



THE SPECIFICITY OF ANXIETY IN PROFESSIONAL HANDBALL

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Abstract

Anxiety represents a very important component, a fundamental element in professional sport, especially due to the fact that it can generate cognitive jams and determine direct somatic reactions which, implicitly, directly influence the way in which the athlete performs, the way in which decisions are taken, the relation to teammates, and resistance to stress and frustration in periods of training and competition. Anxiety is a natural phenomenon in professional sport, given the fact that any activity which implies a permanent surpassing of one's own limits, also triggers an emotional imbalance and an intense state of stress. Anxiety depends on the one hand on the individual characteristics of the athletes, on the specificity of the sport being practiced, but also on the athletic activity's level of performance. In this sense, the present article's purpose is to circumscribe the specificity of anxiety in professional handball.

Keywords: anxiety, performance, handball

JEL classification: I10; I19

Introduction

Anxiety represents a very important component, a fundamental element in professional sport, especially due to the fact that it can generate cognitive jams and can determine direct somatic reactions which, implicitly, directly influence the way in which the athlete performs, the way in which decisions are taken, the relation to teammates, and resistance to stress and frustration in periods of training and competition.

Thus, anxiety becomes an element of interest in professional sport, both for athletes and coaches, as well as for the auxiliary technical team. Dealing with anxiety in professional sport represents an extremely vulnerable point if one takes into account two main directions:

- The majority of individuals engaged in activities of athletic performance development and optimization perceive anxiety as a weakness of the athlete, as a handicap of the latter, incompatible with athletic performance.

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- The second direction is that in which anxiety is seen as a characteristic which the specialized personnel can activate or deactivate as they wish, or according to the need of the moment.

In reality, beyond an innate predisposition of each individual towards the development of states of anxiety of a certain intensity, the social environment, personal and athletic experiences, as well as the cultural environment play a major role. (Gherghișan, 2015, p. 93)

It is known that there are significant individual differences in what concerns anxiety, which is based on elements such as: personality traits, the way of relating to the athletic environment, the fulfillment of the need for security by the team, environment characteristics that favor the appearance of anxiety, such as: criticism, depreciation, unfair competition, an excess of responsibility, an excess of tasks to be fulfilled, an excess of compensation, etc. That is, elements that favor directly the delimitation of the area of competence and of the capacity of performance.

“Anxiety is always present in competitive sports and it is not always negative” (Balague, 2005, p. 73), one of its advantages being the growth of the capacity for effort, concentration and activation. A very high level of anxiety interferes with the capacity for effort and determines muscular tension, behavioral and/or performance inefficiency, decisional difficulties, attention perturbations and low confidence.

Contents

In the present study, we have concentrated on an exploration of anxiety, both at a bodily and cognitive level, as well as at an emotional level. We have studied a sample of 8 players from the Romanian national women’s team, considering them to be the most representative, in the present case, for Romanian handball.

For an efficient exploration of the phenomenon of anxiety, the eight players have been interviewed individually. According to Kornspan (2009), the interviews are an objective form of evaluating athletes.

According to Gardner&Moore (2006, p. 44), the interview is the oldest form of evaluation in professional psychology, facilitating the understanding of personal differences and of individual dynamic. In this sense, we consider that the type of interview used is the one that is focused, concentrating on the underlining of the relevant aspects concerning anxiety and attention in high level handball. Focused interviews respect the dynamic of real situations (Vlăsceanu, 2008, p. 69) and facilitate common knowledge of an issue and of a set of problems (Vlăsceanu, 2008, p. 107).



In this sense, the results suggest that competition anxiety is associated in athletes' language with emotions. Six of the eight members of the Romanian national handball team have described it through emotions and only two of them through the notions of stress and apprehension.

All the 8 athletes have identified in their cases a moderate level of anxiety with an accentuation of this state in the key moments of the game, when the pressure of the result grows, when the expectations of the coach become manifest, when they feel threatened ... by failure.

The common form of anxiety, strongly felt by the athletes, is cognitive anxiety. Cognitive anxiety is the mental component of anxiety, caused by negative expectations concerning success and a negative self-evaluation (Martens, Vealey & Burton, 1990, p. 9). In reality, cognitive anxiety represents a form of being aware of the external stimuli, which is associated to apprehension and perturbing or distorted visual images (Morris, Davis, & Hutchings, 1981, p. 547).

Thus, cognitive anxiety is a form of anxiety which is preponderantly caused by past failures, by a chain of expectations, by attention being concentrated on the result and not on personal performance.

According to the answers of athletes, cognitive anxiety is hard to manage, and appears a few hours before the game, varying in intensity throughout the competition.

The information from the scientific literature, according to which athletes experience competition anxiety at a higher level, especially in a climate charged by the pressure of time and of the result, are found in the information provided by the respondents. The great majority feel a higher level of competition anxiety at the end of the second half or during overtime.

The information from the interviews suggests that each athlete feels anxiety differently, bodily, as well as cognitively and emotionally. In this sense, although it is a team game, it is good for attention to be focused mainly on the individual when the improvement of the collective psychological performance is sought. Individual dynamics and the perception of each individual offer another perspective on the reality which, individually, is felt differently.

According to the answers given by the athletes, the signs and symptoms of anxiety in handball can be synthetized in the following way:



Table 1 The synthesis of the signs and symptoms of anxiety in the case of the interviewed players

AFFECTIVE	COGNITIVE	PHYSICAL	BEHAVIORAL
Emotions Stress Unease Apprehension Pressure Disappointment Lack of trust in one's capacities	Concentration problems Attention problems Fear of failure Fear of making mistakes Fear of the adversary Negative anticipation Inner negative discourse	Tremor Sweating Hyperventilation Tachycardia Urination The feeling of an empty stomach	Loss of concentration capacity – between hyper-vigilance, avoidance, inhibition Agitation Haste Tactical and technical mistakes Missed throws Difficulties in adapting to the game The inability to get into one's stride

Conclusions

The answers suggest the manifestation of anxiety in two key periods – before the competition (a few hours before the game) and during the competition (in the key moments of the game). According to the answers collected from the interview, anxiety determines attention and perception perturbations, as well as diminished cognitive flexibility.

The patterns of movement of the anxious athlete, as well as his reaction speed and the decisional style, change significantly compared to the state of emotional comfort.

The learning of the answers causing anxiety appears when a threat to an object, invested emotionally as having value, or being essential, appears. In the case of the athletes, a major threat is the result. The athletes' focus on the result, and not on the individual performance, determines a chain of expectations and a pressure that they cannot deal with.

When an athlete becomes anxious, the capacity for concentration changes and this applies also to intellectual functions. This has to do with WHAT information is being processed and HOW it is being processed.

The answers of the athletes identify a direct connection between cognitive anxiety and attention. The fear of failure determines a drop of the concentration and attention capacity, a narrowing of the attention field, the athlete being only able to contemplate the imaginary failure and reflect on it.



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