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Psychology of Sport and Exercise 3 (2002) 125–150

www.elsevier.com/locate/psychsport

Psychology  
OF SPORT AND EXERCISE

# Athletes' coping during a competition: relationship of coping strategies with positive affect, negative affect, and performance–goal discrepancy

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Received 30 May 2000; received in revised form 9 November 2000; accepted 18 April 2001

## Abstract

**Objectives:** This study examined the changes in athletes' coping and affect across the phases of a sport competition and the extent to which performance–goal discrepancy (PGD) moderated these changes. Also, it explored the mediating role of coping strategies in the PGD-affect relationships.

**Method:** Sixty-two French–Canadian male golfers, aged from 13 to 20 years, completed a French translation of the MCOPE (*The Sport Psychol.* (1995b), 9, 325–338) and the PANAS (*J. Pers. Social Psychol.* (1988), 54, 1063–1070) two hours prior, one hour after, and twenty-four hours after the competition. A subjective (*The Sport Psychol.* (1995b), 9, 325–338) and an objective indices were used to assess PGD.

**Results:** In order to assess the moderating role of PGD in the temporal patterning of coping and affect, a series of PGD  $\times$  Phase analysis of variance, with repeated measures on the last factor, were conducted. Results showed that positive affect and negative affect as well as behavioral disengagement, increased effort, active coping/planning, suppression, and positive reappraisal changed across the phases of the competition for athletes with high PGD whereas venting of emotion and humor changed for athletes with medium and low PGD. Multivariate path analyses were used to explore the mediating roles of coping in the PGD-affect relationship. Whereas active coping/planning and behavioral disengagement mediated the PGD-positive affect relationship during the competition, positive reappraisal mediated it at post-competition. Also, behavioral disengagement mediated the PGD-negative affect relationship during the competition.

**Conclusions:** The moderating role of PGD on the temporal patterns of coping and affect implies that their dynamic nature might be far more complex than depicted by Lazarus and Folkman ((1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer). Also, the PGD-affect relationships and the mediating role of coping in these relationships outlined the need of considering self-referenced criteria of performance in studies of coping and affect. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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*Keywords:* Emotion; Adaptation; Motivation; MCOPE; PANAS

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## Introduction

Coping has emerged recently as a distinct line of inquiry in sport psychology and a good deal of research has been driven by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping. Thus, coping has been defined as the "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). A pivotal assumption of this model is that coping actions and emotional reactions of individuals are defined as highly contextual responses that change across situations and across different points in time during a stressful situation. Despite the dynamic nature of this definition and the acceptance of this assumption by several sport scientists (Cerin, Szabo, Hunt, & Williams, 2000; Crocker, Kowalski, & Graham, 1998; Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996), little attention has been devoted to the temporal patterning of coping and emotion in competitive sport settings.

### *Temporal patterning of coping and emotion*

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stressful encounters such as public performances and academic and medical examinations are divided into phases (i.e. pre-, mid-, and post-situation) that place distinctive normative demands on the individual, so that their coping responses and emotional reactions might change across time. Studies conducted with American college students (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) partially support this assumption by revealing that the use of some coping strategies and the level of appraisal-related emotions (i.e. threat, challenge, harm, and benefit) change across the phases of a mid-term college examination. Interestingly, the use of task-oriented coping (e.g. active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, acceptance, seeking instrumental social support) was more frequent before the exam whereas the use of emotion-oriented coping (e.g. wishful thinking, mental disengagement, seeking emotional social support) was more frequent during the period in which students waited for the announcement of their grades.

As with academic examinations, sport competitions are divided into distinctive phases that can place specific physical, technical, and psychological demands and constraints on athletes (Cerin et al., 2000; Hanin, 2000). Thus, coping responses and emotional reactions of athletes might change across the phases of a sport competition.

In order to assess this assumption, Gaudreau, Lapierre, & Blondin (in press) have measured golfers' coping strategies across three phases of a golf tournament. The results of a doubly multivariate analysis of variance revealed that the use of wishful thinking, seeking social support, suppression of competing activities, behavioral disengagement, increased effort, and active coping changed across the phases of the competition. Although providing support for the theoretical assumption of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), results also showed that some coping strategies (e.g. positive reappraisal, mental disengagement, humor, and venting of emotion) remained stable across the phases of the competition. Furthermore, this study was highly descriptive and failed

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