attention spans in the long term, and they are inarguable distractors for the both user and those around you in the short term (e.g., Flanigan et al., 2023). Given that the most effective way to prevent distraction is to modify the situation (Duckworth & Gross, 2020), and I want this classroom to feel like a community of engaged learners, tech is banned in this classroom (unless you have an accommodation that requires a device or if a discussion question specifically asks you to look something up, which happens occasionally!).



No phones, laptops, or tablets in the classroom, including before class. This means you should put your phone away before walking into the classroom. If you must check your phone, feel free to step outside briefly. Do whatever works best for you outside of the classroom, but leave your phone and your laptop in your bag during class time (or at home, if you dare!). Please reach out to Violet ASAP if you see this being a problem.

OTHER FINE PRINT

Students may find themselves limited in their ability to accomplish course requirements for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to visible or non-visible physical disability or chronic illness, learning disability, mental illness, and bereavement processes. I aim to provide an inclusive and safe environment for all students and am happy to work with the relevant office(s) on campus to maintain an accessible and accommodating classroom for all. **Please notify me of any accommodation needs as soon as possible.**

Let's work together to make this a respectful and positive classroom atmosphere. This includes silencing and stowing phones, using laptops for note taking only, and being respectful of others.

COURSE GRADING

I struggle immensely with the traditional grading system. I find that it tends to undermine rather than enhance intrinsic motivation to learn and discover, and leads to many of our conversations being about grades and how to do better on the next assignment rather than on learning.

I want to build intrinsic motivation to learn. Grades can get in the way of that. So you know what? Let's do away with them. In this course, you won't receive a grade on any assignment. **This is not to say that you won't receive a grade in this course.** You will! Welcome to college. But it won't be determined by the weighted average of your numerical score on numerous assignments. Instead, it will be influenced by the time and effort you put into the assignments; completing assignments thoroughly and on time; your productive struggle for knowledge and growth; and your willingness to ask questions, take chances, make mistakes, and learn from them.

On the next two pages, you'll find a "**contract for an A-**," which outlines the minimum requirements for attaining an A- in the course. If you stay on contract, you're guaranteed at least an A-; earning an A will require having exceptionally well researched and well written papers (with particular emphasis on your final research paper), not having any unexcused absences (details below), and going above and beyond in terms of engagement with course material and activities (e.g., discussions, Moodle posts, etc.). If you end up off contract, we'll switch to a more traditional grading approach, although your final grade will still be determined by a one-on-one conversation at the end of term where together we'll arrive at a grade based on evidence accumulated throughout the term (see below for more detail).

Note that not receiving a numerical/letter grade on individual assignments does not mean you won't receive feedback. You will. Lots of it. In case it wasn't clear from this document, I tend to be quite thorough in my descriptions, and this is true of the feedback I provide as well. You'll receive detailed feedback on all written assignments, so please trust me when I say that you'll know exactly how you're doing in the course. But, in case you're worried about not knowing how you're doing, you'll meet with me at the five week point to check in, and you are always warmly welcome to set up additional meetings to check in about your current grade at any point throughout the term...as long as you promise to talk about content, too 😊

WHAT IF I END UP OFF CONTRACT?

As stated above, if you stay on contract, you'll receive at minimum an A- in the course. If you fall off contract, we'll switch to a more traditional grading approach (see scale below). As a rough guide, think of the breakdown this way: ~40% of your grade will be determined based on your first two research proposals, 30% will be based on your final research proposal, and 30% will be based on participation and Moodle responses.

Letter	Lowest	Highest	Letter	Lowest	Highest	Letter	Lowest	Highest
A	93.00 %	100.00 %	C+	77.00 %	79.99 %	D-	60.00 %	62.99 %
A-	90.00 %	92.99 %	C	73.00 %	76.99 %	F	0.00 %	59.99 %
B+	87.00 %	89.99 %	C-	70.00 %	72.99 %			
B	83.00 %	86.99 %	D+	67.00 %	69.99 %			
B-	80.00 %	82.99 %	D	63.00 %	66.99 %			

CONTRACT FOR AN A-

This course is completely discussion based. There are no quizzes or exams; instead, every day you'll come to class and discuss the readings for the day (don't worry, I'll provide discussion questions!). As such, the most important course requirements are 1) **thoroughly** engaging with all assigned reading(s) and 2) coming to class ready to engage in thoughtful discussion. All readings for this course are peer-reviewed journal articles, and I assign a reasonable number of readings (no more than three per class, usually two, and sometimes even one!) so you actually do them and aren't tempted to skim. **You are expected to carefully read every paper you're assigned.** We'll all know if you show up to class without having done the readings, and doing the reading defeats the purpose of taking a discussion class! With that disclaimer and plea for engagement out of the way, here's what you need to do to get at least an A-.

- **Discussion participation and attendance:** Again, this is a discussion-based course, so the most important part of your grade is showing up having thoroughly completed the assigned reading(s) and participating in class discussions. Mostly our discussions will occur in small groups, which I hope promotes engagement from students who are less comfortable speaking in front of the whole class.
 - **To receive an A- in the course,** you must attend all classes unless you're sick, observing a holiday, or out of town for unavoidable travel (e.g., participating in athletic events, attending conferences, family emergencies, etc.). You're allowed two "freebies" over the course of the term (i.e., you may skip two classes without warning...but then you'll miss out on all the fun and learning!). Regardless, I'd appreciate an email letting me know ahead of time, even if it's a permitted absence. **Also note that you must submit a few thoughts related to all discussion questions, even if you can't make it to class** (and that is much more difficult to do on your own, so try to come to class!). Failing to submit more than one discussion set for a missed class (including situations in which I deem your responses inadequate to receive participation credit) automatically puts you off contract; failing to submit one will result in an email from me asking you to submit ASAP.
- **Research proposal papers:** You will write three research proposals throughout the term. The first two are relatively short (likely ~6 pages plus references), and the last one—your final paper for the course—is a full-length experiment proposal. The first two can be completed individually or with a partner, but the final one must be completed individually.
 - **To receive an A- in the course,** you must turn in the papers **as well as the experiment ideas** on time (unless you specifically request an extension at least one week in advance); the papers must contain all required sections and be thoroughly researched, well-written, and strictly adhere to APA formatting guidelines; and all writing must be your own work (or the work of you + your partner; see the following pages for a description of my AI policy). This doesn't mean you're on your own though! I'm always open to answering questions and reading drafts/sections ahead of time if it would be helpful.

A note about extensions:

Extensions will be granted on a case-by-case basis, but you need to talk to me at least three days before the deadline if you want an extension. The concepts we'll cover in this course really build on one another, so if you ask for multiple extensions and fall behind, it will be difficult to catch up.

CONTRACT FOR AN A-

- **Moodle responses:** Before every class, there will be a single question on Moodle related to the reading for the day. Each response should be completed **at least two hours before class starts** (ideally by the night before so I have time to read them). These responses ensure that you engaged deeply with the material and didn't just skim, and give us some discussion fodder. It doesn't need to be long, but it should be thoughtful. Usually I'll give you a prompt (in my experience, students tend to prefer having something to go off of rather than being expected to come up with something themselves), but you're also welcome to tell me your general thoughts/reactions to the reading(s), including asking a question, commenting on what was confusing, making connections with other topics/courses/your life, etc.
 - Remember that our classroom is an internet-free zone. So **please remember to print your Moodle post or jot down a few notes on paper before coming to class so you remember what you said.**
 - **To receive an A- in the course,** you must skip no more than three Moodle responses over the course of the term. For a response to count, you must demonstrate to me that you engaged deeply with the reading; typically this means writing more than three sentences, but I care much more about content than length. You must also fill out both habit surveys. Note: **You are always expected to complete the reading, even if you decide to skip the associated Moodle response.** contract; failing to submit one will result in an email from me asking you to submit ASAP.
- **Article presentation:** There will be one day in this course in which everyone will read an article in-depth and present it to the class along with a group of about four students. There will be four articles assigned in total, one per group. The discussion for the day will be centered around those four articles—only one of which you'll be required to read—so be sure you pay attention to the other presentations.
 - **To receive an A- in the course,** you must participate actively in your group's preparation and presentation and adhere to the assignment guidelines. If you're sick or have an otherwise excused absence this day, you'll have to present to me on your own, skim the other papers, and briefly address the discussion questions for the day (see "Discussion participation and attendance" section on the previous page).

**** Please note: Additional assignments will not be given at the end of the term to make up for breaking contract.****

CHAT GPT AND OTHER AI

The goal of this course is for you to learn a lot, think critically and creatively, and craft arguments; the assignments themselves are simply a permanent record of this process. Relying on AI to produce writing circumvents the educational experience. I **promise** you'll be better served thinking hard and using me and the incredible resources at Macalester for help with planning written assignments and writing assistance rather than outsource your thinking to a large language model.

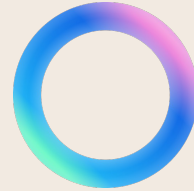
The only way to learn is to practice and struggle: **The struggle is part of the learning process.** So rather than using AI, I encourage you to use your brain, me, your peers, and even good ol' fashioned Google instead. For better or for worse, the most effective way to learn is the hard way.

All that said, **here are my hard-and-fast rules regarding AI:**

- 1) If you use AI to help plan your thinking, I ask that you tell me how. Just like you'd cite any other resource, it's important for you to give credit where credit is due (same with consulting other students on assignments: Let me know who you worked with!). Be honest; you won't get in trouble. If you've used AI in a way that I consider inappropriate, I'll let you know for next time.
- 2) You should *never* copy/paste words produced by generative AI and pass them off as your own. That's plagiarism. Given that most assignments in this course are written assignments, AI won't be much help to you.
- 3) I retain the right to ask you not to use AI on any assignments. If I ask you not to use AI, please don't.

Be aware that in addition to producing rather superficial, formulaic text, AI can give you factually inaccurate information, make up citations that don't exist, and omit key ideas. In addition, AI "reproduces biases that exist in the texts used to train [it] (incl. citational exclusions and inequities, and hegemonic views)" (see van Rooij, 2022). Part of our job as scholars is to question the existing assumptions of our discipline and work to improve them, not just repackage them.

Know how I came up with this policy? I sat down, struggled, and refined it until I found the ideas I was looking for.



A NOTE ABOUT YOUR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

A thing about me is that I REALLY value your health and wellbeing. I want you to be successful in this class and work hard and learn a ton, but I want you to keep in mind that you're a human being with a human body and human needs. SO please please please balance your success with rest, exercise, and attention to your mental and physical health. Hey, listen to me: Working until exhaustion is not a badge of honor; it's a sign that things are out of balance. I assign short readings and reasonable assignments because I want you to do them fully, but more importantly, I want you to learn as much as you possibly can *without destroying yourselves*. I want you to learn a ton, but not more than you can within reason.

This is all to say: Please take good care of yourselves. It's hard enough being human, and being in college poses additional challenges, so remember to give yourselves a little grace and stay gentle. In the wise words of Sara Bareilles, "You might feel crazy, but babe, that's just passing through." Hang in there. Outside of class, remember to move your body (take my "Psychology of Athletics: From Elite Performance to Everyday Exercise" course if you want to learn about the neurocognitive and mental health benefits of exercise!), connect with others while taking time for yourself when you need it, and reach out to me and/or the many, many resources we're extremely lucky to have here at Mac if you're struggling (academically or otherwise). In class, if you're hungry, please eat! If you're thirsty, please drink water! If you need to use the restroom or step out for any reason, you do you! No need to ask; I'll emphatically say "yes" every time.

[I hid not one but two Brandi Carlile lyrics in this section...email me if you can find either or both!]

CLASS SCHEDULE (subject to change)

Week	Day	Topic	
1	Tues	Intro	
	Thurs	Visual perceptual processing	
2	Tues	Anticipation: Probabilistic and kinematic cues	Habit survey wave 1 due by 5pm
	Thurs	Anticipation: Gaze behavior	
3	Tues	Chunking and recognition memory	
	Thurs	Performance under pressure: Mechanisms	
4	Tues	Performance under pressure: Compounding errors	
	Thurs	Performance under pressure: Penalty kicks	
5	Tues	Habits and motivation: Day 1	Unit 1 experiment idea due by 5pm
	Thurs	Habits and motivation: Day 2	
6	Tues	Fatigue: Day 1	Unit 1 short research proposal due by 10pm
	Wed	Meet with your group to prepare for your very short article summary next Tuesday	
	Thurs	Fall break (no class)	
7	Tues	Fatigue: Day 2	Low key 10-minute group presentation summarizing an article
	Thurs	Social forces: Day 1	
8	Tues	Social forces: Day 2	
	Thurs	Cohesion in marginalized groups	
9	Tues	Gender and belonging	
	Thurs	Team dynamics	
10	Tues	Depression	Unit 2 experiment idea due by 5pm
	Thurs	Mood and well-being	
11	Tues	Anxiety (clinical)	Unit 2 short research proposal due by 10pm
	Thurs	Violet is at Psychonomics (no class)	
12	Tues	Regular exercise and stress	
	Thurs	Thanksgiving break (no class)	
13	Tues	Acute exercise and stress	
	Thurs	Acute exercise and memory	Habit survey wave 2 due by 5pm
14	Tues	Regular exercise and cognition	
	Thurs	Conclusions	Final experiment idea due by 5pm
Final (full-length) research proposal due at 5pm on the last day of finals			



Research proposal due



Other assignment due (i.e., a habit survey or a description of your experiment idea)



Day off!