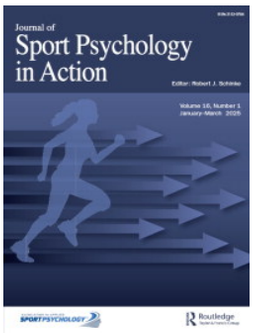

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Integrating Psychology Skills Training (PST) with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Samuel Wood[a] and Martin J. Turner[b]

[a]Department of Sport and Exercise Science, Manchester Metropolitan University Institute of Sport, Manchester, UK; [b]Department of Psychology, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has grown enormously since it emerged. One context in which ACT seems ubiquitous is applied sport psychology. A strength of ACT is its flexible, principles-driven delivery, which can be applied to most presenting problems encountered in applied sport psychology. Psychological skill training (PST), a set of psychological, performance enhancement techniques, have become a cornerstone of applied sport psychology. Yet little has been written about how ACT can be applied alongside PST. Clarifying the alignment between ACT and PST is crucial for practitioners to seamlessly integrate ACT into their practice. To this end, the current paper proposes and details the confluence of a framework for how PST can align with the ACT hexaflex model. We draw on core ACT theory, within the lens of applied sport psychology.

KEYWORDS

Applied sport psychology; consultancy; interventions; psychotherapy

After decades of development, struggle, and criticism, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has grown enormously since it emerged (see Hayes et al., 2023). ACT is a so-called third-wave cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) recognized by the World Health Organization and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Hayes et al. (1999) outline that ACT is built on two foundations: functional contextualism, which argues that "truth" is context-dependent, given our understanding of how behavior meets our perception of success; and relational frame theory, a language-based model of learning (i.e., a behavioral theory of cognitions) that explains how we link different stimuli. For example, as infants, we learn basic relationships: here versus there, big versus small, me versus you. Through complex language development, we come to learn, for example, the word "cat" is both associated with the sound/kæt/*and* the four-legged animal. We derive relationships from knowledge, constantly make judgements and comparisons, often automatically, learning

CONTACT Samuel Wood s.wood@mmu.ac.uk Department of Sport and Exercise Science, Manchester Metropolitan University, Institute of Sport Building, 99 Oxford Road, Manchester M1 7EL, UK.

to draw relationships between things we have not seen paired. This web of associations—these "relational frames"—within a given context form verbal rules, like "I cannot be successful if I'm anxious." These rules can dominate perceptions of contexts, govern, and even influence the consequences of our behavior.

Together, functional contextualism and relational frame theory highlight how verbal rules mediate the relationship between environment and behavior, leaving us at risk of stressing about future, or past, events. Once developed, these associations can be difficult to break and risk resurging even if changed through direct training (e.g., cognitive restructuring) (Hayes et al., 1999). Applying this to sport, let us take the example of an athlete who has recurrent thoughts of being sick at competitive events (where being sick negatively impacts performance). The arbitrary relationship established between "competition" and "being sick" is an example of relational framing. This is controlled by relational contexts of causality (if, then) and the functional contextualism of anxiety (i.e., threat or pressure). Therefore, the aversion function of being sick may transform the function of competition, evoking a "fused" response that is congruent with the thought's content, leaving the athlete avoiding competitive events.

ACT interventions aim to change overt behavior, moving clients from *psychological inflexibility* (i.e., cognitive fusion, experiential avoidance, behavioral rigidity, and inactivity) toward *psychological flexibility* (i.e., mindfulness, acceptance, and clarification of values) (Harris, 2019). ACT has six core therapeutic processes, typically presented as the ACT hexaflex model (see Figure 1). Each process is briefly outlined below. There is no correct order to consider these.

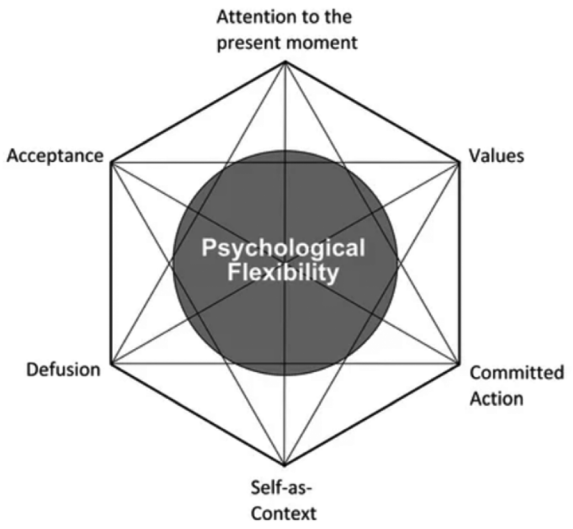

Figure 1. The ACT hexaflex model (Copyright Hayes et al., 1999, reprinted with permission).

Defusion is a defining component of psychological flexibility that aims to create distance between the individual and unhelpful thoughts, reducing the power (and negative impact) unhelpful cognitions have on emotions and behaviors (Assaz et al., 2023). Although discussed as a procedure, process, and outcome, defusion might be best considered an outcome (Assaz et al., 2023).

Fusing with painful memories (e.g., rejection, disappointment, or failure) might manifest as worry, rumination, or ongoing negative commentary. This can create ongoing attempts to avoid or escape difficult thoughts (and feelings)—termed *experiential avoidance*—and increase psychological suffering (Harris, 2019). ACT encourages *acceptance* of unhelpful cognitions; seeing them nonjudgmentally and less literally (Harris, 2019).

Contact with the present moment relates to our ability to pay attention to, and engage in, here-and-now experiences (Harris, 2019). Intentionally focusing on the present moment, without judgment, is more widely discussed as mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2023). The opposite is *inflexible attention*—difficulty concentrating on a task; losing interest or involvement in an experience; and disconnecting from thoughts and feelings (Harris, 2019).

Values relate to how we want to behave, treat ourself, and others, both in a given moment and an ongoing basis (Harris, 2019). Like a compass, values provide a direction of travel. Typically, as behavior becomes increasingly driven by fusion and experiential avoidance, values become neglected or forgotten.

Committed action means taking effective (physical and psychological) action to live our values (Harris, 2019). This might involve goal setting, action planning, problem solving, and skills training to adapt to the challenges of a given situation.

Self-as-context, one of the more complex aspects of the ACT hexaflex model (also termed the "noticing self" or "observing self") focuses on drawing attention to our awareness so we can learn to see thoughts as thoughts (Harris, 2019).

Using ACT in sport

The cognitive-behavioral tradition is integral to the applied practice of sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) with numerous psychotherapeutic approaches (e.g., cognitive therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy; REBT) employed in sport settings (Turner et al., 2023). One context in which ACT seems ubiquitous is applied sport psychology. ACT's flexible, principles-driven delivery, make it effective for a range of performance issues in sport, including confidence (Wood & Turner, 2024a) and anxiety (Wood & Turner, 2024b) across the sport landscape (i.e., various ages, sports, and sporting levels). Given its promise, exploring how SPPs can

integrate ACT processes into their work is a worthy endeavor. Yet, despite its proliferation, the use of ACT in sport has received limited empirical evaluation.

For more than two decades, fundamental elements of ACT have been discussed in sport as Mindfulness, Acceptance and Commitment (MAC) interventions (Gardner & Moore, 2012). Although MAC includes ACT, it is a manualised protocol presented as separate to ACT. We argue that ACT's iterative, flexible, and principles-driven approach means ACT aligns with a range of professional philosophies, suited to both client-led and practitioner-led approaches. Consequently, there is no need for sport-adapted versions of ACT, or little need to alter ACT to be (more) agreeable for athlete or a SPP audiences. If ACT is being applied in sport, then let us adhere to core ACT principles for which over 500 meta-analyses exist (see https://shorturl.at/fwDTX), rather than ACT-based approaches. ACT facilitates SPPs to continually develop new and varied approaches to interventions, yet there is a need to understand how core ACT principles can be implemented in sport settings. As such, this article draws on theoretical perspectives and our experiences as applied practitioners to explore how ACT aligns with psychological skills training (PST), perhaps a more familiar approach to applied sport psychology. Little has been written about how ACT can be applied alongside PST and clarifying this alignment may facilitate seamless integration of ACT into applied practice. Doing so, we complement the work of Munnik et al. (2024), who outline the integration of REBT-PST.

An overview of PST

PST (also known as mental skills training) is a set of psychological, performance enhancement techniques, rooted in CBT (Turner, 2022), that form the cornerstone of applied sport psychology (Andersen, 2009). Although each technique is effective in isolation, they are typically combined in interventions to address the client's needs and specific sport demands (Andersen, 2009). The most frequently used PST techniques (e.g., goal setting, self-talk, imagery, relaxation, and concentration techniques; Andersen, 2009) are discussed below and summarized in Table 1.

Goal setting is widely applied in sport (see Williamson et al., 2024). Process goals are specific (e.g., a golfer might focus on *practice chipping and putting to improve my touch around the green*) and can increase self-efficacy due to increased perception of control, and consequently, have been found to have a greater impact on performance than performance and outcome goals (e.g., *reduce my average score on the back nine by three within the next three months*) (Williamson et al., 2024). However, open goals (e.g., *improve my golf game by becoming more consistent with my*

Table 1. Aligning PST with ACT processes.

Psychological skill	Description	Related ACT processes
Goal setting	Related to the aim of an action and what an individual is trying to achieve	Values – Identifying what is important to the athlete Committed action – having the athlete consider the type of athlete they want to be, and the associated behaviors needed to demonstrate this
Self-talk	A variety of techniques to refute negative consequences of troublesome/anxiety-provoking cognitions	Defusing from unhelpful self-talk by changing the athlete's relationship with their self-talk Acceptance of unhelpful self-talk Encouraging self-as-context so the athlete observes their self-talk nonjudgmentally, appreciating not all thoughts need attention (e.g., challenging and/or changing).
Imagery	Deliberate mental practice of sport performance	Facilitating defusion by visualizing arbitrary physical properties to cognitions Acceptance of "bad" performances and visualizing moving on from errors in performance Visualizing the athlete delivering performance that align with their identified committed action(s)
Relaxation	Help athletes maintain optimal arousal levels and manage psychological anxiety	Using mindfulness activities and breathing exercises to encourage the athlete to contact with the present moment, facilitating a focus on their here-and-now experiences, rather than past or future events. Self-as-context – encourage the athlete to see their thoughts as "passing clouds" that come and go so they come to realize not all thoughts need acting on (which links to the notion of acceptance)
Concentration	Focusing attention on the task at hand, limiting impact of external and internal stimuli	Defusing from unhelpful cognitions to prevent the athlete becoming distracted by their cognitions. Facilitate concentration in the here-and-now through formal mindfulness activities that focus on contacting with the present moment Encouraging the athlete to focus on what it important to them in each moment (e.g., the athlete's values and committed action) can facilitate concentration.

short game), are exploratory and focus on challenging the athlete to see how well they can do, which avoid identifying specific outcomes and may lead to optimal performances (Swann et al., 2017).

Self-talk refers to the internal running commentary of events as they happen most of us have (also referred to as verbal thinking or self-directed verbalisations) (see Van Raalte et al., 2016). In sport, self-talk is considered a widely used and effective strategy for enhancing performance through both instructional and motivational statements (Van Raalte et al., 2016).

Imagery encourages the athlete to mentally practice their sport deliberately, focused on identifying and correcting poor performance or preparing for upcoming challenges. Often delivered alongside other psychological skills (Andersen, 2009), imagery engages sensory qualities and can evoke strong emotional states due, in part, to the link between imagery and perception (Holmes & Mathews, 2010). Many people experience automatic thoughts as unspoken words or as mental pictures or images (Beck, 2011). Hence, imagery is a form of cognition, viewed as containing meaning that is related to beliefs about oneself, others, and the world.

Relaxation techniques are integral to helping athletes maintain optimal arousal levels and effectively manage tension and psychological anxiety (Andersen, 2009). PST incorporates progressive relaxation, autogenic training, and biofeedback methods to reduce activation of the sympathetic nervous system and associated muscle tension (Andersen, 2009). However, of relevance to us is the use of centering, breathing exercises, and mindfulness in PST (Andersen, 2009).

Concentration training relates to an athlete's ability to focus, switch attention, and disregard internal or external distractions; arguably one of the most crucial factors for athletes in sport (Moran, 2016). Concentration training helps the athlete focus their attention on the task at hand, limiting the likelihood of being affected by irrelevant external and internal stimuli (Wilson et al., 2006).

Integrating ACT with PST in sport

The aim of this article is to highlight how ACT can be delivered alongside PST and outline a framework for SPP's applied delivery. We structure our discussion using some key PST techniques (e.g., goal setting, self-talk, imagery, relaxation and concentration training) which will be familiar to applied SPPs. Doing so, we hope to emphasize how SPPs can use the comfort of PST interventions to explore fundamental ACT principles.

Goal setting

Goal setting is one of the main strategies for enhancing motivation and performance in sport (Andersen, 2009). Although outcome goals permeate sport (Andersen, 2009), open goals align well with ACT's values-based work. Here, rather than the SPP focus on sport-specific outcomes, the SPP might consider exploring goals relating to effective actions (physical and psychological) that will move the athlete closer to the athlete they want to be (what ACT terms committed action). In this sense, rather than facilitating athlete motivation solely through the accomplishment of set goals, the SPP can have the athlete consider what is important to them (what ACT terms vales). If traditional goals are seen as traveling to a specific destination, values (e.g., competence, curiosity, authenticity, humility) are seen as a direction of travel. Importantly, focusing on committed action helps the athlete reimagine goal setting, prioritizing valued-based living over sport-specific goals. Further, when faced with adversity and bad performances, a focus on committed action may help the athlete reframe success, acknowledging achievements in diverse ways, providing a vagueness and personal challenge, similar to open goals (see Swann et al., 2017). This teaches athletes to consider perspective when pursing

goals, embracing failure as opportunities for personal growth, in a way that process goals cannot always achieve.

As an example, let us consider an athlete experiencing low motivation. The SPP might have the athlete complete a task where they consider their retirement party and the testimonials they would like to hear from their peers and coaches. Let us assume several of the values discussed can be grouped under the label "Adventurous." The SPP would then explore goals around how the theme of "adventure" could be achieved through committed action. There might be a focus on taking risks and committing to the unfamiliar, rather than playing safe—for example, developing different aspects of their game; and moving forward, developing, and improving, rather than winning. This shifts the athlete's focus to the bigger picture and what is important in their overall career, more than the short-term outcome. Moreover, some of these aspects may be perceived to be more within the athlete's control, which might positively improve their motivation.

Self-talk

In sport, self-talk is considered a widely used and effective strategy for enhancing performance through both instructional and motivational statements (Van Raalte et al., 2016). Let us take the example of an athlete with low self-confidence who has the self-talk "I'm a complete failure because I made a mistake in the game." PST might counter this with a positive statement (e.g., "We all make mistakes, and I did some really good things in the game too"). A second wave CBT approach would dispute this statement if it was revealed to underpin unhealthy emotional responses to perceived dismissal (Young & Turner, 2023). But in ACT, the SPP would focus on helping the athlete change their relationship with this self-talk, where they learn to experience thoughts and feelings as mental events, rather than seeing them as completely true or reflective of reality (Ruiz et al., 2023). This is what ACT terms cognitive defusion. Consequently, rather than judging, challenging and changing the content of self-talk, ACT encourages the athlete to change their relationship with their self-talk (Hayes et al., 1999). Here, ACT prioritizes the *workability* of thoughts (i.e., "Will focusing on these thoughts take me closer to the athlete I want to be?"), which is important when the athlete's conceptualized self—the stories they tell themselves that form their internal narrative—prevent them from living a life in line with their values.

An ACT approach would reframe from controlling cognitions. Moreover, an ongoing struggle to avoid or remove unwanted thoughts and feelings (i.e., experiential avoidance) can restrict actions toward what is important, which negatively impacts the athlete's actual performance (i.e., cognitive fusion; Ruiz et al., 2023). Changing an athlete's relationship with their

self-talk (i.e., defusion) allows for more flexible thinking and lessens the power of unhelpful commentary on emotions and behaviors. ACT interventions achieve this through defusion strategies. There is no agreed-upon taxonomy for categorizing or linking these strategies with interventions, and the ACT literature is yet to evidence the effectiveness of one approach over another (see Ruiz et al., 2023). In this article we discuss four routes to defusion (summarized in Figure 2). In this section, we discuss two of these routes. Returning to the example of an athlete experiencing low self-confidence, let us assume they are fusing with the statement "Will I ever be enough?"

First, the athlete could repeat the words "Will I ever be enough?" out loud, changing the speed, pitch and/or tone (i.e., the voice of a cartoon character), or sing "Will I ever be enough?" to a familiar tune (e.g., happy birthday) (Harris, 2019). This shifts the stimulus control from the word's meaning to their formal properties (e.g., how words sound and feel) (Assaz et al., 2023). Second, the SPP can encourage the athlete to understand thoughts are a verbal response from the "thinking athlete." The statement "Will I ever be enough?" is constructed in seconds because of previous experiences (Hayes et al., 1999). The SPP could label this reoccurring self-talk as "the 'I'm not good enough' story" or introduce the use of sarcasm to "thank" the brain for the thought. This facilitates the athlete seeing their mind as separate to them, where they see themselves as an unreliable, untrustworthy thinker. Despite the behaviors associated with the athlete's fusion being functionally valid (i.e., it helps the athlete interact more effectively with their environment), it does not reflect reality (Assaz et al., 2023).

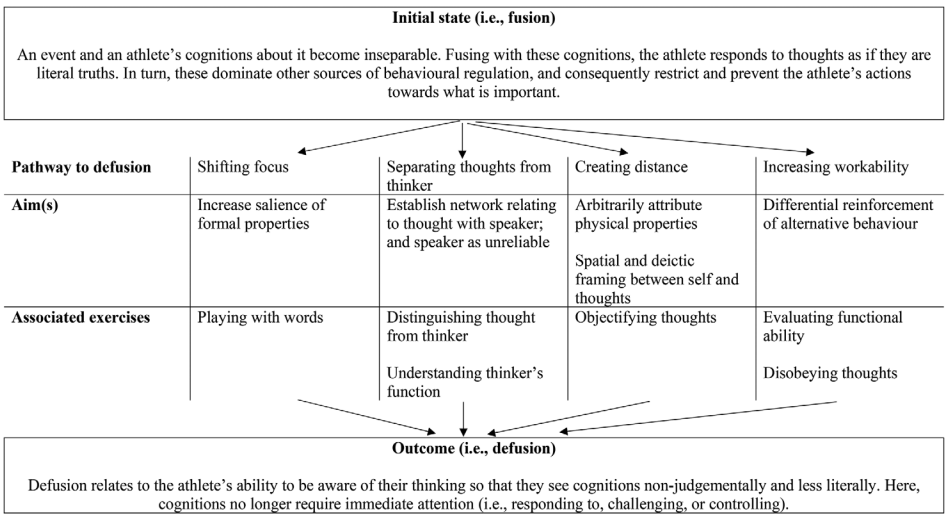

Figure 2. Conceptualization of cognitive defusion (Adapted from Assaz et al., 2023).

Using experiential exercises the athlete can come to learn that not all self-talk needs challenging or changing, seeing them nonjudgmentally (what ACT terms acceptance). Some athletes can be resistant to this different approach. However, discussing second-wave therapy approaches like playing tug of war with our brain, the SPP can ask the athlete "How is your current approach working for you?" The SPP can then pose "How about we drop the rope?" to introduce the notion of defusion (and acceptance).

Imagery

SPPs can use imagery to improve the workability of the athlete's cognitions in relation to valued-based living. Here, an athlete who believes "mistakes are the end of the world" could visualize a mistake and see the world continue, evaluating the usefulness of their cognitions. This approach bleeds into the aims of second wave CBTs, because by realizing that mistakes do not signal the end of the world, the athlete challenges this belief for its logic and veracity. Yet, using the ACT approach, the SPP might also encourage the athlete to visualize them demonstrating their committed action. Similarly, the SPP can use imagery to encourage the athlete to disobey their thoughts, performing an action after convincing themselves not to. This creates an incongruent experience between thought and action, where the usual response is extinguished in favor of an alternative one that is reinforced, achieving defusion by broadening the stimulus control (Assaz et al., 2023).

Returning to the example of an athlete experiencing low self-confidence, and the thought "Will I ever be enough?" Exploring a further two routes to defusion (illustrated in Figure 2), the SPP could use imagery to encourage the athlete to visualize "Will I ever be enough?" on paper, flashing across a computer screen, or as a character (e.g., a "self-doubt monster") (Harris, 2019). Attaching physical properties (e.g., size, shape, weight, and texture) to thoughts establishes spatial distance between the thought and the individual (Assaz et al., 2023). Whether this changes a thought's function is yet to be investigated, but it anecdotally makes sense as we respond differently to a dangerous situation in our town/city versus a different continent.

Further, SPPs can encourage athletes to sit with unhelpful thoughts and feelings from simulated scenarios. For example, athletes can imagine encountering a scenario that exhibits experiential avoidance and the associated cognitive fusion they would typically experience in these moments. They can then practice defusion strategies and focus on demonstrating their committed action. For example, a gymnast might visualize making an error on the opening skill of their routine, feeling anger, and thinking

"I'm a failure." The athlete can use this moment to practice the "thanks brain" response, visualizing their committed action (e.g., being artistic and an all-round athlete). In this way, the athlete can mentally rehearse a more functional response to this potential set back in future performances.

Relaxation and concentration training

Relaxation techniques are integral to helping athletes maintain optimal arousal levels (Andersen, 2009). Breathing exercises that engage multiple senses (i.e., listening to and feeling breaths, while visualizing colours) or having the athlete notice what they can see, hear, feel, touch, and taste in each moment can help reduce potential anxieties about past or upcoming performances. Returning to the example of an athlete experiencing performance anxiety, these techniques can help relax the athlete in pressured moments.

Concentration training helps the athlete focus their attention on the task at hand, limiting the likelihood of being affected by irrelevant stimuli (Wilson et al., 2006). From an ACT perspective, mindfulness and acceptance reduce rebound effects (Wegner, 1994) and reinvestment (Baumeister, 1984), directing attention to more useful cues, rather than supressing thoughts and feelings (Birrer et al., 2012). ACT interventions encourage the athlete to concentrate on the present moment. Activities like Lego, Sudoku, crosswords, Rubix cubes, knitting, crocheting, and coloring can be helpful to highlight that mindfulness is a dynamic activity that can improve concentration and relaxation. In this way, an ACT approach would improve the athlete's concentration by helping them focus on the present.

A fundamental aspect of ACT is accepting uncomfortable and unwanted thoughts and feelings, nonjudgmentally. Yet, sometimes, athletes are uneasy at allowing unhelpful thoughts to linger. The SPP can use formal mindfulness activities to encourage the athlete to observe their typical self-talk. For example, the finger on the thigh exercise (see Harris, 2019) asks the athlete to sit quietly and slide their index finger toward their knee when they experience future-focused thoughts and toward their hip when they experience thoughts focused in the past. This helps the athlete realize that few of their thoughts need acting on and introduces the *self-as-context* (Hayes et al., 1999). This can help the SPP establish if the athlete's thoughts are future-focused (e.g., "What if I play badly in this weekend's match?") or past-focused (e.g., "I was really poor in training today").

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how SPPs can integrate ACT principles with PST techniques. We should appreciate how deeply rooted PST is, both within sport psychology and the cognitive behavioral tradition. Neophyte

SPPs may be introduced to PST interventions and quickly encouraged to move "beyond" this approach toward other CBTs (e.g., cognitive therapy, REBT, or ACT). However, we argue that this is the result of not thinking deeply enough about the value of PST. PST being rooted in CBT generates the possibility of applying various CBTs with the tools of PST. Given that most athletes are likely familiar with PST, the current article highlights the possibility for SPPs to use PST as a trojan horse for exploring the ACT hexaflex model. We suggest that those looking to use ACT in their work undertake training in this approach. We hope SPPs can use this article to incorporate the ideas of ACT into the framework or curricula they employ in creative ways. Future research endeavors should pursue the development of sport-specific psychometric measures for ACT processes, and from here explore the integration of PST-ACT interventions through experimental designs and case studies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Samuel Wood http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1281-870X
Martin J. Turner http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1975-5561

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