

The Personality of Elite Big Wave Surfers

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Abstract

The ancient sport of surfing has been growing in popularity as both elite and non-elite surfers grow in numbers. Surfing has also been introduced as a clinical intervention to a diverse range of populations with promising results for groups diagnosed with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse. The current study seeks to investigate the personalities measured by the Big Five traits of elite surfers and other elite athletes. The sample of elite surfers was compared to the normative sample, professional level baseball players, and an international sample of everyday surfers on the Five Factor Inventory. The results show elite surfers scored significantly higher on *Extraversion* and lower on *Neuroticism* than the normative sample. They scored higher on *Neuroticism* and *Openness*, as well as lower on *Agreeableness* and *Conscientiousness* than the elite comparison sample of baseball players. Insight to the differences is discussed.

Key Words: Personality, Sport Psychology, Five Factor Inventory, Athlete Mental Health

1. Introduction

The last few years have seen an explosion in the attention to and interest in Big Wave surfing. This past winter saw exceptional big wave swells hitting all over the planet. The results were crowded lineups and lots of cameras at famous waves like Mavericks, Waimea Bay, Peahi/Jaws, and Nazare just to name a few. One of the reasons for this is the attention Big Wave surfing has gotten in both social media and in the traditional news media alike.

There are thousands of social media accounts that cover the exploits of big wave surfers, big wave surf spots, and big wave equipment and training. Some of this is because of sponsor obligations but the public consumes it. These accounts result in thousands of posts and millions of likes a year. That is a lot of attention on a sport that has existed mostly on the sidelines for decades. Traditional media outlets are taking note too and creating plenty of content for what appears to be an endless audience on ESPN, nightly network news, HBO Max 100 foot wave, Red Bull's *Life of Kai*, etc.

Big wave surfing has long been thought of as a bunch of vagabond thrill seekers that either couldn't make it on the professional surfing tour or couldn't handle the attention that came with it. Do tags like loner, introvert, and stoner apply to the modern big wave surfer? We set out to see if these elite athletes are comparable to athletes in other disciplines or if the old reputations still apply. To do this we need to examine the 'personality' of big wave surfers.

Personality, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is the "individual difference[s] in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving" (American Psychological Association, n.d.). We will be utilizing the Five Factor Model of personality (also known as the Big Five model of personality)- one of the most widely accepted frameworks of personality (Soto, 2018) – The Five Factor Model features five broad traits meant to encompass the entirety of personality composition: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (McCrae & Costa, 1985).

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2. The History of Personality Research in Sport Psychology

Personality has been theorized about and studied extensively by some of the most prominent figures in psychology, including Sigmund Freud, Hans Eysenck, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers (American Psychological Association, n.d.). As such, research investigating the impact of personality can be found in nearly every subfield of psychology, and the field of sport psychology is no different. Early sport psychology personality research produced literature studying optimal athlete personality profiles (Thune, 1949), personality trait predictors of athletic participation (Fauquier, 1940), gender-based personality differences in male and female athletes (Fleming, 1934), and personality trait predictors of athletic performance (La Place, 1954).

When applying The Five Factor/Big Five Model of Personality, Openness measures an individual's interest in aesthetics (Costa, McCrae, & Holland, 1984) and novel experiences (Piedmont, 1998). Conscientiousness measures the tendency to be organized, self-disciplined, careful, and non-impulsive (Jackson et al., 2010; McCrae & Costa, 2003; Roberts et al., 2009). Extraversion measures the degree of interpersonal warmth, gregariousness, and social outgoingness (McCrae & Costa, 2003). Agreeableness measures the degree to which one views themselves as considerate and cooperative (McCrae & Costa, 2003) and assesses for individual differences in compassion and respect for others (Soto, 2018). Neuroticism, which has alternatively been referred to as Emotional Stability (Soto, 2018), measures an individual's propensity to experience negative affective states, such as anxiety and depression (Costa & McCrae, 2003; Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017). Since its introduction in the 1980s, the Big Five model of personality has become one of the most well-researched, widely used, and empirically supported frameworks of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1997; Soto, 2018; Yamagata et al., 2006).

Of particular interest in Big Five research as it relates to elite athletes is the trait of Conscientiousness, which has been defined "as individual differences in the propensity to follow socially prescribed norms for impulse control, to be goal-directed, planful, able to delay gratification, and to follow norms and rules" (Jackson et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2009). High levels of the broad trait of Conscientiousness have long been theorized to be predictive of successful outcomes in a variety of contexts (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Poropat, 2009; Wilmot, 2019). Perhaps most notably, research has found Conscientiousness to be associated with a particularly important measure of success: overall life satisfaction (Duckworth et al., 2012). The study found that Conscientiousness was the only Big Five trait to be consistently associated with measures of both objective (income and wealth) and subjective (life satisfaction, positive affect, and lack of negative affect) adulthood success- even when demographic and cognitive factors were controlled for (Duckworth et al., 2012). The researchers theorized that Conscientiousness was related to tendencies to remain focused on goal driven behavior even when "tempted to do otherwise", and that this commitment to such behavior helped facilitate successful life outcomes (Duckworth et al., 2012).

3. Our Study

We set out to determine if Big Wave Surfers have a personality style more similar to professional and elite athletes or are they just like normal people who happen to surf giant waves. To do this we conducted several parallel studies.

First, Using the Five Factor Inventory (FFI) we surveyed the best Big Wave Surfers on the planet. We started with most of the top 20 recognized Big Wave Surfers and shared with them the details of our study. We had to convey that we were not looking to do "negative" research and paint them in a predetermined manner, rather we shared our idea for "real" research where we collect data, analyze it, and convey the results. After discussing the study most of the top surfers we approached took the survey and passed the link on to others they thought met our criteria. This is called snowball sampling, and as the original participants shared the survey link our sample size grew to 53. Survey results are anonymous, but many of the participants reached out to us on their own after taking the survey to help us gather more data.

Since we needed to compare our study results to similar professional/elite athletes we used data we recently collected using the same measure, the FFI, with professional and collegiate baseball players as part of one of the authors doctoral dissertations. That survey resulted in 73 professional or elite athletes for our comparison group. Finally, to determine if our results were simply the profile of surfers who happen to ride giant waves, we collected a sample of everyday surfers who focus on regular size waves. This survey resulted in 238 participants.

4. Demographics

Our Big Wave Surfer sample consists of 56 participants. There are 44 self-identified males (78.6%) and 12 self-identified females (21.4%). The average age is 34.1 with the youngest being 20 years-old and the oldest being over 50.

We also asked about the biggest wave they have surfed knowing that this is a subjective answer which has geographic differences. There are differences in how surfers measure waves in Hawaii and California or Europe. Most contests use the size of the wave on the face where the surfer is riding the wave, but to measure your own wave you just have to guess. The average largest wave size reported is 35 feet (about a three-story building) with 11 (20%) of our participants indicating that they have ridden waves in excess of 50 feet tall.

Our elite/professional baseball player sample consists of 73 self-identified male participants. They have an average of 7.8 years of organized baseball experience after finishing high school (range 3-22 years post high school baseball experience). The average age of the participants is 29.6 years old. Fifty-three participants (72.6%) meet the criteria of “professional baseball player” and 20 (27.4%) are classified as collegiate baseball players.

Finally, our regular surfer sample rides waves smaller than 20 feet tall. Our sample includes 162 (70.1%) self-identified males and 69 (29.9%) self-identified females. Their age ranges from 18 to over 60 years-old with an average age of 42 years-old.

5. Results

We utilized t-tests to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the means between samples using traditional cut offs. The results of multiple comparisons are found below in Tables 1 through 3.

Table 1. Big Wave Surfers Compared to a Normal Population Comparison Group.

Trait	Big Wave (n=56)	Normal Sample (n=1135)
Extroversion	3.54*	3.22
Agreeableness	3.78	3.88
Conscientiousness	3.87	3.77
Neuroticism	2.67	3.10*
Openness	3.95	3.90

* = Significant mean differences obtained via a statistical analysis called a t-test.

Table 2. Big Wave Surfers Compared to Elite/Professional Baseball Players

Trait	Big Wave (n=56)	Professional Baseball (n=73)
Extroversion	3.54	3.54
Agreeableness	3.78	4.10*
Conscientiousness	3.87	4.14*
Neuroticism	2.67*	2.54
Openness	3.95*	3.52

* = Significant mean differences obtained via a statistical analysis called a t-test.

Table 3. Big Wave Surfers Compared to Regular Surfers

Trait	Big Wave (n=56)	Regular Surfers (n=162)
Extroversion	3.54	3.38
Agreeableness	3.78	3.91
Conscientiousness	3.87	3.76
Neuroticism	2.67	2.69
Openness	3.95	3.98

* = Significant mean differences obtained via a statistical analysis called a t-test.

6. Discussion

The first comparison examined the scores obtained from the Big Wave Surfers to the general population on the FFI. We wanted to see if our general hypothesis was true that big wave surfers are different than regular people. The Big Wave Surfers scored statistically higher on the trait “Openness” and statistically lower on the trait “Neuroticism” when compared to a normal population sample.

Openness is described as having interest in aesthetics and novel experiences, intellectual curiosity, and creative imagination. It is also a tendency to be open to new ideas, cultures, and ways of doing things. Big wave surfers tend to fit this description well. They travel the world chasing swells often with very little notice. We see their openness to experience and new techniques as being key to their success.

Our Big Wave Surfers were found to be lower than the general population on Neuroticism. As this score gets higher there is a propensity to experience negative affective states and it represents a tendency towards anxiety and depression. As the score decreases, we conceptualize it as emotional stability. Being able to control one's emotions in life and death situations seems like a great trait for a big wave surfer.

The second comparison we made was to examine the similarities or differences between big wave surfers and elite/professional baseball players. There were several differences observed. We again found our big wave surfers to be higher on Openness (novel experiences, intellectual curiosity, and creative imagination). The big wave surfers actually scored higher on Neuroticism than baseball players but both groups were well below the scores of the normal population. Again, the low score for both groups is indicative of emotional stability and life satisfaction.

The baseball players scored statistically higher on Agreeableness which represents compassion for others, respectfulness, and trust in others. All of which seem like great traits for a team sport. They also scored statistically higher on Conscientiousness which can be described as having well developed organizational skills, an emphasis on productivity, and a sense of responsibility. Again, these sound like valuable traits for elite athletes participating in team sports.

Our final comparison was needed to determine if our big wave surfer's personality traits were the same as everyday surfers. Does the size of the waves matter? We determined that both groups of surfers shared a lot of general personality traits but that regular surfers scored statistically higher on traits of anxiety, depression and compliance.

7. Summary

The purpose of our study was to determine if big wave surfers' personalities live up to the long-standing stereotypes of the odd, eccentric, loner vagabond. Using multiple comparison groups including a normal population sample, an elite athlete sample and a regular surfer comparison group we determined that big wave surfers appear to be very grounded in terms of healthy personality traits. They appear similar to other surfers who are open to new experiences and report stability and a high-level life satisfaction when compared to the normal population sample. The big wave surfers though are quite different from our elite/professional baseball player comparison group. The baseball players display more traits likely to be useful in team sports such as compassion, respectfulness, trust in others, responsibility, and organizational skills. It seems likely that baseball coaches and scouts would say that getting along with teammates and being part of a cohesive group is a key personality trait in baseball and other team sports. When sharing these results with some of our big wave surfers they were happy to see that they were more self-reliant, open to experience and display a willingness to persevere until the task is completed.

Finally, we asked both of our surfer samples for adjectives that describe a big wave surfer. The results, in order of inclusion include strong, fearless, calculated, crazy, calm, focused confident, passionate and adventurous.

The results of our surveys shed light on a group of elite athletes that have recently come to the attention of the various media outlets. Big wave surfers have been stereotyped in movies and books for decades as social misfits, loners, and with angry violent rage. The truth is that our sample of world class, elite big wave surfers are grounded, happy, open to experience and report a strong sense of life satisfaction. It would have been interesting to do this survey 25 years ago, but today's big wave surfers are more similar to healthy, stable, elite athletes than they are the negative stereotype. The biggest differences obtained are likely a product of the type of sport played. Baseball is clearly a team game where you are part of a large group of people with a common goal while the elite big wave surfers are individuals who have learned to rely on themselves and their experiences while participating in a sport well known to be potentially fatal. By all accounts, big wave surfers exhibit a stable and healthy personality profile.

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