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REACTIVE MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVATION: a theoretical model of remobilization in sports performance

ATIVAÇÃO MOTIVACIONAL REATIVA:
um modelo teórico de remobilização no desempenho esportivo

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ABSTRACT

Rapid performance recovery after an unfavorable start is common in sport but lacks specific conceptual delimitation. This article proposes Reactive Motivational Activation (RMA) as a situational and transient psychological process of remobilization following the perception of suboptimal performance, when the athlete judges that the result can still be reversed during the ongoing task. The theoretical model describes a functional sequence involving perceived discrepancy from the goal, appraisal of reversibility, self-efficacy belief, acute motivational activation, and feedback-guided self-regulatory adjustments, culminating in subsequent performance improvement within the same competitive episode. The construct is differentiated from stable motivational traits, resilience, coping, and psychological momentum by emphasizing a rapid state change triggered by a specific negative cue. From the model derive observable predictions and a preliminary set of dimensions for future psychometric operationalization. RMA thus provides a theoretical framework to investigate recovery processes during sport performance and to guide interventions at critical moments of competition.

Keywords: Reactive Motivational Activation; sport motivation; self-regulation; performance recovery; motivational remobilization.

RESUMO

A recuperação rápida de desempenho após um início desfavorável é comum no esporte, mas carece de delimitação conceitual específica. Este artigo propõe a Ativação Motivacional Reativa (AMR) como um processo psicológico situacional e transitório de remobilização após a percepção de um desempenho aquém do desejado, quando o atleta julga possível reverter o resultado ainda durante a tarefa. O modelo teórico apresentado descreve uma sequência funcional que envolve percepção de discrepância em relação à meta, avaliação de reversibilidade, crença de eficácia, ativação motivacional aguda e ajustes autorregulatórios guiados por feedback, culminando em melhoria subsequente de

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desempenho no mesmo episódio competitivo. O construto é diferenciado de traços motivacionais estáveis, resiliência, coping e momentum psicológico, por enfatizar uma variação rápida de estado desencadeada por um gatilho negativo específico. A partir do modelo derivam-se previsões observáveis e uma proposta preliminar de dimensões para futura operacionalização psicométrica. A AMR oferece, assim, um enquadramento teórico para investigar processos de recuperação durante a performance esportiva e orientar intervenções em momentos críticos da competição.

Palavras-chave: Ativação Motivacional Reativa; motivação no esporte; autorregulação; recuperação de desempenho; remobilização motivacional.

1 INTRODUCTION

Phenomena of rapid recovery after an unsuccessful start can be observed in different domains of daily life (resuming a conversation after a conflictive beginning, correcting a poorly prepared dish, reorganizing a text that started badly written, or regaining focus after a wrong decision) and more formal settings (school exams, artistic presentations, professional meetings, among many others), but they become particularly visible in sequential performance sports contexts, in which, after an initial result below expectations, some athletes exhibit a sudden mobilization of effort, focus, and engagement capable of altering the course of their performance.

Despite its frequency and practical relevance, this type of intraepisodic remobilization still lacks precise conceptual delimitation in the sports psychology literature. Widely consolidated motivational theories explain engagement and persistence in the face of challenges, such as self-determination theory (Deci; Ryan, 2000), self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), and expectancy-value models (Eccles; Wigfield, 2002), while coping approaches describe adaptation processes to adverse situations in competitive contexts (Lazarus, 2000; Nicholls; Polman, 2007).

However, these perspectives tend to favor relatively stable dispositions or broader adaptive processes, without directly specifying a brief, reactive mechanism capable of transforming an unsatisfactory start into immediate mobilization aimed at performance recovery.

To characterize this specific process, the construct of Reactive Motivational Activation (RMA) is proposed, defined as a situational and transitory psychological process of intensive mobilization of motivational resources after the perception of performance below the desired level, provided that the individual deems it plausible to recover or reverse the result while the activity is still in progress. Although it dialogues with self-regulation models based on the discrepancy between goals and performance (Carver; Scheier, 1998), RMA

emphasizes the reactive and intraepisodic moment of motivational remobilization. The objective of this article is to conceptually delimit RMA, differentiate it from related motivational constructs, and propose an initial theoretical model of its components and conditions of emergence, with a specific focus on the sports context and its future empirical investigation.

2 MOTIVATIONAL BASES AND THEORETICAL GAP FOR UNDERSTANDING REMOBILIZATION AFTER INITIAL FAILURE

From a theoretical standpoint, the main contemporary motivational theories offer important foundations for understanding why individuals may intensify their engagement after an initially unsatisfactory outcome. Self-determination theory highlights the role of perceived competence and autonomy in sustaining effort in the face of challenges (Deci; Ryan, 2000). Self-efficacy theory emphasizes that belief in one's own ability to produce desired results directly influences the amount of effort invested and persistence in the face of difficulties (Bandura, 1997).

Expectancy-value models indicate that engagement increases when the individual assigns high value to the goal and believes it is achievable (Eccles; Wigfield, 2002). In the sports context, coping and self-regulation approaches describe how athletes adjust thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in the face of adverse events during competition (Lazarus, 2000; Nicholls; Polman, 2007).

Taken together, these perspectives converge on the idea that discrepancies between current performance and desired outcome can trigger active adjustments in effort and strategy, especially when the individual perceives a real possibility of recovery, in line with self-regulation models based on feedback and course correction (Carver; Scheier, 1998).

However, such approaches do not specifically describe an acute, focused, and short-lived motivational process that takes hold within a single performance episode after an unsuccessful start. It is precisely this reactive moment of immediate remobilization that the construct of Reactive Motivational Activation seeks to isolate and describe in its own way, serving as a point of articulation between these general theoretical bases and a reactive motivational dynamic specific to competitive contexts.

3 THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE AMR CONSTRUCT

The proposition of Reactive Motivational Activation (RMA) derives from the recurring observation of a performance pattern in sequential tasks: after an unsatisfactory start, some individuals show a rapid and marked improvement within the same action episode. This pattern suggests not only persistence but also the emergence of a qualitatively distinct motivational state, triggered by a perceived discrepancy in performance. The formulation of the construct follows an inductive logic of conceptual construction, in which observable empirical regularities guide the creation of theoretically delimited explanatory categories (Goertz, 2006; Gerring, 1999). This process can be described by a minimal functional sequence: (a) a frustrating initial performance, (b) the cognitive assessment that the task remains open and reversible, (c) an acute mobilization of effort and focus, and (d) a subsequent performance superior to the previous one.

AMR organizes these elements under its own category, distinct from both basal motivation and constructs such as coping, resilience, or general self-regulation, because it refers to a specific, brief, and intraepisodic remobilization. Its proposition fulfills the principle of practical and theoretical relevance of new psychological constructs: responding to an empirically recognizable phenomenon that is not yet adequately systematized (AERA; APA; NCME, 2014). The choice of the term activation highlights the dynamic and transitory nature of the phenomenon, understood as an acute elevation of psychological readiness and engagement in the face of a negative event, in line with conceptions of arousal and neuropsychological mobilization associated with preparation for action (Hebb, 1955; Lang, Bradley; Cuthbert, 1997). It is not a stable trait, but a change of state triggered by a perceived discrepancy between current performance and the desired outcome.

The qualification "motivational" indicates that this activation is goal-oriented and intentionally modified in the course of action, and not merely an emotional or physiological reaction. In this sense, AMR (Activity-Based Motivation) fits into traditions that define motivation as the direction, intensity, and persistence of goal-oriented behavior (Eccles; Wigfield, 2002; Schunk; Meece; Pintrich, 2014; Deci; Ryan, 2000), emphasizing the active redirection of psychological energy toward performance recovery. Finally, the term "reactive" delimits the trigger of the process: the activation does not arise spontaneously, but in response to an initial result evaluated as unsatisfactory.

This is a functional reaction to a discrepancy between the current state and the desired state, similar to the general feedback adjustment mechanisms described in self-regulation models (Carver; Scheier, 1998), but focused on the critical moment of immediate remobilization within the same performance episode. Thus, AMR is conceived as an acute motivational state oriented towards trend reversal, whose specificity lies in the combination of a negative trigger, reversibility assessment, and intensive mobilization of resources to alter the outcome while it is still in progress.

4 EMERGENCY CONDITIONS AND FUNCTIONAL DYNAMICS OF AMR

Reactive Motivational Activation does not arise in response to any initial difficulty, but depends on specific psychological conditions. The central trigger is the perception of underperformance combined with the belief that the outcome can still be changed. When the situation is assessed as irreversible, the tendency is demobilization; when there is a perception of a real margin for recovery, a sudden intensification of effort and focus may occur. This situational judgment is similar to the cognitive appraisal processes of challenge and threat described in transactional models of stress (Lazarus, 2000) and the efficacy beliefs necessary to sustain the investment of additional effort (Bandura, 1997).

Once activated, AMR can be understood as a rapid adjustment driven by a discrepancy between the current state and the desired goal, in which self-regulatory systems modulate attention, effort, and action strategy (Carver; Scheier, 1998). Unlike gradual changes in motivation, it is an abrupt state transition, marked by an increase in behavioral intensity and a reorganization of attentional focus on the most controllable aspects of the task. In the sports context, this process interacts with attentional control mechanisms and self-regulation of performance under pressure (Baumeister, 1984; Beilock; Carr, 2001), but describes an effect opposite to collapse under pressure: a functional increase in performance after a negative start.

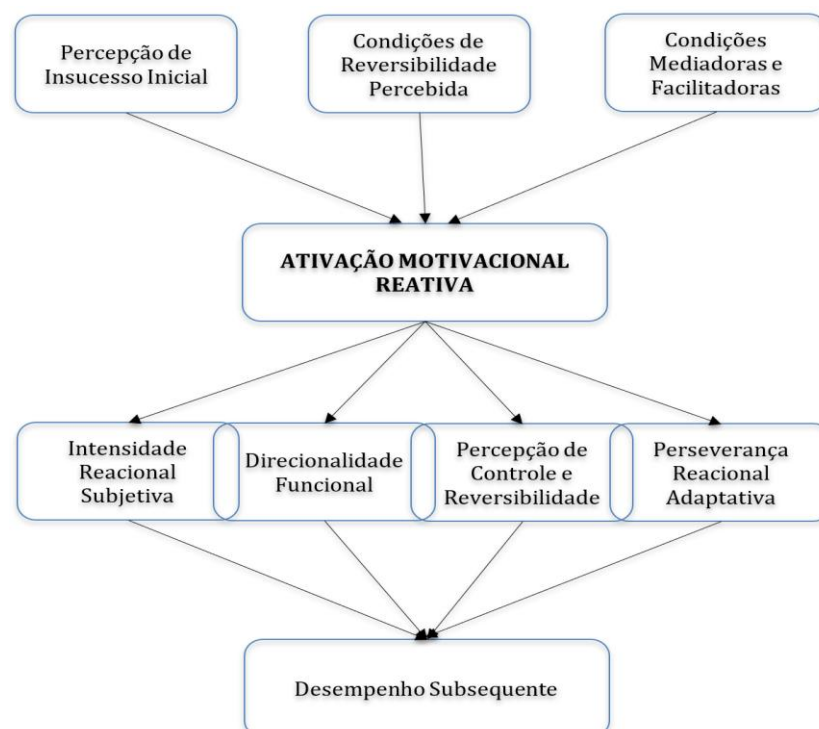
From a dynamic perspective, AMR (Analyzed Recovery Management) can be seen as an attempt to re-establish coherence between goal and action through a concentrated mobilization of psychological resources. This movement involves rapid reassessment of priorities, suppression of distractions, and redirection of effort towards immediate indicators of progress, in line with motivational control models based on feedback (Eccles; Wigfield, 2002; Deci; Ryan, 2000).

Its expected effect is not only to increase gross effort but to optimize its direction, producing performance gains proportional to the perceived possibility of reversal. Thus, AMR represents a functional dynamic of intraepisodic recovery, dependent on the assessment of reversibility, belief in efficacy, and rapid self-regulatory adjustment. It describes the moment when initial failure ceases to generate disengagement and begins to function as a catalyst for a remobilization capable of altering the trajectory of performance.

5 AMR'S INTEGRATIVE THEORETICAL MODEL

Reactive Motivational Activation can be understood as a sequential process of motivational adjustment triggered by an initial perceived failure in a task still in progress. This process does not correspond to a stable trait or simple persistence, but to a rapid and transient reorganization of motivational functioning in the face of a discrepancy between current performance and the desired outcome. The proposed integrative theoretical model organizes this phenomenon as a functional chain of interdependent evaluations and responses that occur within the same action episode.

Figure 1 - Integrative theoretical model of Reactive Motivational Activation



Source: prepared by the authors, 2025

The starting point is the perception of initial failure, that is, the identification that the current state of performance is below the intended goal. This discrepancy acts as an error signal that interrupts the expected trajectory and triggers monitoring and correction processes guided by feedback (Carver; Scheier, 1998).

From this trigger, the individual performs a quick cognitive assessment of the possibility of reversing the situation. When the scenario is perceived as still modifiable, a challenging interpretation tends to emerge; when it is seen as irreversible, the tendency towards demobilization prevails (Lazarus, 2000). A positive assessment of reversibility creates the condition of possibility for remobilization.

At this point, mediating and facilitating conditions of the process come into play, especially beliefs about efficacy in altering the course of the task (Bandura, 1997). The expectation that one's own effort can produce change sustains the additional investment of psychological and behavioral energy. This passage marks the transition to a state of acute motivational activation, characterized by increased readiness for action and directed intensification of engagement (Lang, Bradley; Cuthbert, 1997).

The intensity of this activation is modulated by central motivational factors. The greater the subjective value attributed to the goal and the expectation of achieving it, the greater the tendency for functional redirection of effort (Eccles; Wigfield, 2002). This movement is favored when the action preserves a perception of competence and self-determination, supporting more autonomous forms of engagement (Deci; Ryan, 2000). The effect produced is not just more effort, but better-directed effort.

Once activated, AMR expresses itself through rapid self-regulatory adjustments in task execution. The individual reorganizes priorities, suppresses distractions, and focuses resources on the most controllable aspects of the action, in short cycles of continuous monitoring and correction (Carver; Scheier, 1998).

This reorganization operationalizes motivational activation and creates the conditions for subsequent performance change within the same episode. The complete chain can be described as: perception of initial failure → assessment of perceived reversibility → activation of mediating and facilitating conditions (beliefs in efficacy, goal value, perception of competence and self-determination) → reactive motivational activation → rapid self-regulatory adjustments → subsequent performance improvement.

Interrupting this flow at any stage tends to reduce or prevent the full emergence of AMR. When the components act in a coordinated manner, they define a specific intraepisodic remobilization mechanism capable of altering the performance trajectory while the activity is still in progress.

In analytical terms, the processes described in the model can be translated into observable dimensions of the remobilization phenomenon, allowing for the future construction of empirical indicators sensitive to short-term motivational variations. This shift from the mechanistic level to the dimensional level does not alter the proposed sequential logic, but offers an operational pathway that enables the systematic investigation of Reactive Motivational Activation in empirical studies.

6 APPLICATION OF AMR TO THE SPORTS CONTEXT AND EMPIRICAL IMPLICATIONS

In sports organized by points, attempts, times, or successive stages, the final performance results from the sum and dynamics of multiple partial moments. In these contexts, a negative start does not end the task, but redefines its conditions, keeping open the possibility of reversing the result.

It is in this interval between initial failure and final outcome that Reactive Motivational Activation tends to play a decisive role, operating as a performance recovery mechanism within the competitive episode itself. Applying the RMA model to sports allows us to understand why some athletes quickly transform an unfavorable initial sequence into an upward trajectory of performance.

When initial failure is interpreted as reversible, efficacy beliefs support an additional investment of effort (Bandura, 1997), which is expressed in rapid adjustments of focus, strategy, and execution guided by feedback (Carver; Scheier, 1998). This process results less in "more force" and more in "better direction" of effort, favoring progressive gains in efficiency and performance stability. From this perspective, AMR generates observable predictions.

After an initial unsatisfactory segment, in cases where AMR emerges, the following is expected: (a) subsequent increase in perceived exertion intensity, (b) greater attentional stability, (c) reduction of unforced errors, and (d) gradual improvement of objective performance indicators throughout the same competitive episode.

These changes constitute a trajectory correction pattern compatible with motivational models based on goals and values (Eccles; Wigfield, 2002) and with more self-determined forms of engagement (Deci; Ryan, 2000).

From a methodological point of view, the study of AMR requires intra-individual designs capable of capturing state variations throughout the same task. Comparisons between initial and subsequent blocks of performance, repeated measures analyses, and short time series allow for the identification of the transition between a drop in performance and a recovery phase within the same episode. Self-reported assessments of effort and attentional focus can be combined with objective performance indicators and psychophysiological measures of acute arousal, useful for characterizing the transient intensification of readiness for action (Lang; Bradley; Cuthbert, 1997).

This approach shifts the focus from stable differences between athletes to dynamic processes that occur within the flow of competition itself. Instead of simply asking who is more motivated overall, it investigates when and how motivation is reactivated after a partial setback.

This perspective is consistent with situational and contextual conceptions of motivation and engagement (Deci; Ryan, 2000; Eccles; Wigfield, 2002) and expands traditional models of sports performance by introducing a specific mechanism of functional recovery. Thus, applied to sports, AMR provides a theoretical framework for analyzing performance turns as identifiable and measurable psychological processes, and not merely as fortuitous or random events.

Their empirical study can contribute to understanding the intra-individual variability of competitive performance and open avenues for interventions aimed at strengthening remobilization processes during critical moments of performance.

As a first step towards the empirical operationalization of the model, it is possible to describe functional dimensions derived directly from its theoretical components. These dimensions do not yet constitute a validated scale, but an exploratory proposal intended to guide the future construction of instruments sensitive to intraepisodic motivational remobilization.

Table 1 - Preliminary proposal of dimensions of Reactive Motivational Activation and examples of exploratory items

Dimension	Functional description	Example of an exploratory item
Subjective Reaction Intensity (SRI)	Level of emotional activation and internal focus after realizing the initial failure.	"I felt an immediate urge to try to turn the situation around."
Functional Directionality (FD)	Ability to refocus and reorganize strategies.	"I quickly changed my behavior to try to improve."
Adaptive Situational Perseverance (ASP)	Maintaining active and persistent engagement after failure.	"I kept putting in the effort until the end, even after it had started badly."
Perception of Control and Reversibility (PCR)	Belief that it was still possible to improve the result.	"I believed there was still time to reverse the situation."

Source: prepared by the authors, 2025

Each dimension could initially be represented by four to six items, totaling a preliminary set of 16 to 24 indicators. Future studies with exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory modeling will allow testing and refining this structure, eliminating redundant items and evaluating the dimensional adequacy of the construct in different sports contexts. A first experimental version of an instrument based on these dimensions is currently under development and will be the subject of specific psychometric investigation in future work, with the aim of evaluating its validity, reliability, and sensitivity to intraepisodic motivational variations.

7 CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATION, CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The AMR proposition shifts the explanatory focus of athletic performance from relatively stable dispositions to dynamic processes that occur throughout the competitive episode itself. This shift is closer to self-regulatory approaches based on feedback and continuous correction of discrepancies between current state and desired goal (Carver; Scheier, 1998) and to situational conceptions of motivation that emphasize contextual variations in engagement (Deci; Ryan, 2000; Eccles; Wigfield, 2002).

Instead of simply asking why some individuals tend to be more motivated in general terms, the construct directs attention to when and how remobilization occurs after an unfavorable start, in response to specific conditions of ongoing performance. This perspective requires distinguishing it from concepts traditionally associated with overcoming difficulties.

AMR does not correspond to resilience, understood as a relatively lasting capacity for positive adaptation to adversity over time (Masten, 2001; Fletcher; Sarkar, 2012). Nor should it be confused with coping, which involves broad repertoires of cognitive and emotional coping mechanisms in the face of demands assessed as stressful (Lazarus; Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 2000). While these constructs describe more general patterns or styles of adaptation, AMR refers to a specific motivational reorganization that directly affects the immediate execution of the task.

Similarly, AMR does not equate to global levels or stable traits of motivation. Classical motivational models show that efficacy beliefs, goal-oriented values, and quality of self-determination influence engagement in a relatively consistent manner across situations (Bandura, 1997; Deci; Ryan, 2000; Eccles; Wigfield, 2002). AMR, however, describes a state variation dependent on a specific negative trigger and a situational assessment of the possibility of reversal, functioning as a rapid adjustment within the flow of action, consistent with models of situational self-regulation (Carver; Scheier, 1998).

In the sports context, AMR also differs from phenomenological descriptions such as psychological momentum or performance "turnarounds". The literature on momentum describes patterns of perceived or actual change in competitive performance (Iso-Ahola; Dotson, 2014), but does not specify the psychological mechanism that produces them. AMR's contribution is to offer a processual explanation anchored in cognitive evaluation of the situation (Lazarus, 2000), belief in efficacy for change (Bandura, 1997), and feedback-guided correction cycles (Carver; Scheier, 1998), capable of sustaining an effective alteration of the performance trajectory while the competition is still in progress.

This delimitation allows us to clarify the main contributions of the construct. First, AMR introduces a specific recovery mechanism during the competitive episode itself, highlighting variations in state within the same competitive event.

Secondly, it organizes into single model processes already described in motivational literature, such as cognitive evaluation of the situation (Lazarus, 2000), efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997), regulation by goals and values (Eccles; Wigfield, 2002; Deci; Ryan, 2000), and discrepancy-based correction loops (Carver; Scheier, 1998). Thirdly, it transforms the

intuitive notion of "reacting after making a mistake" into an explicit and potentially measurable theoretical object.

Because it is an initial theoretical formulation, the model opens up a set of empirical questions. Future investigations need to develop measurement strategies sensitive to rapid state variations and designs capable of comparing successive segments of performance within the same task. Tests of the chaining proposed by the model, examining whether situational evaluations and efficacy beliefs precede measurable changes in focus, effort, and subsequent performance, constitute a decisive step for its validation.

It will also be important to verify to what extent the process remains the same or changes according to the sport, the level of expertise, and the characteristics of the competitive context. Defined as a specific, situated remobilization mechanism, AMR proposes a new lens for analyzing critical moments of recovery in sport. Empirically exploring this process can broaden the understanding of intra-individual variability in performance and provide a basis for interventions aimed at strengthening recovery responses at decisive moments in performance.

8 CONCLUSION

This article proposed Reactive Motivational Activation as a specific psychological mechanism for remobilization after an unfavorable start in ongoing tasks. By integrating, in a single model, processes of situational assessment, belief in efficacy, intensive mobilization of resources, and self-regulatory adjustment, the construct shifts the explanation of sudden performance changes from a merely descriptive plane to a mechanistic and theoretically structured one. This proposal introduces a new unit of analysis for the study of motivation in sport: the motivational state variations that occur throughout the competitive episode itself. Instead of treating performance merely as an expression of relatively stable dispositions, the model highlights how a partial failure can act as a trigger for functional reorganization capable of altering the performance trajectory.

The model generates clear and testable predictions about subsequent changes in effort, focus, and performance, and allows for a preliminary translation of its components into observable dimensions of the remobilization process. This dimensional structure paves the way for the future development and validation of instruments sensitive to short-term motivational variations and suitable for intra-individual investigation in real-world sports contexts. Empirically investigating Reactive Motivational Activation can broaden the

understanding of the moment-to-moment variability of competitive performance and provide a basis for interventions aimed at strengthening recovery responses in critical performance situations. Thus, the construct offers not only a new way to describe performance shifts, but also a theoretical framework that allows them to be studied systematically, cumulatively, and empirically verifiably.

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