The psychological preparation of the Swiss Junior team of rhythmic gymnastics for a major competitive event

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INTRODUCTION

Applied sport psychology has offered many examples in the last decade of how athletes can be mentally trained to manage competitive stress and fear of failure in major sport events. The illustrations insist on both physical stress management techniques, geared at lowering levels of somatic anxiety, and psychological stress management tools, aiming at modifying the direction of cognitive anxiety and interpreting the competitive event in a positive way (Reda 1991; Jones & Hendon 1996). Among those strategies, Gould & Udry (1994) identify biofeedback, relaxation, cognitive-behavioral interventions and precompetitive routines as being the most widely used.

When intervening in a youth sport setting, the sport psychologist has to take into account the developmental characteristics of the athletes. Actually, adolescence witnesses a rise of anxiety levels as well as of the importance of evaluation by others concerning performance and physical appearance (Bizzini & Piffaretti 1998; Wilson & Eklund 1998). Literature about the application of psychological counseling to the junior athlete therefore points out the need to modify traditional psychological training to the cognitive traits of young athletes, by emphasizing the use of strategies destined to attract their interest and easy for them to put into practice (Orlick & McCaffrey 1991; Weiss 1991). Physical relaxation, task-oriented motivations and cognitive-behavioral techniques are among the most frequently mentioned strategies for managing stress and reducing the adolescents' fear to be evaluated in a competitive setting (Duda 1999; Bizzini & Piffaretti 1998; Piffaretti, Bizzini, Mahler and Schnyder 1999; Le Scanff 1999).

In light of this theoretical framework, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate how applied sport psychology can be adapted to the needs and the characteristics of a junior team for their preparation of an international competition.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

In the context of the preparation of the European Championships of rhythmic gymnastics, the sport psychologist was asked by the National Federation to design a program of mental training for the Swiss junior team. 7 young gymnasts (age average: 13.5) took part in the program. Each of them followed five 2-hour sessions in a timespan of three months prior to the competitive event. Sessions generally took place during training camps and encompassed both the use of psychological techniques and free interviews. The goals of the intervention were previously discussed with the national coach, and the necessity to work with the whole group, instead of individually, was agreed upon in order to enhance team cohesion.

The program mainly consisted in the learning and the implementation of the following psychological skills: a- education on self-awareness of motivations (intrinsic motivations vs.
extrinsic motivations) and of personal stress levels (exploring the somatic symptoms and negative thoughts associated with fear of failure); b- progressive relaxation training (two group sessions, and then takehome tape and follow-up); c- precompetitive routine; d- positive self-talk (the gymnasts would be encouraged to perceive things in a constructive way by wearing the "glasses", see figure 1); e- visualisation (exercised with the help of the program music and the technical assistance of the coach).

Degree of success and acceptance of the psychological preparation was then evaluated through a 14-item questionnaire that the gymnasts were asked to fill in after the European Championships. On the one hand they were asked to report on a 6-likert scale their levels of somatic (1-"no activation"; 6- "lot of activation") and cognitive anxiety (1- "not worried at all"; 6- "very worried and tense") prior to the first and second passages, as well as their thoughts and concentration in those crucial moments; on the other hand, they evaluated the degree of help provided by the psychological techniques (1- "did not help at all"; 6- "helped me a lot") to deal with the competitive challenge.

RESULTS

Concerning the first subscales, figure 2 illustrates the mean scores of 6 out of 7 gymnasts.

![Figure 1: cognitive technique of "the glasses"](image)

![Figure 2: cognitive and somatic anxiety levels prior to event 1 and 2](image)

Results suggest that, while levels of somatic anxiety remained high, cognitive anxiety scores were moderately low, with a slight increase at the second execution of the program. On a more qualitative basis, here are some of the most significant thoughts that they reported just prior to their programs: "I thought about my exercise with pleasure, because I felt motivated and sure", "I felt confident about our training, so I was really excited and only thought that we'd do well", or even "I was concentrated on the exercise and my coach's suggestions". No major differences were visible between their attitude before the first passage and the second one: "Since the first passage went
well, it was time to confirm that it had not been pure luck" or again "I thought that we could only do well since the first passage had been very good".

As for the second part of the evaluation, scores all range between 4.50 ("helped me moderately") to 5.43 ("helped me a lot"), with higher mean scores reported for techniques which are cognitive in nature, namely visualisation of the exercise program (helping concentration and self-confidence) and "the glasses" (helping emotional control and positive self-talk). Figure 3 illustrates those results in more detail.

![Figure 3: Perceived efficiency of psychological techniques](image)

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Results concerning pre-competitive anxiety suggest that, despite the importance of the event, most gymnasts were able to keep a cool and positive attitude towards the stressful event. This cognitive tendency is confirmed by the thoughts that the gymnasts report, which are generally task-oriented and filled with positive expectancies about performance. These results confirm the importance of motivational orientation as a stress management strategy (Duda 1999).

Given those evaluations, sport psychology training proved to be well-accepted and integrated into the preparation of the team for the European Championships. Gymnasts perceived the benefits of a psychological approach to the competition, especially thanks to the application of cognitive techniques. Efficiency of visualisation of the competitive program can be accounted for by the close cooperation between the sport psychologist, who introduced the technique, and the coach, who later applied it to practices. Moreover, the playfulness of the "glasses" strategy and its recalling power certainly explain the efficiency of emotional control. The national coach herself attributed the gymnast's better mastery of stress and their positive outlook to the mental preparation program.

This intervention suggests that psychological counseling can be an enhancing factor for junior competitive athletes' mental preparation, when it is tailored to their characteristics. It also stresses the importance of the cooperation between the coach and the psychologist in the mental domain. Further interventions with elite athletes need to be implemented and evaluated in order to assess the benefits of sport psychology to other competitive settings.
REFERENCES


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