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Perceived impact of anger and anxiety on sporting performance in rugby players[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: The main purpose of the study was to extend the notion of directional perceptions beyond anxiety to anger in order to assess rugby players' perception of the facilitative or debilitating effects of trait anger symptoms.

Design: A cross-sectional study design was employed using normative measures of anger and anxiety.

Method: The frequency and direction of symptoms of competitive trait anger were assessed in 197 Italian rugby players together with the intensity and direction of multidimensional trait anxiety.

Results: Findings revealed a general tendency of rugby players to experience a moderate frequency of anger symptoms and to interpret their symptoms as facilitative rather than debilitating. Regarding the direction of symptoms, cognitive anxiety was a significant predictor of anger, while self-confidence was a significant predictor of control of anger.

Conclusions: Support was provided for assessment of individual's interpretation of anger symptoms.

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Keywords: Athletic performance; Anger; Anxiety; Directional perceptions; Contact sports

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Introduction

A wealth of research in sport psychology has been devoted to the study of the debilitating or facilitative effects of competitive anxiety symptoms on performance. The multidimensional conceptualisation of competitive anxiety has contributed largely to the expansion of knowledge within the field (Martens, Burton, Vealey, Bump, & Smith, 1990; see Burton, 1998; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). The multidimensional anxiety theory describes a series of two-dimensional relationships between cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, self-confidence and performance. Cognitive anxiety (or worry) is viewed as the mental component of anxiety typified by negative expectations and cognitive concerns about oneself, the situation and potential consequences. Somatic anxiety is conceptualised as the physical component of anxiety that reflects the perception of one's physiological responses. Finally, self-confidence is conceived of as one's belief of being able to successfully perform a desired behaviour. The relationship with performance is predicted to be negative linear in the case of cognitive anxiety, quadratic (inverted-U shaped) for somatic anxiety, and positive linear for self-confidence.

To assess multidimensional anxiety, Martens et al. (1990) developed the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2). Although the original inventory was designed to gauge the level (i.e., intensity) of symptoms purported to indicate the presence of anxiety, further research has focussed on the directional perception of anxiety (Jones, Hanton, & Swain, 1994; Jones & Swain, 1992). Directional perception refers to whether athletes interpret their level of experienced anxiety symptoms as facilitative or debilitating towards performance (Jones, 1995; Jones & Hanton, 2001). The interest in the directional perception derived from limitations in the measurement of only the intensity of competitive anxiety symptoms (Jones, 1995). As a result, a growing number of authors have advocated the need to address additional dimensions of the stress response (see Mellalieu, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2006). Traditionally, a high level of anxiety symptoms was thought to be debilitating and thus would be predictive of a negative influence on performance. However, research results have challenged the assumption that anxiety is always detrimental to athletic performance (Hanin, 1980, 1986; Raglin, 1992; Raglin & Hanin, 2000).

The introduction of the modified version of the CSAI-2 (Jones & Swain, 1992) enabled researchers to measure both the intensity and the direction of anxiety symptoms. In some studies, anxiety direction scores were found to be better predictors of the performance level of athletes than anxiety intensity scores. Specifically, findings indicated that good performance was associated with a more facilitative and less debilitating perception of anxiety than poor performance (Jones, Swain, & Hardy, 1993), and that elite athletes interpreted their anxiety symptoms as being more facilitative than those of non-elite performers (Jones et al., 1994). Yet, Robazza and Bortoli (2003) found that both the intensity and the direction of the multidimensional anxiety response (i.e., symptoms of cognitive anxiety and somatic anxiety) differentiated athletes across a range of individual or team sports as a function of the competitive standard. Elite athletes reported lower levels of cognitive and somatic anxiety symptoms, and experienced those symptoms as less debilitating than those of non-elite athletes. They also exhibited higher self-confidence, which they perceived to be more facilitative. In general, the importance of measuring the directional interpretation of anxiety symptoms in addition to intensity levels has received strong support in sport psychology studies examining the anxiety trait-state relationship (Hanton, Mellalieu, & Hall, 2002) and variables such as skill level (Jones

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