THE COGNITIVE COMPONENT OF COMPETITIVE STATE ANXIETY IN SEMI PROFESSIONAL SOCCER: A CASE STUDY‡

D. PEARS*

SUMMARY

Competitive state anxiety may influence performance. The cognitive component of competitive state anxiety was assessed qualitatively in the present study, in a case of semi professional soccer player. Data was collected by means of a five stage method interview. Inductive content analysis was employed to categorise and analyse the emergent themes. The participant perceived some cognition as positive and facilitative and other cognition as negative and debilitative. He has developed coping strategies to turn the latter to positive cognition. The analysis revealed six distinctive phases about his thought patterns in proximity to a match, with no relation to the intensity of these thoughts.

Key words: Competitive state anxiety, cognition, soccer, exercise

ÖZET

YARI PROFESYONEL FUTBOLDA YARIŞMA DURUM KAYGISININ BİLİŞSEL ÖGESİ: OLGU SUNUMU


Anahtar sözcükler: Yarışma durum kaygısı, biliş, futbol, egzersiz

‡ Presentated at the Vlth World Congress on Science and Football, January 16-20, 2007, Antalya, Türkiye

* Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, University of Bedfordshire, Luton, England
INTRODUCTION

The demands on elite performers in any sport are great. One effect of these demands can be competitive state anxiety. Competitive state anxiety refers to anxiety that specifically relates to competition and is temporary due to its link to competition. It arises when a player perceives that they are unable to cope with the demands of performance. Weinberg and Gould (12) describe competitive state anxiety as a negative emotional state characterised by feelings of nervousness, worry, apprehension and bodily arousal.

Competitive state anxiety has been extensively studied in relation to a range of sports including karate (10), rifle shooting (5), rugby (7) and tennis (11). Competitive state anxiety in soccer too has been studied extensively (3,6).

Many of the previous studies into competitive state anxiety in soccer have used a multidimensional approach in line with Martens, Vealey & Burton (8). This study sought only to examine the cognitive component of competitive state anxiety. Jones and Hardy described in 1990 the cognitive component as being, “…characterized by negative expectations, lack of concentration and images of failure…” It is also relevant to state that all of the above examples used a quantitative approach. This study used a qualitative approach, specifically focusing on the experiences of one semi-professional soccer player and comparing these experiences with existing research findings.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participant

The subject is a 26 year old male, semi-professional soccer player. He had previously played at professional level and gained 22 England international schoolboy caps, before injury forced retirement.

Data collection

A semi-structured interview was carried out to examine the cognitive aspect of competitive state anxiety in relation to the subject’s experiences. A pilot study of the interview schedule and its explanation was carried out with the five-stage method described by Breakwell (1).

Procedure

The interview was carried out with the interviewee in a setting of his choice. His consent was sought prior to the interview and an explanation was given as to the purpose of the interview and the study.
**Content analysis**

Inductive content analysis as detailed by Patton (9) was employed to categorise and analyse the emergent themes.

**RESULTS**

The results of the content analysis are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Inductive content analysis displaying emergent themes from the participant’s experiences of cognitive aspect of competitive state anxiety.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Quote</th>
<th>Level One</th>
<th>Level Two</th>
<th>Level Three</th>
<th>Level Four</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I always think about my performances...</td>
<td>Individual (past)</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If it’s something, I’ve missed a tackle...</td>
<td>Individual (present)</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think prior to a game... my own performance...</td>
<td>Individual (future)</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous games, results...</td>
<td>Team (past)</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...but yet I do think about other players...</td>
<td>Team (present)</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...how my own preparation has been...</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...team preparation is less...</td>
<td>Team</td>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...obviously the bigger the game...</td>
<td>Match</td>
<td>Other (external)</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...because they've paid to watch us...</td>
<td>Crowd</td>
<td>Other (external)</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...regarding certain strong or weak areas...</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>Other (external)</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...what’s happening around you...</td>
<td>Team mates</td>
<td>Other (internal)</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...the instructions from the manager...</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Other (internal)</td>
<td>Topics of cognition</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obviously, we think about it during training...</td>
<td>Tuesday to Thursday</td>
<td>Pre-match</td>
<td>Temporal patterning</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...my thoughts the night before...</td>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Pre-match</td>
<td>Temporal patterning</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The morning of the game is important...</td>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Pre-match</td>
<td>Temporal patterning</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...what’s happening in front of you...</td>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Match</td>
<td>Temporal patterning</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What could I do better?...</td>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Post-match</td>
<td>Temporal patterning</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...reflect on it on the Sunday as well...</td>
<td>Sunday to Tuesday</td>
<td>Post-match</td>
<td>Temporal patterning</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...it’s like well done, well done...</td>
<td>Self talk</td>
<td>Changing (-)ve to (+)ve</td>
<td>Psychological interventions</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The scenarios...I try to be positive...</td>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td>Changing (-)ve to (+)ve</td>
<td>Psychological interventions</td>
<td>Facilitative/debilitative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

The main theme to develop from the interview was the participant’s perception of the effect of cognition on performance. The participant saw some cognition as positive and facilitative and other cognition as negative and debilitating. However, he has developed coping strategies to turn these to positive cognition.

The second theme discovered related to the wide range of topics what the participant typically thinks about in relation to playing semi-professional soccer. His thoughts are largely concerned with his or his team’s ability to cope. Fortunately, his perception is mainly positive, due to the strategies listed above.

Thirdly, the participant described how his thought patterns change in proximity to the match. The analysis revealed six distinctive phases for a match played on a Saturday.

Research into temporal patterning has been widespread. Cox (2) found that anxiety typically increased towards performance and then decreased rapidly once performance began (inverted-V pattern). A subsequent study by Gould, Petlichkoff and Weinberg (4) supported this, but found that this pattern relates more to somatic anxiety than cognitive anxiety. Martens, Vealey and Burton (8) reported that cognitive anxiety remained relatively stable in pre-competition. It would be difficult to support or refute these findings on the basis of the present study, as the participant did not relate to the intensity of his thoughts.

CONCLUSION

The main theme of the study that emerged concerns the ability of the participant to use psychological interventions to counteract negative cognition. Qualitative research may be seen as an important tool for examining cognitive state anxiety especially regarding temporal patterning and individual perceptions of cognitive anxiety as being either facilitative or debilitating. Further qualitative research relating to state anxiety might examine anxiety during matches and the role of playing position in relation to anxiety.

REFERENCES


**Address for correspondence:**
David Pears, University of Bedfordshire,
Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences,
Park Square, Luton, Bedfordshire,
LU1 3JU, England, UK