COPING WITH PRE-COMPETITIVE ANXIETY IN SPORTS COMPETITION

Amasiatu, Athan. N. & Uko, Ime Sampson, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria


ABSTRACT

This paper discussed coping with pre-competitive anxiety in sports competition. The aim of the paper presentation is to provide explanation and reassurance to coaches, athletes and managers in the process of dealing with pre-competitive anxiety in sports competition. Five theories are used as the framework: the multidimensional theory which describes competitive sports anxiety in a model composed of two main subcomponent; cognitive and somatic anxiety, the general adaptation syndrome theory which describe the body’s short-term and long-term reaction to stress, the optimal arousal theory being one that predicts performance of athletes to be at best only if their level of arousal falls within the optimal functioning zone, and the Inverted ‘U’ Hypothesis theory which predicts a relationship between arousal to approximate an inverted ‘U’ shape. The concept of pre-competitive anxiety was defined as an unpleasant emotion which is characterized by vague but persistent feeling of apprehension and dread before an event. The paper traced the sources of pre-competitive anxiety to an imbalance between perceived challenges and capabilities. It also enumerated signs and symptoms of pre-competitive anxiety to include: paralyzing fear, inability to concentrate, sweating, shaking, shortness of breath, dizziness and increase heart rate. The effect of pre-competitive anxiety on sport performance and techniques of dealing with pre-competitive anxiety which include: teaching the athletes to know what is fear; visualization, goal setting, relaxation, self confidence, distracting oneself and focusing on that which could be controlled were also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Sports is littered with broken dreams of those whose performance collapsed when they are most needed to be in control of themselves and focus on the task at hand. It is not uncommon to see athletes “freeze” in big games or moments or commit unexplainable error in the course of their performance. When athletes do not perform well in relation to their abilities, nervousness in anticipation of the sporting challenges could be the root cause of anxiety.

The problem of pre-competitive anxiety is one of the most pressing problems in modern sports psychology. It has been recognized for many years that psychological factors, in particular anxiety, play an important role in competition and in competitive sports, every athlete experience fear before, during and after events (Lizuka, 2005). Anxiety could make even the world most successful athlete feel nervous. According to Moran (2004), factors such as fear of failure and lack of confidence induce feeling of anxiety in athletes. Anxiety is like worry; it is an unpleasant emotion that most athletes feel at sometimes when they are faced with challenges.

Anxiety in sports is such a huge issue for many athletes. The logic is that, the better you become, the higher the level of competition, the more anxiety you experience. Anxiety can have a devastating effect on the performance of an athlete. No matter how much talent or skill one may have, he will never perform at his or her best if he or she lives in fear before
every event. The precise impact of anxiety on sporting performance depends on how you interpret your world. In the world today, nearly every concern of human endeavour is thought to be affected by anxiety. A number of theories exist concerning the effect of anxiety on performance, and while there seems to be an interaction effect between the amounts of anxiety necessary to maximally perform certain specific task, all theories seems to agree that maximum performance is reduced by too much anxiety.

Competitive anxiety should be viewed in two dimensions; trait and state anxiety. State anxiety may be conceptualized as a transitory emotional state or condition of human organism that varies in intensity and fluctuates overtime. This condition is characterized by subjective, consciously perceived feeling of tension, apprehension and activation of the autonomic nervous systems. It is an immediate or “right now” emotional response that can change from moment or situation to the next. Trait anxiety is ingrained in a person’s personality and the individual with this disorder tend to view the world as a dangerous and threatening place.

It is noted that some athletes are more prone to anxiety than others. Amateur athletes are more likely than seasoned professionals to experience anxiety that interfere with their ability to perform in competition – this makes sense due to their relative lack of experience both in competition and in managing arousal. Athletes who participate in individual sports have also been found to experience more anxiety than those who play team sports; common sense suggests that being part of a team alleviates some of the pressure experienced by those who compete alone.

In this paper, attempt will be made to discuss ways of coping with pre-competitive anxiety in sports competition. Issues to be discussed include:

i) Concept of pre-competitive anxiety
ii) Sources of pre-competitive anxiety
iii) Common signs/symptoms of pre-competitive anxiety.
iv) Effect of pre-competitive anxiety on sports performance
v) Ways of coping with pre-competitive anxiety.

THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

Five theories are used for this paper presentation; Multi-dimensional Anxiety Theory, General Adaptation Syndrome, Catastrophe Theory, Optimal Arousal Theory and Inverted ‘U’ Hypothesis Theory.

Multi-Dimensional Anxiety Theory

Multi-dimensional Anxiety Theory developed by Martens, Burton, Vealey, Bump and Smith in (1990) focused primarily on competitive sport anxiety. This theory describes competitive sport anxiety in a model composed of two main sub-components: cognitive anxiety and somatic anxiety. Cognitive anxiety is defined as worry or an individual’s negative thoughts or concerns about performance, as well as attention disruption and lack of concentration. Somatic anxiety can be identified as the physical reaction symptoms that may occur in the individual which include excessive sweating, increased heart rate, shakiness, or tension (Martens et al, 1990). The theory predicts that somatic anxiety should decline once performance begins but cognitive anxiety may remain if confidence is low.
General Adaptation Syndrome Theory

The General Adaptation Syndrome or GAS, is a term used to describe the body’s short-term and long-term reaction to stress. Originally described by Hans Selye (1907-1982), an Australian-born physician, the general adaptation syndrome represents the three-stage reaction to stress. He thought that the general adaptation syndrome involved two major systems of the body, the nervous system and the endocrine (hormonal) system. He then went on to outline what he considered as three distinctive stages in the syndrome’s evolution as listed below:

- **Stage 1: Alarm Reaction:** The First stage of the general adaptation syndrome, the alarm reaction, is the immediate reaction to a stressor at the initial phase of stress, humans exhibit a “fight or flight” response, which prepares the body for physical activity.
- **Stage 2: State of Resistance:** Stage two might also be named the stage of adaptation instead of the stage of resistance. During the phase, the body adapts to the stressors it is exposed to.
- **Stage 3: Stage of Exhaustion:** At this stage, the stress has continued for some time. The body’s resistance to the stress may gradually be reduced, or may collapse quickly. Generally this means the immune system and the body’s ability to resist may be almost totally eliminated.

Catastrophe Theory

Catastrophe Theory (Hardy, 1987) suggests that anxiety influence performance and that each athlete will respond in a unique way to competitive anxiety.

Optimal Arousal Theory

According to Hanin (1997), Optimal Arousal Theory predicts that each athlete will perform at his or her best if his or her level of arousal or competitive anxiety falls within the optimal functioning zone.

Inverted ‘U’ Hypothesis Theory

Inverted ‘U’ Hypothesis (Yerkes, 1908) predicts that a relationship between arousal to approximate an Inverted ‘U’ shape. The theory is that as arousal is increased then performance improves but only to a certain point (top of the Inverted ‘U’). If the athlete’s arousal is increased beyond this point then performance diminishes.

CONCEPT OF PRE-COMPEITITIVE ANXIETY

In sport psychology, pre-competitive anxiety refers to an unpleasant emotion which is characterized by vague but persistent feeling of apprehension and dread before an event. Anxiety is a reaction to impending danger: real or imaginary. It consists of two sub-components, namely cognitive and somatic, which influence performance before and during competitions.

Cognitive is the mental component, characterized by negative expectation about success or self evaluation, negative self-talk, worry about performance, images of failure, inability to concentrate, and disrupted attention, (Jervis, 2002). The somatic is the physiological element which is related to autonomic arousal, and negative symptoms such as feeling of nervousness, high blood pressure, dry throat, muscular tension, rapid heart rate and butterflies in the stomach (Martens et al 1990). In support of this Karageorghis (2007) classified pre-competitive anxiety into three components which are: Cognitive, Somatic and Behavioural. Martins et al (1990) sees pre-competitive anxiety as an arousal that is unpleasant or negative...
and occurs prior to competition. According to them, it is a negative emotional state that is
characterized with feeling of worry, nervousness and apprehension associated with activation
of the body.

Lious (2006) opined that when athletes start to experience increase heart rate, sweating, rapid
breathing and dry mouth prior to competition, it all indicate signs of pre-competitive anxiety.
At this stage of their life, their thoughts become self focused, self defeating and negative.
However, the degree to which pre-competitive anxiety influence athlete’s performance is
largely dependent upon the interaction of the athletes, uniqueness and the competitive
situation. In support of this, Krane (1994) observed that our bodies provide us with
numerous cues such as muscle tension, butterflies, desire to urinate and cotton mouth that
suggest that we are out of control.

Cox (1990) stated that pre-competitive anxiety is such feelings that an athlete may endure
during the week, hours and minutes leading up to the start of an event or competition.

**SOURCES OF PRE-COMPETITIVE ANXIETY**

One of the main sources of pre-competitive anxiety in sports could be due to perceived stress.
How the athletes think about the sports competition and not the competition itself could be a
source of pre-competitive anxiety. Pre-competitive anxiety results from an imbalance
between perceived capabilities and the elements of the sports environment. When the
perceived demands are balanced by the perceived capabilities, athletes experience optimal
arousal often referred to as the flow state. At this stage everything appears to go on smoothly.
However, if athlete perceived capabilities exceed the sport challenge, arousal will decrease
resulting in boredom or lack of motivation, if the opposite occur (perceived challenge) exceed
capabilities; athlete will be over arousal resulting in worry and anxiety. Therefore pre-
competitive anxiety results when skills and abilities are not perceived as equivalent to the
sport challenge.

Alison (2006) classified factors that underlie pre-competitive anxiety as:

i. **Physical Complaint:** Digestive disturbances, shaking and yawning.
ii. **Fear of Failure:** Losing, choking, and living up to expectation and making mistake.
iii. **Feeling of Inadequacy:** Poor conditioning, unpreparedness, low skill/ability and
    feeling that something is wrong.
iv. **Loss of Control:** Bad luck, poor officiating and indecent weather.
v. **Guilt:** Concern about hurting an opponent and cheating.

Research suggests that people with a family history of anxiety have increased risk of
developing it. They have greater chance of suffering from anxiety disorder which results in
constant worry, (Kendler et al, 2002). Douglas et al (2006) stated that the major sources of
pre-competitive anxiety include: fear of failure, thinking too much on what people may say
about the performance, and lack of confidence. They concluded however, that pre-
competitive anxiety is dependent upon factors such as: skill level, experience and general
level of arousal in daily activities.

Ikulayo (1990) enumerated sources of pre-competitive anxiety in sports. According to her,
the major sources reported in individual and coaches in amateur and professional sport
include: the fear of failure, concerns about social evaluation by others (particularly the
coach), and loss of internal control over one’s environment.
COMMON SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PRE-COMPITITIVE ANXIETY

Pre-competitive anxiety is a social anxiety disorder that presents itself via various signs and symptoms. It usually affects people who are afraid of performing in public, such as athletes and players. Valerie (2013) enumerated the under-listed signs and symptoms as associated with pre-competitive anxiety.

**Paralyzing Fear:** Paralyzing fear is a common symptom associated with pre-competitive anxiety. It may appear in the form of stage fright, an experience of anxiety in present situation. As a result, the athlete may become unable to move or speak.

**Inability to Concentrate:** The inability to concentrate is another symptom of pre-competitive anxiety. Apprehensive thought may overtake the athlete’s mind, interfering with the necessary action needed to complete the present task. As a result, the athletes may become confused or lose focus while performing.

**Sweating:** Fear due to pre-competitive anxiety may cause athletes to sweat excessively on various places of their body, including the face and hands. The emotional stress may cause their brain to send signal to their body that will cause hot flashes and enormous amount of perspiration which may make them feel self-conscious and uncomfortable.

**Shaking:** While athletes are experiencing pre-competitive anxiety, their hands and knees may start to shake uncontrollably. That response is due to the large amount of adrenaline sent throughout their body as a defuse mechanism, also known as “fight or flight mode”.

**Shortness of Breath:** Shortness of breath is another symptom or sign of pre-competitive anxiety. When athletes are afraid of performing, they may begin to hyperventilate or start breathing really fast, while gasping for air.

**Dizziness:** Dizziness while performing is a symptom of pre-competitive anxiety. As a result, athletes may lose their balance due to their brain not getting enough blood and oxygen. They may begin to feel like the ground or hall is spinning and, if the anxiety is too intense, they can possibly faint.

**Increase Heart Rate:** While experiencing pre-competitive anxiety, the heart rate may increase due to the adrenaline being released into the body as a survival response. Sometimes the heart rate increases due to panic; therefore the more the athletes panic about competition, the faster their heart will beat.

In support of these, Karageoghis (2007) classified signs of pre-competitive anxiety into three components: cognitive, somatic and behavioural. According to him, the cognitive aspects are indecision, sense of confusion, negative thought, images of failure, defeatist, self-talk and thought of avoidance. The somatic signs and symptoms include: pounding heart, muscular tension, and increase in respiratory rate, dry mouth, need to urinate, yawning and distorted vision. The behavioural symptoms are: biting finger nails, playing safe, covering of face with hands and avoidance of eye contact.

When pre-competitive anxiety strikes an athlete, the body reacts with a “fight or flight” reaction that leads to obvious physical, mental and behavioural symptoms. A high level of pre-competitive anxiety can affect the mental state of an athlete, enough so that he or she may not make decisions that normally would in a less stress state. He or she may be unable to concentrate on task and feels confused, (midlineplus.com). According to the website, other mental symptoms of anxiety include negative thinking, conviction of failure, indecision, unhappiness and inability to follow direction.
EFFECTS OF PRE-COMPETITIVE ANXIETY ON SPORTS PERFORMANCE

There are many ways that pre-competitive anxiety can affect sports performance. Firstly, for sports requiring endurance, power or both, pre-competitive anxiety can be very draining on the athlete’s energy level. Secondly, in sport where calmness is critical (e.g. golf, archery, free throw shooting in basket ball or direct free kick in football), pre-competitive anxiety can significantly interfere with the athlete’s ability to stay calm. Thirdly, anxious athletes will find it difficult to be able to remain focus on the task at hand and finally pre-competitive anxiety can increase tension in the muscle of the throat and chest to the point where it may seem impossible to swallow or expand the chest (Ikulayo, 1990).

According to Krane (1994), pre-competitive anxiety has been found to exert a powerful influence on athlete’s performance. In his research, he observed that the cognitive interpretation an individual gives to a situation exerts an effect on his or her performance. He also added that successful athletes are those that can interpret pre-competitive anxiety to be facilitative in the course of their athletic performance.

It is usual to experience pre-competitive anxiety indeed; a certain level of physical arousal is helpful and prepares athletes for competition. But when the physical symptoms of pre-competitive anxiety are too great, they may seriously interfere with athlete’s ability to compete as the coordinated movements required in athletic events become increasingly difficult when the body of the athlete is in a tense state.

COPING WITH PRE-COMPETITIVE ANXIETY IN SPORTS

There are many ways to deal with pre-competitive anxiety, among them are:

Teaching Athletes to know what is Fear: It is true that every athlete experience fear and anxiety especially before big games. But for some athletes, it causes them to freeze up and miss opportunities. The enemy of peak performance is fear of failure. Fear is nothing more than our unconscious mind releasing some chemicals in our body and making us feel something. With this understanding, we need to explain this to our athletes by helping them understand what fear is.

Explain to them that what happens in their body is the release of some chemical that make them feel something. Help them understand that the butterflies they feel in the stomach are not butterflies but are just some chemicals in the body that are moving on to the cell of their stomach lining and giving them the sensation that there are butterflies. When these situations are explained to the athletes they will begin to see fear as just something their body does.

Visualization: Many athletes use visualization to improve performance, develop confidence and manage anxiety. Visualization also known as imagery or mental rehearsal involves imagining ourselves successfully competing at an athletic event. In order to make visualization work, athletes and players should close their eyes and imagine the physical movements that they would make in order to be successful in competition. They should try to imagine themselves moving at the same speed as they would in real life. They should make sure their imaginations should be from their own perspective not that of the observers. They should view the scene (e.g. the crowd, the field) as they would if they were really there.

According to Cox (1990), the under-listed visualization exercises could be useful to athletes in enhancing their performance:
Exercise 1: Visualizing Yourself
- Sit down in a quiet place with your eyes close.
- Bring the whole of your body before you.
- Take a look at your feet; examine your toes still with your eyes close.
- Say to yourself “my toes are strong”.
- Take a look at your knees, say yourself “my knees are strong and can carry me throughout the game”.
- Bring your palm to your face, still with your eyes close.
- Look at your fingers and palms strong.
- See your elbow, go through your upper arms and see your shoulders, say “they are strong”.
- Look at your intestine; say “there is nothing wrong with my intestine”.
- Look at your lungs; say “my lungs are strong”.
- Take a look at your heart; say “my heart is strong”.
- Say to yourself; “my toes, knees, fingers, arms, elbows, and shoulders are strong”.
- Say to yourself; “my intestine, lungs, and heart are strong”.
- Say to yourself “they cannot fail me”.

Exercise II: Visualizing your Game:
- Sit down in a quiet place with your eyes close.
- Bring the game you are about to play before you as if you are watching a movie.
- Look at yourself from the dressing room.
- Take a look at the dress you are wearing, say to yourself, “I am well kitted”.
- Look at yourself again.
- Take a look at yourself and the position you are playing.
- Look at the first movement you want to make, say to yourself “this is the correct movement”.
- Look at yourself playing your game.
- Tell yourself to do what you want in my game.

Exercise III: Visualizing your Opponents:
- Sit down in a quiet place with your eyes close.
- Bring to your memory the opponent you are about playing against.
- Look at their height, and body size.
- Say to yourself “my opponent are not stronger than I”.
- Take a look at the position of the opponent.
- Say to yourself “I possess this game than my opponent.
- See you opponent movement, say to yourself “my opponent movements are good but mine is better”.
- Feel the tension of your opponents attack go down you. Say “I am OK and in control”.
- See yourself blocking every attempt of your opponent to beat you at the game.
- Enjoy you performance, say “I am in control”.
- Feel the joy of victory pass through your head to the whole body.
- Say to yourself “I am happy with my performance”.

Goal Setting: Athletes should choose goals that are achievable but challenging. It is advisable to break task down with smaller parts with a series of short-term goals. These will help to keep them focus.
**Relaxation Techniques:** Relaxation techniques are helpful for reducing the physical symptoms of pre-competitive anxiety such as an increased heart rate, tense muscles and quick shallow breathing. These techniques can be used anytime leading up to a performance or competition. Two of the techniques are: diaphragmatic breathing and progressive muscle relaxation.

**Diaphragmatic Breathing:** According to the free encyclopedia (wikipedia), diaphragmatic breathing is breathing that is done by contracting the diaphragm, a muscle located horizontal between the chest cavity and stomach cavity. Air enters the lungs and the belly expands during this type of breathing. It involves slow and deep inhalation through the nose, usually to a count of 10, followed by slow and complete exhalation for a similar count. This process may be repeated 5-10 times, several times a day.

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a technique for reducing anxiety by tensing and relaxing the muscle (Wolpe et al, 1966). The physical component involves the tensing and relaxing of the muscle groups over the legs, abdomen, chest, arms, and face.

With the eye closed and in a sequential pattern, a tension in a given muscle group is purposefully done for approximately 10 seconds and then released for 20 seconds before the next muscle group. The mental component focuses on the difference between the feeling of tension and relaxation. Because the eyes are closed one is forced to concentrate on the sensation of tension and relaxation.

**Cognitive Restructuring:** Cognitive restructuring refers to changing habitual ways of thinking. In athletic performance, cognitive restructuring helps evaluate bodily arousal; for example elite athletes channel arousal into excitement and the ability to rise to the challenge. Changing the way one thinks about a competition can also be helpful. Planning to always do our best regardless of how important we think a competition is allows us to attach less significance to major competitions, and in turn reduces pre-competitive anxiety. Craske et al, (2006) stated that being aware of your thoughts and feelings is also a key to managing the cognitive symptoms of pre-competitive anxiety. They concluded that recognizing negative thoughts when they first enter your mind allows you stop them before they take hold, so you can replace them with more positive ones.

**Develop Self Confidence:** Sometimes it might be hard to imagine being confident in a competition if we usually crumble under pressure. However, athletes can be helped to take specific steps to help increase confidence. Athletes should be made to focus on past successes instead of failure. They should make practice and preparation a priority and continue until they have no doubt left about their ability to succeed.

**Distract Yourself:** It is true that distraction during competition reduces performance, but immediately before the event, we could talk to our teammate or fellow competitor, read books and listen to music. All these things help keep the mind away from negative thoughts.

**Focus on that which you can Control:** Athletes should not focus their attention on that which they cannot control. Whenever they find themselves worrying about who is in the crowd watching them, or that other competitors are better than them, they should remind themselves that these are aspects of the competition that are out of their control. They should know that what they can control is their performance, how well prepared they are, and how well they implement technique and strategies such as progressive muscle relaxation and mental imagery.
CONCLUSION

In concluding this presentation, coaches, athletes and managers should begin to see pre-competitive anxiety just as something their body does and should not be worried about. Recognizing it and using the right techniques such as visualization, goal setting, cognitive restructuring, developing self confidence and focusing on what you can control rather than what you cannot control will help keep athletes free from pre-competitive anxiety.

REFERENCES