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Optimism, Pessimism, and Precompetition Anxiety in College Athletes

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of optimistic and pessimistic cognitive styles on performance and pre-competition anxiety. Collegiate athletes (female = 39; male = 35) completed the Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire and were grouped as optimists, defensive pessimists or real pessimists. Defensive pessimism is a strategy through which individuals set low expectations so as to protect themselves from potential failure, but has no adverse effect on performance. Such a strategy differs from the real pessimist approach, which results in both low performance expectations and achievements. Predicted precompetition anxiety was assessed via the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-YI). Results revealed that females exhibited significantly ($P < 0.05$) higher levels of predicted precompetition anxiety than males. However, when anxiety responses were re-analyzed by cognitive orientation, it was found that regardless of gender, optimists exhibited significantly lower ($P < 0.01$) levels of precompetition anxiety compared to the pessimists groups. While a majority of the sample (59.9%) possessed a pessimistic style, these findings suggest that performance differences between the groups were not significant. Hence, findings from this study indicate that cognitive orientation style and not gender is the best predictor of precompetition anxiety. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In the field of sport psychology, it is commonly held that an optimistic attitude toward competition is essential for success in athletics (LeUnes & Nation, 1996). In contrast, less successful

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athletes are often portrayed as pessimistic and anxious. As a result of these perceived negative traits many sport psychology interventions typically involve techniques designed to enhance confidence (Weinberg & Gould, 1999) and reduce anxiety (Cox, 1994; LeUnes & Nation, 1996). However, research findings based on Hanin's (1986) Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) model indicate that the optimal level of anxiety may vary widely across athletes, with between 30 and 45% performing optimally when anxiety is high (Raglin & Hanin, 2000).

Moreover, it has been proposed that some forms of pessimism may not be inherently harmful to performance. Specifically, Norem and Cantor (1986a) have identified two distinctive styles in which pessimism is employed. Defensive pessimism is characterized as a strategic mechanism in which individuals set unrealistically low expectations in order to protect themselves from potential failure, and as motivation to avoid future failure. Olympic speed skater Dan Jansen provides an example of this approach when, after winning a gold medal in speed skating during the 1994 Winter Olympics, he admitted, "I went in with such low expectations because I didn't want to set myself up for disappointment" (Wolff, 1994). Research has further indicated that defensive pessimists do not appear to suffer performance impairments compared with individuals who utilize an optimistic approach (Norem & Cantor, 1986a; Showers & Ruben, 1990). This differs from the real pessimist who both expects and achieves low levels of success. In this case, pessimism becomes a maladaptive response leading to negative outcomes associated with higher levels of anxiety (Showers & Ruben, 1990).

Additionally, studies examining cognitive orientation styles (Norem & Cantor, 1986a, 1986b; Showers, 1988, 1992; Showers & Ruben, 1990; Spencer & Norem, 1996) have found that individuals possessing an optimistic attitude towards an assigned task do not outperform those employing a defensive pessimistic orientation. In fact, Sanna (1998) has demonstrated that manipulations that interfered with the typical moods and mental simulations used by defensive pessimists actually worsen performance levels. Specifically, when attempts were made to induce positive mood or downward counterfactuals in which the participants anticipated performing prior to the actual performance, the level of performance for optimists was not impaired while the defensive pessimists suffered significant drops in performance.

The implication that defensive pessimists benefit from adopting a negative perspective towards upcoming performances, with elevated anxiety serving a facilitative function has potential implications for the IZOF model. While IZOF research has found that a considerable proportion of athletes perform best with substantially elevated anxiety, factors that contribute to this variability have not been identified (Raglin & Hanin, 2000). Additionally, IZOF research has found that athletes are generally capable of accurately predicting their own precompetition anxiety up to several days prior to actual competition (Hanin, 1986; Raglin, Morgan, & Wise, 1990a; Raglin & Morris, 1994; Raglin & Turner, 1992; Wilson & Raglin, 1997), and this information is used to identify those athletes possessing anxiety levels outside their optimal zone prior to competition. However, in some circumstances, athletes fail to make accurate predictions, leading to potentially erroneous attempts to raise or lower anxiety. An unexplained finding in IZOF research has been that young female athletes consistently "overpredict" levels of anxiety for easy competitions (Raglin et al., 1990a; Raglin, Wise, & Morgan, 1990b; Raglin & Turner, 1992; Wilson & Raglin, 1997), but are accurate in predicting anxiety prior to difficult meets. In contrast, young and adult males have been shown to be capable of making accurate predictions for both easy and difficult competitions (Raglin & Turner, 1992; Turner & Raglin, 1996; Wilson & Raglin, 1997). The

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