

Overcoming The Competition Stress Through Coping Strategy

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Abstract : *The purpose of this study is to examine how the coping skills help student-athletes to overcome the competition stress. Fifteen student-athletes (8 female, 7 male) from selected universities in Asean (i.e., Indonesia and Malaysia) aged between 18 to 23 years old agreed to participate in this study. All of them are National university athletes representing sports of track and field, rugby, wrestling, hockey, and football. A Qualitative methodology approach was utilized in this investigation and the interview transcript was analyzed inductively. The results show that the coping strategy did help them to overcome the competitive stress. Moreover, they also identify that the coping skills help them to focus under pressure, be more confidence, and have the fighting-back spirit. They also suggested that expert should teach them more on improving their coping strategy through psychological skills techniques in order to improve performances and overcome anxiety. Recommendations for further research were also suggested in the paper.*

1.0. Introduction

Participation in competitive sport at elite level requires both mental and physical capacity in order to handle the pressure during competition, thus each of the athletes who compete needs to prepare themselves in both areas to ensure better performances (Omar-Fauzee et al., 2014a). Therefore, one should understand that being mentally fits doesn't means that one did not have to learn it, as a matter of fact, they should mentally trained themselves through the simulations of obstacles faced by athletes during competitions. Without training, the capacity to overcome the mental obstacles during competition might be slower than expected. Thus, it is risking the ability to make the right judgement during the games which could narrow down their chances to beat the opponent. In other words, the sports psychology experts should analysed thoroughly the coping strategy that athletes should used when facing

consistent pressured (Sheard, 2010; Wong, Teo, & Polman, 2015). For athletes who compete at university level who has less experienced at international level will mostly faced difficulties if they are not prepared especially before competitions (Omar-Fauzee, et al., 2014 b). This is especially true, when athletes are in the situations where they feel not ready before competition starts, and of course it will makes them nervous and confuse which will increased their anxiety level and decreased their confident level (Dominikus, Omar-Fauzee, Chong, Meesin & Choosakul, 2009). However, for those athletes who trained and prepared themselves with psychological skills such as coping strategy they are more likely to mingle easily and interact and with others, able to adjust themselves in difficult circumstances, always calm and relax which helps them to sustain a strong level of self-confidence (Omar-Fauzee et al., 2009). Therefore, a psychological skill should be learned by student-athletes in order to make sure that they are able to adjust themselves in the stressful situation and able re-silenced back to catch-up with others (Omar-Fauzee et al., 2014a). According to Clough, Earle, and Sewell (2000), psychological skills will build mental toughness which will enables athletes to compete in most situations certain or uncertain, and their anxiety level relatively low as compare to those who have poor mental toughness. In such a way, with this psychological skill (i.e., coping strategy) and physical strength were the determining factors for the successful performance of the athletes.

The research on the athlete's performances employing the mental toughness and psychological skills has been conducted for more than 20 years back. Gould, Eklund, and Jackson (1993) interviewed 20 wrestlers from the U.S. Olympic team on how they applied the psychological skills of coping strategies to face stress during the 1988 Seoul Olympic. Results of their study had identified that elite athletes employed psychological skills such as coping were to control their negative thought, give full attention, better self-discipline, and able to control emotions especially during competitions. They are not easily being distracted by surrounding situations. Thus it helps them

to improve performances. Following that research, study by Gould, Finch and Jackson (1993) on 17 National team surfers had identified that seven coping strategies employed by them in order to overcome competition stress which were positive thinking, self confidence, concentration, social support, time management, mental preparation before competition, and able to control self doubt. On the other hand, for novice Asian athletes social support and problem solving skills needed in order to overcome their losing problems (Omar-Fauzee, Abd-Latif, Tajularipin, Manja & Rattanakoses, 2011). As follows, apart from positive thinking, self-confidence and concentration, it also shows that the social supports also needed by Asian novice athletes and American surfers. It seems that it is common issues that needed by all over the world regardless of their abilities. However, it seems that novice athletes needed extra psychological skills and need to learn more on how to solve problems and cope with the distractions. Therefore, unable to gain the skills of problem solving will also discourage their confidence level to manage stress. Additionally, study by Rattanakoses, Omar-Fauzee, and Soh (2009) on male and female athletes in Malaysia had also found that the psychological skills employed by both male and female athletes by using the imagery, self-confidence and coping strategy help them to fight back when they were 'off-peak' during competition. However, if compare between Malaysia and Indonesia student-athletes at university level, it is surprising to identify that the Indonesian student-athletes score higher than Malaysia in the 'freedom from worry' as other category such as confidence, goal setting and peaking under pressure had showed that Malaysian student-athletes score higher (Omar-Fauzee, et al., 2014a). Due to the fact that the Omar-Fauzee et al. study was employing the quantitative research design, which unable to answer the 'why' as what the in-depth interview research designed did. Therefore, this study is continuing the previous study on Indonesian-Malaysian university student athletes but with respect to the qualitative research design which will be conducted through in-depth interviewed. The purpose of this research is to examine the benefit of coping strategies using the in-depth interviewed design among student-athletes in Indonesia and Malaysia.

1. Methodology

1.1. Respondents

A number of fifteen student-athletes (8 female; 7 male) from a selected Indonesia and Malaysia university aged between 18 to 23 years old agree to participate in this research. All of them are National university athletes representing sports of track and field, rugby, wrestling, hockey, and football. Some of them have involved in their

particular sports since primary school starting at 12 years old.

2.2 Research instruments

Semi-structured interviews and open questions were used to determine the coping strategies of the athletes in this study.

The following are sample of questions:

1. During this interview, I am interested to know your experiences about your anxiety, fear, stress, and negative thought when you are training and competing?
Coping strategies Questions
1. Can you specify how the coping strategy that you employed helps you in managing or trying to manage your anxiety, fear, stress and negative thought? How is the coping strategy skill helping you in competitions? Please give explanation to your answer.
2. What are your suggestions to improve your ability in coping strategy so that you can and other students-athletes can gain benefit?

2.3. Procedure

This is a qualitative study that aims to find out in-depth information about the coping strategies used by athletes and what are their suggestions for future athletes. The in-depth Interviews were used to ensure that the responses obtained achieve the objectives of the study. Interview is a powerful method to explore perceptions, including ideas, values and opinions (Creswell, 2012). The Semi-structured interviews were selected in the interview session. Each participant was asked the same questions according to the order listed in the guidelines and the interviewer will respond freely, whereby the follow up questions asking them to explain 'why' will be probed according to the current needs of the situation. Permission from both institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia has been obtained in this study. All participants were interviewed on coping strategies. Each participant who agreed to be interviewed would sign a letter of consent. They were informed of the purpose of the study, and researcher stressed that participation was voluntary and that all data would be kept confidential. Researchers made the appointment with the participants through the telephone. A convenient time was set up for the interview at the training center or where the athletes were staying. The interviewers made every attempt to establish a relaxed atmosphere and a good rapport with the participants so that

they feel comfortable and talked freely. Interviewers asked the athletes to fill in the demographic form that includes the information of their age, position in sport, playing experience, the highest level of participation in sports. Before the interview sessions started, the Interviewers asked permission from the participants for the interview to be recorded. The length of the interview session ranged from 25 minutes to 40 minutes, with the average of 30 minutes.

2.4.Data Analysis

The team of researchers listened to the entire recording to get the overall picture and transcribed the data. The researchers read the transcripts several times until they become completely familiar with all the lines in the interviews. The screening of the data was made based on Patton’s (2002) concept of thematic content analysis that was used to identify the same raw data and categorize them in similar themes. The themes were placed in the same group, and would then be identified as major themes. As a result, the main theme is the overall outcome of the study.

3.0. Results and Discussion

Data analysis revealed four major dimensions of the benefit of coping strategy which are *overcome the competitive stress, focus under pressure, be more confidence, and have the fighting-back spirit*. In addition, when these student-athletes were asked about how to improve their coping skills, all of them answered they need expert to teach them. The frequencies of the benefit of coping strategy mentioned by the twelve athletes as recorded in table 1. On the other hand, all of them agreed that an expert should teach them the proper coping skills in other to improve their coping skills (Table 2).

Table 1: Benefit of coping strategy

Coping Strategies	Total (15)	Players
<i>Overcome the competitive stress.</i>	12	
<i>focus under pressure,</i>	10	
<i>be more confident, and</i>	10	
<i>have the fighting-back spirit</i>	8	

3.1.Benefit of Coping Strategies

Overcome competitive stress

The competitive stress is the one thing cannot be avoided by all athletes especially before and during competition, unable to control it can be turmoil to focus during the games. Results from this study found out 12 out of 15 athletes agreed that with coping strategy they can overcome their competitive stress. One of the athletes said,

Before this I feel like going into a war without preparation, but after was given a good support and feedback by my coach I feel that I can go to the field and win. Thank you for giving me a psychological thought to me....

My worst enemy is anxiety, I can bare my mind to fight it without help to develop my mind into positive. With the thinking of being positive given by my coach lately, I felt that I can be myself before competition. I know my stress level were lower than before with the positive thought given.

Focus under Pressure

No matter how and what, athletes will be facing great pressure in competition for example they might losing 0-3 in soccer during first half, the captain is given red card and out of the game after playing only five minutes, or all the strategy planned for attacking was overtake by the opponent easily. All of these examples were too embarrassing which makes some athletes unable to play as usual because they cannot focus anymore. Therefore, they need coping strategy to focus back to their game. One of the female athletes mentioned that:

Before this when ever our team is losing, I am sure can feel the negative moods from my teammates faced. They are not focusing because they thought that they are losing. But thank you for the talk given by the sports psychologist invited by my coach who now we really understand what is to be 100% effort and those efforts only can be reached through 100% focus. We have to believe that with focus you can overrules the pressure of losing or pressure of not performing.

As an 800 meter runner, there always a 'player' from other teams who try to distract you so that you lose your running momentum. This player is very dangerous strategically because you will not run at your own paced that will make you easily tired or cannot run at your own paced. This is especially true when you were left 50 meter behind which will make you feel uneasy and unable to focus. But thanks to our invited psychologist who

gave tips that even under pressure we have to be positive and run at our own paced. Now I feel more focus with myself....

Be More Confident

In sports, the ability to readjust one thought will also help their ability to perform better. The more confident is the individual, the more capable is the individual performing at their best. However, confident also needs to be practiced and learned in order to sustain for longer period. One of the rugby players said;

As you know, my major problem before was when I look at the physical of the opponents. The bigger they are, the less confident I felt to perform. I really did forget all the tough time training, all the hard work out on stamina and physical, and all the 're-do' again and again on the strategy which has make me as good as the opponents. My special thanks to our invited speaker who had told us the 'confident drills' that we have to practice. I agreed with him that to build confident you need to keep on practicing until you can do it automatically....

On the other hand, one of the wrestlers said;
Now I am more confident than before because I already know on how to make myself free from distraction and think positive. The more positive I am, the more confident I became.

Have a fighting back spirit

The losing team always lack of fighting spirit, especially when they are behind.. In order to motivate them, the whole team must have the motivation to fight back even they are far behind the other team. With the coping strategy, athlete will be more motivated than before they were exposed to the psychological training on coping. One of the athletes mentioned that:

I know it is difficult to make everybody to 'wake-up' and fight back when they are losing behind the other team. Before this I feel like everybody not doing their work and I was the only one who does the good job which makes me unmotivated to play. But after the psychological session by the expert, now I can feel that to win you have to play together, be alert all the time, and cannot blame others because we are together in this game.

Another student-athlete said;
Now I am able to come back from losing and play at my own capacity as usual. I just don't bother to think about defeat, what I should do is to play at my best not winning. The more I think about winning, the more stress I was. I understand why I should fight back because of the psychological skills given.

Suggestions about Coping Strategy

Following the dimensions of the benefit of coping strategy, all of the informants agreed that an expert in sports psychology should trained them thoroughly the psychological skills so that they can cope with all the distractions, anxiety, fear of losing before and during competitions.

Table 2: Suggestions by the informants to improve coping skills

Suggestions	Total (15)	Players
<i>Experts should teach them proper coping skills techniques</i>	15	

The followings are the quotations by the student-athletes:

After the psychological session by the expert, I felt that my hard physical training did not means anything if my mental is so weak and kept changing negatively because of inside and outside distraction. Surely, I will suggest you need expert to train your brain.

Before this, I thought my thinking is positive but actually it is not enough if I don't train it to be tougher. To make it consistent positive I need sports psychologist to take care of my mind.

Of all the training I did, it seems that it worthless if I go to the field to compete without any preparation to fight the distraction and emotion that keep changing 'come and go' positively and negatively. To make it perfect you need to learn from the expert who knows what to do and not to do during and before games.

4.0. Discussions

The ability to cope with stressful situation do not happen or exist naturally, but require learning, awareness and practice. According to Kirk, Cooke, Flintoff, and McKenna, (2008), athletes who want to successfully maintain their high performance, they must teach themselves to associate with variety of psychological coping and mental toughness skills. This is because those who unable to cope with stressful situation will not be able to overcome the

competitive stress. The competitive stress can create distressful emotions, unable to think properly, felt not confidence and not able to pay attentions to the games (Nicholls et al., 2007). For example, study by Holt and Hogg (2002) found that female soccer players who played in World Cup 1999 has reported that coach, demands from international soccer tournament, the stress in the competition and distractions are the sources of competitive stress. Therefore, high level athletes should be able to learn on how to overcome it by trained themselves the coping strategies by experts. Those athletes who did not prepared themselves will feel depressed, especially when faced with the risk of injury and the mistake in mental and physical interpretation (Nicholls, Holt, Remco & Johnny, 2006). This is agreed by Mosewich, Crocker, and Kowalski (2014) who found that poor performance, performance plateau and injury were common frustrated experiences by athletes. Therefore, coaches and sport psychology should implement the most effective coping strategy depending on the individual and situation in order to optimising their performances (Wong, Teo, & Polman, 2015).

Another benefit of coping strategy is being able to focus under pressure which need a positive mind set of the individual to focus their game instead of other external and internal distractions. The mind set helps a lot in avoiding stress, distractions, and always prepare them physically and mentally. This is true with the pentathlon athletes who revealed that they need mental preparation before undergoing training or competition (Bertollo, Saltarelli, & Robazza, 2009). Furthermore, the mental preparation requires setting the focus, goals, imagery, and positive self-talk.

Moreover, by employing the positive self-talk as part of coping strategy it will helps the athletes to stay and maintain themselves in the training and face the competition with confidence. The positive self-talk can improve performance and skills in sports (Hardy, 2006). Thus, it will increase the self-confidence of the athletes to compete in the games. Through the coping strategy, it helps athletes to make themselves belief that they can perform at their best which will maintain their confidence level and increase their motivation to perform as well. This, on the other hand will allow the best performance that one can showed.

This research also revealed that the other benefit that athletes can gain from the coping strategy is the ability to come back from defeat. Thus, with coping strategy also they are able to cater the difficult situations like adversity which is happen without any predictions (Hammermeister,

Pickering, McGrawl, & Ohlson, 2012). They are able to re-silence and played at their best even though they are losing. The study by Belem, Caruzzo, Nascimento Junior, Vieira, and Vieira (2014) also found that coping strategies did help elite beach volleyball athletes in Brazil have significant impact on resilience among these athletes. They also found that coping strategies overcomes problems, increase motivation and concentrations among athletes.

In relations to the benefit of coping strategy, all of the respondents did mentioned that they really need the expert in sport psychology to educate and trained them the coping strategies in order they can used it during training and competitions to produce great performances. Thus, this suggests that the Asean varsity team should employ a sport psychologist who can create and developed a proper coping strategies program for the whole student-athletes program at university levels. The sports budget should put a side some allocations in order to improve athletes mental strength capacity in competitions.

5.0. References

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