



Personality in sport

The topic of personality can be used to introduce some general principles of sports psychology that can be used in subsequent teaching. Your aims in this topic are to introduce the strong link between theory and practice, to introduce types of measurement in sports psychology and to show the problems of research. Theoretical principles are also highlighted.

- 1 Introduce the topic of personality by highlighting the attempts to link personality to the choices performers make in sport and the way that personality can affect the way sports players behave. (15 minutes)
- 2 Use the information sheets and **WS1** to get the students to list some personality characteristics in sport by looking at some sports performers. Try to compare the perceived with the actual. (10–15 minutes)
- 3 Use the information sheets to cover the main points of personality theory. The differences between the three theories should be stressed and examples used to illustrate the key features. (30–40 minutes)
- 4 The personality profile of an athlete in the Cattell study may help to promote an understanding of the difficulties associated with trying to predict behaviour and help the students to realise why personality is important in sport. The students should look at the profile on **IS1** and suggest ways that this could help a coach. An anxious athlete may be no good in a penalty shoot-out, for example! The answers given by the students should promote a discussion on the drawbacks and problems of linking personality to sport and the points on **IS2** should be highlighted. (30–40 minutes)
- 5 The students should now complete the personality questionnaire on **WS2** and then go on to complete the table on **WS3**, giving the advantages and disadvantages of each of the three main types of personality measures already discussed on **IS2**. (25–30 minutes)
- 6 Use **OHT1** to summarise personality. Note that the further we move away from the core of the diagram the more likely it is that behaviour is subject to change. (10–15 minutes)
- 7 The topic of achievement motivation relates strongly to personality and can be taught in the same area of study. Use **IS3** to teach the main points of achievement motivation. Concentrate on the characteristics of those who display the need to achieve and those who display the need to avoid failure, and get the students to come up with some examples that you can discuss in class. Then introduce the idea that these 'Nach' or 'Naf' characteristics can be learned or innate and are not stable. Use the information sheets to highlight the factors affecting the development of motives to succeed, the three stages of competitive development and the ways a coach can ensure a player continues to try to succeed. Use **OHT2** to show how the need to achieve is affected by the incentive value of the activity and the probability of success. (30–40 minutes)
- 8 Students should complete the questions on **WS3** (see **AS**).



■ Answers to questions on WS3

- 1 a Trait measures are:
 - innate
 - stable
 - enduring
 - consistent
 - predictable

- b Problems associated with trait measures are:
 - They are poor predictors of behaviour.
 - They do not take into account the situation.
 - Research lacks validity.

- 2 Problems associated with linking personality and performance are:
 - Research lacks validity and reliability.
 - Behaviour changes during the game.
 - Behaviour changes from outside to the game.
 - Equally successful athletes have different personalities.

- 3 Factors affecting approach to competition include:
 - past success
 - ability
 - confidence
 - personality
 - importance of task
 - probability of success
 - incentive value of success

Suggested answers to table on **WS3**:

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Quick ■ Easy to set up ■ Deals with lots of information ■ Results comparable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Misunderstanding the question ■ Giving a socially acceptable answer
Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ True to life ■ In the sport setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Observer bias ■ Subjective ■ Being watched causes performer to change behaviour
Physiological measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Accurate measure done during performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Restrictive to performance ■ Being 'wired up' causes stress



Personality theories

Personality is defined as an individual's unique psychological make up. Sports psychologists are interested in relating personality types to various sports; personality is important in sport because it affects the way people behave on the field of play and in training.

■ Trait theory

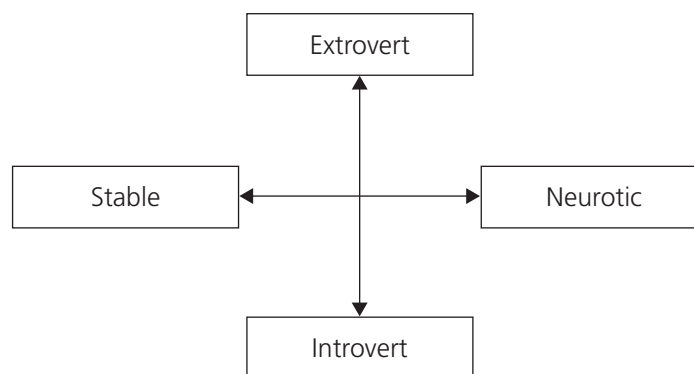
The features of trait theory are that an individual is born with innate characteristics that are stable, enduring and stay the same in different situations. Behaviour is said to be consistent. Trait theory attempts to predict behaviour.

For example, a loud and extrovert basketball player may also behave in an extrovert manner at training, whilst playing and in team discussions.

There are two main trait theories — those of Eysenck and Cattell.

Eysenck

In Eysenck's theory, four main personality characteristics are defined and placed on a matrix. The characteristics are determined from a questionnaire. The Eysenck personality formula is shown below.



Stable behaviour is consistent.

Neurotic behaviour is extreme, varied and anxious.

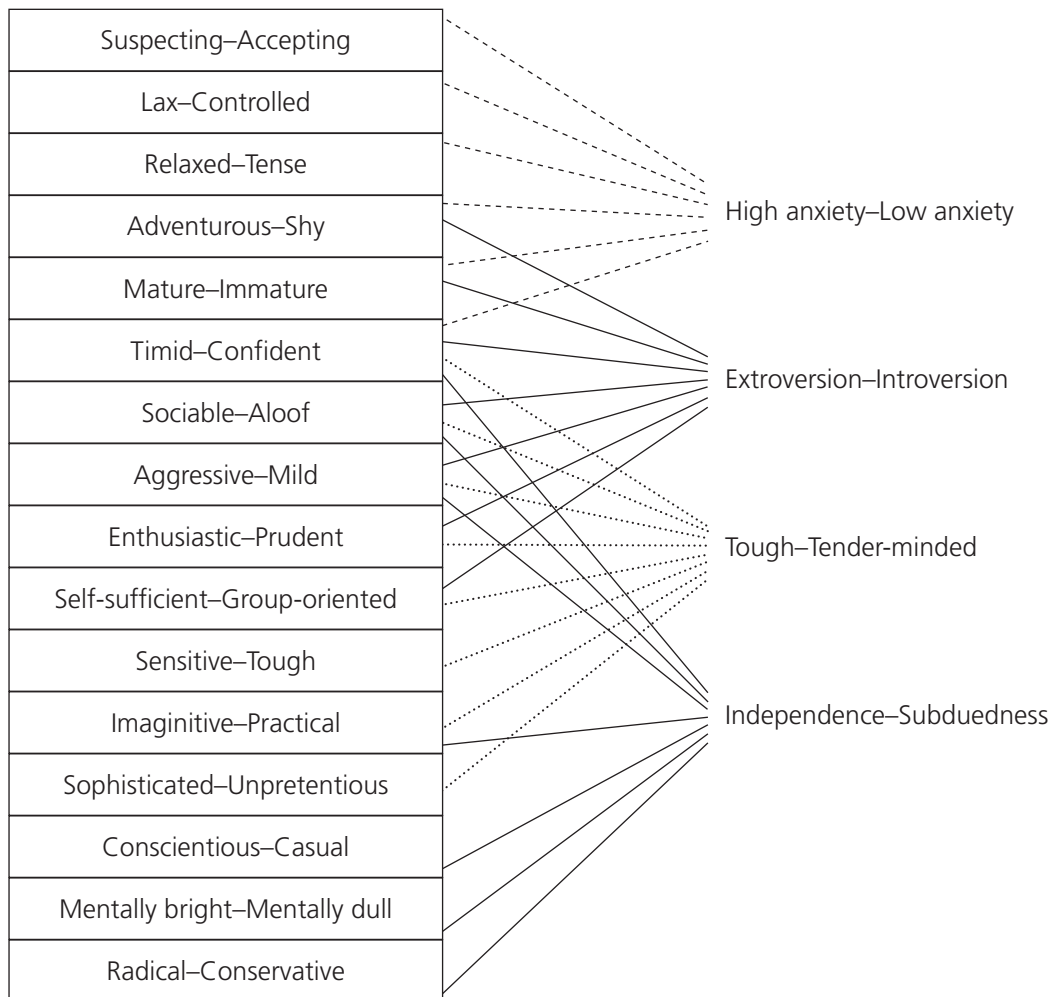
Introvert behaviour is shy, quiet and reserved.

Extrovert behaviour is loud, bright and outgoing.

These four characteristics combine on the matrix so that 'stable extrovert' is the term used to describe a personality that is consistently loud and bright.

Cattell and the 16 personality factor inventory

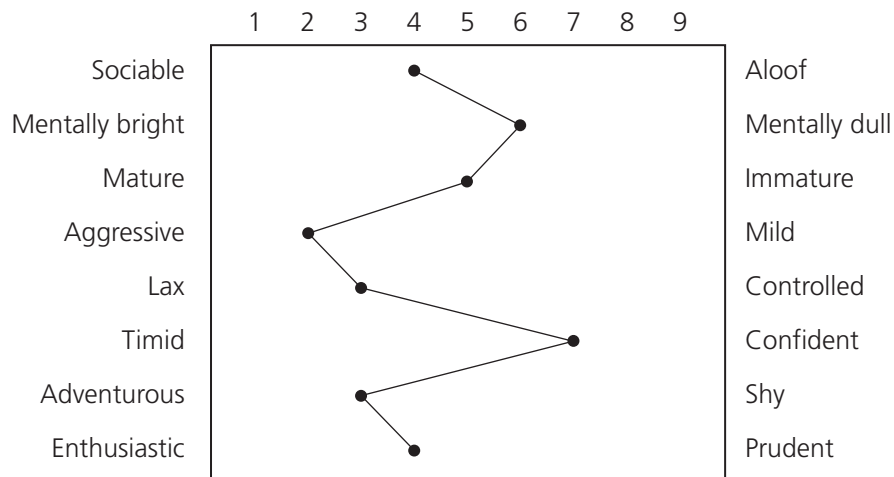
Cattell devised the second trait theory of personality, which is also based on a questionnaire. He identified 16 source traits and four secondary traits. The secondary traits, similar to those proposed by Eysenck, are the ways sports people are said to behave in most situations. A summary of Cattell’s theory is given in the diagram below.



The four secondary traits shown on the right of the diagram are important. According to Cattell, a performer who is anxious before competition is likely to be anxious before most competitions.

The traits identified by Cattell can be used to develop a profile of a performer, which can then be used by the coach to identify the best way to handle her. Extreme personalities are noteworthy. For example, if a coach can see that a performer has an aggressive trait, he might predict that in a highly competitive game with some foul tackles occurring it would be a good idea to substitute her.

A personality profile is shown below. A coach would study the profile and use the information to predict how the performer will behave in a sporting situation.



The problem with trait theory is that it does not take into account personality change. Personality and behaviour can change with the situation. A footballer could be aggressive after being fouled but then calm and apologetic in the post-match interview. Trait theory does not consider that our personalities can be learned by experience. David Beckham played in the 2002 World Cup with concentration, dignity and focus. In 1998 he was petulant and aggressive when sent off in a World Cup game against Argentina. Did his international experience help him to learn a more mature approach to his play?

■ The social learning approach

Social learning theory offers another explanation as to how our personalities develop. It states that behaviour changes with the situation. Rather than being born with characteristics, we learn them from other people, especially those we hold in high esteem or significant others, such as role models, friends and parents. We are more likely to learn reinforced behaviour. We learn our behaviour by the following process:

observe → identify → reinforce → copy

We observe others and copy them. We can also learn from experience. For example, young football players copy the goal celebrations of professional players when they score a goal playing with their friends.

■ The interactionist approach

This more modern theory of how personality develops combines trait and social learning theory. It suggests that we base our behaviour on inherent traits that we then adapt to the situation we are in. Behaviour changes with the situation. The interactionist theory is summed up as: $B = f(P \times E)$, where behaviour is a function of personality and environment.

For example, a games player might behave in a loud, extrovert and dominant manner in the game because that is the best way to succeed, but would be more quiet and focused when in a training session designed to improve individual technique. This demonstrates behaviour being adapted to the situation.



Research into sport and personality

Attempts have been made to classify sporting performance in relation to personality type. The following is a summary of some of the main findings.

- The narrow band approach suggests that there are two personality types:
 - Type A personalities are more intolerant and susceptible to stress but will train when not really motivated.
 - Type B personalities are more relaxed.

The two types show little difference in sporting performance.

- It has been suggested that the main sporting personality type is a stable extrovert. (Do you think this is always true?)
- Sport can mould your personality to develop strengths of leadership (outdoor education), competitiveness and teamwork (games).
- The Reticular Activating System (RAS) theory suggests that introverts have high levels of adrenaline while extroverts have low levels of adrenaline and can therefore tolerate excitement.
- It has been suggested that introverts always choose individual sports. (Do you think this is always true?)

■ Problems with research

Personality research relies on inventory tests such as the Cattell and Eysenck questionnaires, which are criticised for their lack of validity, reliability and interpretation because they are not specific to sport.

Validity

Research lacks internal validity in that the content of questions may not be appropriate for measuring what they are supposed to measure.

External validity is lacking because results may not be appropriate for the population as a whole. The tests relate only to sport and need to be completed using sporting and non-sporting samples of people.

Reliability

Tests should produce the same results when repeated, but in personality research this is not always the case. Results can be inconsistent.

Interpretation

Research lacks standardised instructions to avoid possible observer bias when performers are being watched.

It is also difficult to link personality to sport because:

- research is inconclusive and coaches are either sceptical or credulous — because of the concerns over the results of personality research it is difficult to believe in the ability of the results of personality tests to predict behaviour
- personality displayed outside sport differs in the game situation — players who are calm and welcoming off the pitch may turn into aggressive, dominant personalities during the game
- equally successful performers have different personalities
- personality can change during the game — a player who is fouled may suddenly turn aggressive

Personality measures

There are three main methods of measuring personality:

- **Questionnaire** This is the method favoured by Eysenck and Cattell. It involves giving short, written answers to questions that can then be standardised on a scale to compare results.
- **Observation** Here the researcher watches the players in action and notes aspects of their behaviour and personality. You may need to be trained well to do this.
- **Physiological responses** In this method of assessment the player is wired up to a monitor, such as a heart-rate meter, and accurate readings of responses to exercise or stress are taken.



Achievement motivation

A further facet of personality found in sport is the degree of competitiveness shown by the performer. The degree to which a player accepts the prospect of challenge in sport is called **achievement motivation**. Just like other aspects of personality achievement, motivation can be instinctive, in that some performers always want to compete no matter what the event. It can be nurtured through experience, in that we can be competitive and confident in sports that we have become good at; and it depends on the situation.

Achievement motivation is an individual's motivation to strive for success. It is the extent to which we approach and welcome challenge and competition, or avoid competitive situations.

For example, in a soccer final with the score at 1–1, a penalty is awarded and one player refuses to take it because there is a chance he may miss — if he fails he will lose self-esteem. He has the motive to avoid failure. Another player welcomes the chance to go for glory and is driven by the motive to achieve success — he will gain self-esteem if he scores the penalty.

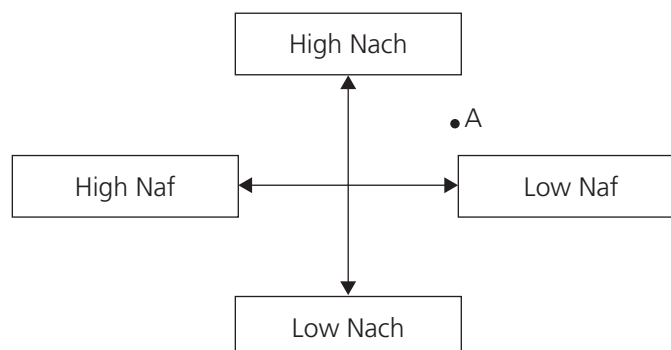
Atkinson related achievement motivation to personality and said that a person who is motivated by the need to achieve, or 'Nach', will:

- accept challenges
- demonstrate task persistence
- be quick and efficient
- take risks
- welcome feedback
- take personal responsibility for actions
- try harder after failure

A person who is motivated by the need to avoid failure, or 'Naf', will:

- avoid responsibility
- take an easy option
- give up after failure

These characteristics are represented in the following diagram, which shows that achievement motivation can vary. At point A the performer has a high need to achieve and a low need to avoid failure.



■ Features of achievement motivation

Since achievement motivation is related to personality, it is said to develop through experience and it may not be displayed equally in all situations.

Achievement motivation is said to develop in three stages.

Autonomous competence stage

Up to about 5 years of age, a child is concerned with mastering skills. A 2-year-old will repeat the same actions, such as piling up bricks, and is not concerned if anyone else can do the skill better. There are no comparisons made.

Social comparison stage

From 6 years old, the child starts to compare herself with others. Who is the tallest or fastest? External standards are important. At this stage the child might be uncomfortable with competition, especially if she is trying to beat others to satisfy her own ego, and she might not progress to the next stage. It might be better to use this stage to gain feedback on performance and to enjoy taking part, so progress will continue.

Integrated stage

The individual uses both external and internal standards to evaluate performance. There is no age limit on this stage and it depends on maturity and experience. Performance is assessed from within by looking at previous efforts, from outside by gaining feedback or from the standard of others.

■ Sports-specific achievement motivation: competitiveness

In sport, the motivation to succeed is not always present. The same performer can differ in his approach to different sports. Achievement motivation is sport-specific. In other words, whether a performer shows a Nach or Naf approach depends on:

- the importance of the task
- whether he has shown competitive trait anxiety because worries about the event can lead to a motive to avoid failure
- self-efficacy and confidence
- past success and the possibility of future success
- experience
- personality
- motivation

Atkinson argues that the situational change in achievement motivation depends on how the performer sees the probability of success along with the incentive value of that success. The chances of success depend on who you are competing against and the task difficulty. For example, climbing a highly rated and extreme rock climb may have a limited chance of success but a great satisfaction element or incentive. Therefore, the need to achieve would be high for a competitive performer.

A graph to show the relationship between incentive value and probability of success is shown on **OHT2**.

■ Achievement motivation and competition

A high degree of achievement motivation might lead to the inclination to be competitive. This is again related to personality. A performer with high trait anxiety may exhibit the need to avoid failure because they are usually worried about the outcome.

Competitiveness measures the degree to which we approach competition and success in sport. The amount of competitiveness shown depends on the situational variables of task importance, experience and confidence. It is measured in three areas:

- competitiveness — the desire to seek and strive for success in sport
- win orientation — the desire to win interpersonal competitive sporting events (this is sometimes referred to as an ego approach to competition)
- goal orientation — the desire to reach personal goals (this can be referred to as a task motivation)

Ego and task motivation

Ego-oriented performers see success as beating others and showing superiority. Ability is important for success, so goals that emphasise superiority are important.

Task-oriented performers believe success is measured in terms of personal improvement and that effort is important. Performance and process goals that concern technique are the best ones to motivate this type of performer.

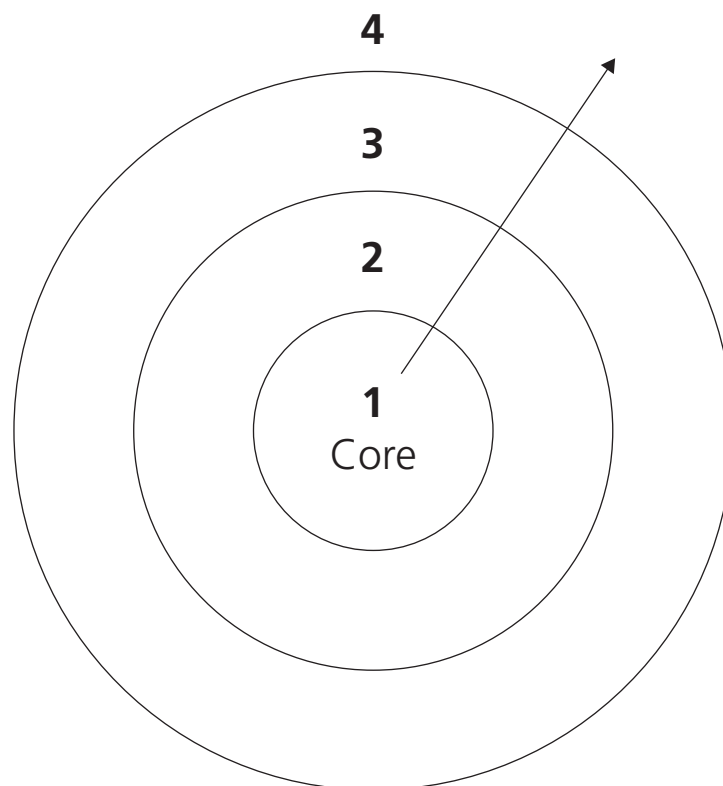
To ensure the motives to succeed

A coach would want the players in a team to be competitive and to continue to try harder, particularly in the face of defeat. To ensure that players maintain the motives to succeed, a coach might:

- allow early success
- raise self-efficacy
- attribute success internally and failure externally
- use rewards and reinforcement
- promote intrinsic motivation with personal goals
- show successful, attainable role models
- re-define failure
- control arousal

■ Personality summary

- 1 The core: the real you — permanent, inner, stable reactions that are hard to change
- 2 The typical response or trait — the way you usually respond to situations; a consistent trait
- 3 Role-related behaviour — changeable, inconsistent responses to situations; an interactionist approach
- 4 The environment — changeable, learned behaviour may occur

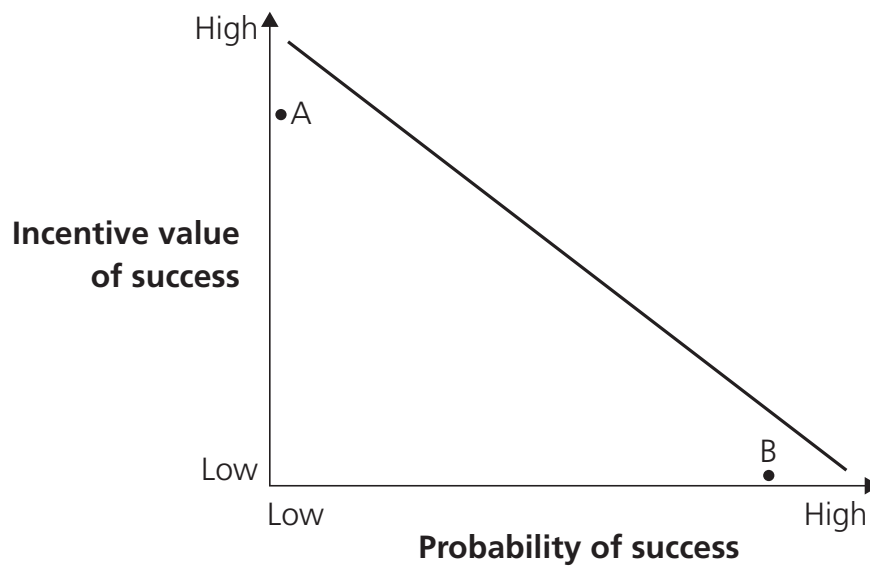


The arrow shows that the more we move from the core, the more likely it is that behaviour will change.

■ The relationship between incentive value and probability of success

Task A has a low chance of success but a high incentive value. If you played the number 1-ranked tennis player in the club you might not win but you would feel great if you did!

Task B is an easy task that has little incentive. An easy draw in the first round of a cup competition may not give you much incentive but you will be expected to win.





■ Tasks

Complete the following tasks on your own or in groups.

- 1 Think of some high-profile performers in sport and list three aspects of their personality. How do the people you are thinking of behave? Try to pick people from different sports and with different characters.
- 2 Study **IS1** and look carefully at the 16 personality factor inventory personality profile. Describe the personality of the performer shown and suggest ways you could use the profile to help with your coaching of this person in the future, using your increased understanding of their personality.
- 3 List the personality characteristics that you think are important for each of the following sports: boxing, rugby, marathon running and mountaineering.
- 4 In the responses you gave above you may have suggested some typical responses or personality traits. Do the sports performers you have discussed always behave in the same manner?
- 5 Complete the personality questionnaire on **WS2**. How long did it take you and how difficult did you find it?
- 6 Having completed the questionnaire, look at the table on **WS3**, which shows the different ways of measuring personality. Complete the table by suggesting advantages and disadvantages of each personality measure.
- 7 Study **IS3**, which looks at the factors that contribute to achievement motivation. Give some examples from sport of a 'Nach' and a 'Naf' performer, using the characteristics given. Imagine that you are a coach to a team of sports players. Discuss with your class how you would make sure that the performers in your charge continue to show motivation to succeed.



■ Questionnaire

Answer the following questions with either YES or NO, as honestly as you can.

- 1 Do you find it easy to relax completely when you are on holiday?
- 2 Do you feel annoyed when people are not punctual for appointments?
- 3 Do you dislike seeing things wasted?
- 4 Do you ever worry about your college/school work during your holidays?
- 5 Would you prefer to work with a friendly but incompetent partner (as opposed to a difficult but highly capable one)?
- 6 Does inefficiency make you angry?
- 7 Have you always worked hard in order to be among the best in your own group?
- 8 Do you like staying up late?

Scoring

Each question is scored as follows:

- 1 Yes = 0 No = 1
- 2 Yes = 1 No = 0
- 3 Yes = 1 No = 0
- 4 Yes = 1 No = 0
- 5 Yes = 0 No = 1
- 6 Yes = 1 No = 0
- 7 Yes = 1 No = 0
- 8 Yes = 0 No = 1

Minimum score = 0 (low achievement-oriented individual)

Maximum score = 8 (high achievement-oriented individual)



■ Personality measures

Complete the table below by giving the advantages and disadvantages of each personality measure.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Questionnaire		
Observation		
Physiological measures		

■ Questions

- 1 a What is meant by the trait perspective of personality?
b What problems are associated with this method of personality assessment?
- 2 What are the problems that may occur when personality is linked to performance in sport?
- 3 Atkinson argued that some performers in sport show a competitive, or need-to-achieve, approach to challenge, while other performers may shy away from competitive situations and show a need-to-avoid-failure approach to challenge. Discuss the factors that determine whether a performer sport adopts a 'Nach' or a 'Naf' approach.