THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STRATEGIES USED BY MALAYSIAN NATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS DURING ASIAN 5 NATIONS RUGBY TOURNAMENT 2015

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to obtain the psychological performance strategies used by Malaysian national rugby players during Asian 5 Nations Rugby Tournament 2015. All twenty-nine participants of this study are trained and experienced male players within the age of 19 to 38 years. Each player was given a set of Test of Performance Strategies (TOPS) questionnaire, which consisted of 64 items seeking the respondents to state the psychological strategy they use towards themselves during competition and practice during the match. The results showed significant difference only in emotional control strategy during practice condition. Due to specific demand in position, the backline-position players used emotional control as a strategy more often during practice, compared to the forward-position players. Meanwhile, in competition condition the performance strategies were equally used for both positions. The findings suggest that to win a game, both positions (forward and backline) have to use similar strategies, particularly in team sports. Future study should examine the strategies adopted in several investigations in order to derive comparisons among other professional teams.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, several mental aptitude inventories have been proposed (Thomas *et al.*, 1999) including meta-analyses that indicate that psychological practice produces measureable additions in talented execution, particularly for cognitive and physical assignments (Feltz and Landers, 1983; Driskell *et al.*, 1994).

Competitive anxiety has been defined as a combination of cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and self-confidence (Martens *et al.*, 1990). Even professional athletes admit that they feel nervous when performing in front of thousands of spectators (Mazlan and Mustaza, 2014). Anxiety has also been found to be more intense during competition than during pre-competition because anxiety is caused by external aspects, such as the physique of opponents, the huge number of spectators, and the intense feeling of responsibility towards coaches and family. A sport psychologist thus will usually recommend increasing the motivation and goal-setting of athletes, believing that such efforts would increase the athletes' performances and facilitate determining successful and unsuccessful athletes by their psychological skills.

Previous researchers have recommended that athletes be urged to enhance their skills performance intrinsically by using self-psychological strategies instead of extrinsic inspiration in order to facilitate achieving particular tasks (Rushall, 1992). However, these performance psychological strategies are not suitable in all conditions. For example, one study has found that the anxiety levels of goalkeepers were higher than that of other positions (i.e. defenders, midfield), and that goalkeepers also demonstrated less self-confidence than did the defenders (Sewell and Edmondson, 1970) .This discovery were attested in a recent research, which found that defenders and goal keepers were better than strikers and midfielders in goal-setting strategies (Mazlan and Mustaza, 2014). The relationship between sport psychological skills and different playing positions is also stated as an important research area (Sweata and Remon, 2013). Performance strategies must perfectly fit the needs of an athlete based on his or her position on field, and nature and intensity of game. For example, imagery, activation, and goal setting methods are more frequently used by professional athletes compared to novice athletes (Thomas et al., 1999).

One study conducted by D'Urso et al. (2002) on rugby players found that emotions were modified widely during a game due to external events (e.g., behavior of teammates or opponents) or individual behaviors (e.g., individual faults). Another study by Hodge et al. (2008) used self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (2002) to identify the motivational level among elite rugby players. The study concludes that the competence and autonomy scores of high burnout elite rugby players were low compared to players with low burnout symptoms. Previous study also found that team-sports athletes had lower emotional control than individual athletes during practice and competition (Dachen, 2012). Recent study conducted by Mazlan and Afizan (2016) revealed no significant difference in the anxieties states of the university rugby players between backs and forwards positions. However, the players demonstrated higher level of cognitive and somatic anxieties before the first game compared to second game (Mazlan and Afizan, 2016). No study thus far has revealed the mental strategies used by Malaysian national rugby players during practice and competition. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to recognize the performance strategies used by Malaysian national rugby players, particularly in different positions of play, during Asian 5 Nations Competition 2015.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

Data for the study were collected from twenty-nine Malaysian national rugby players, aged 19 to 38 years (M = 25.72, SD = 4.38). The participants were sampled from different positions on the pitch (16 forward and 13 backline) and all players were competing in the Asian 5 Nations Rugby Competition 2015 at the time of data collection.

Test of Performance Strategies. The participants completed the Test of Performance Strategies (TOPS) questionnaire during the Asian 5 Nations Rugby Tournament 2015 competition. It consists of two scales, practice and competition with 64-item self-report instrument designed by Thomas et al. (1999). The questionnaire served to measure the psychological skills and strategies used by the athletes during practice and in competition. The practice subscales were self-talk (maintaining a positive internal dialogue), emotional control (controlling emotions under pressure), automaticity (performing with little conscious effort, automatically), goal-setting (setting personal, specific goals), imagery (visualizing sport performance), activation (maintaining an optimal level of arousal), relaxation (practicing to remain calm under pressure), and attentional control (focusing attention effectively). Meanwhile, the competition subscales were the same, except attention control, which was replaced by negative thinking (thoughts of failure). In the present study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .70. Finally, descriptive statistic and independent sample t test were performed to compare the performance strategies adopted in different positions.

3. RESULTS

The preliminary assumption was conducted and the data was normally distributed. Descriptive statistics for performance strategies during practices and competitions are presented in Table 1 and Table 2. An Independent t-test result in Table 1 shows significant differences only in emotional control scores during practice condition for forward (*M* = 9.12, *SD* = 1.89) and backline (*M* = 9.31, *SD* = 3.20; *t* (29) = -.1.82, *p*= .015, two -tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (means difference = - .183, 95% *CI*: -2.29 to -1.93) is moderate (eta squared = .07). In competition condition, the Independent t-test result in Table 2 shows that there was no significant difference in the performance strategies used by Malaysian national rugby players (forward and backline).

Table-1. Independent t-test for differences position on the pitch between forward and backline among Malaysian national rugby players for performance strategies during practice condition

Variable	Position	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p-value	Mean difference	Std. Error difference
Goal setting	Forward	16	13.06	2.35	-1.23	27	.06	-1.32	1.08
	Backline	13	14.38	3.43					
Emotional control	Forward	16	9.12	1.89	-.18	18.6	.01*	-.18	1.01
	Backline	13	9.31	3.20					
Automaticity	Forward	16	15.56	3.18	-.48	27	.59	-.59	1.24
	Backline	13	16.13	3.48					
Relaxation	Forward	16	13.94	1.91	.02	27	.25	.01	.93
	Backline	13	13.92	3.09					
Self-talk	Forward	16	14.75	3.19	-1.42	27	.84	-1.71	1.21
	Backline	13	16.46	3.28					
Imagery	Forward	16	14.25	2.3	-1.29	27	.53	-1.29	1.00
	Backline	13	15.54	3.1					
Attention control	Forward	16	12.94	1.98	-.87	27	.90	-.68	.78
	Backline	13	13.62	2.22					
Activation	Forward	16	12.69	1.92	-1.32	27	.42	-1.01	.76
	Backline	13	13.69	2.18					

(*significant at p<0.05)

Table-2. Independent t-test for different position on the pitch between forward and backline among Malaysian national rugby players for performance strategies during competition condition

Variable	Position	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p-value	Mean difference	Std. Error difference
Goal setting	Forward	16	15.36	3.26	-1.16	27	.33	-1.13	1.13
	Backline	13	16.70	2.72					
Emotional control	Forward	16	11.63	2.78	-.81	27	.99	-.84	1.03
	Backline	13	12.46	2.76					
Automaticity	Forward	16	14.44	2.83	-.93	27	-.89	-1.02	1.11
	Backline	13	15.46	3.13					
Relaxation	Forward	16	10.44	2.46	1.11	27	.48	1.13	1.03
	Backline	13	11.15	3.07					
Self-talk	Forward	16	14.94	2.77	-.69	27	.69	-.76	1.09
	Backline	13	15.69	3.12					
Imagery	Forward	16	13.31	2.75	-2.00	27	.96	-2.07	1.04
	Backline	13	15.38	2.81					
Negative thinking	Forward	16	10.75	2.46	1.11	27	.48	1.13	1.03
	Backline	13	9.62	3.07					
Activation	Forward	16	15.31	2.85	.01	27	.74	.01	1.03
	Backline	13	15.31	2.63					

(*significant at p<0.05)

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to obtain the psychological performance strategies used by Malaysian national rugby players in practice and competition condition during Asian 5 Nations Rugby Tournament 2015. Independent sample t test was conducted to determine if any significant differences existed between forward and backline in terms of the performance strategies used during practice and competition conditions. The findings revealed that certain positions on the pitch showed differences in the performance strategies used by forward and backline only during the practice condition. For example, compared to forward positions, backline positions used more emotional control strategies during practice. According to Pensgaard and Roberts (2003) emotion-focused coping strategies are aimed to diminish undesirable physical and emotional arousal. These strategies incorporate systems, for example, mental and behavioural withdrawal, refusal, or acknowledgment. The players in forward positions were also found to use less emotional control to maintain their aggressive nature of play on the field. As mentioned by D'Urso *et al.* (2002) the emotional changes of rugby players depend on their teammates and team oppositions before the actual match. More importantly, the present study found that the performance strategies were equally used by both positions (backline and forward) to win the game as well as to play as a team. Correspondingly, one previous study found no difference of pre-competitive anxieties in rugby positions between backs and forwards before competition (Mazlan and Afizan, 2016).

Further research should include strategies in more than one investigation and comparisons between other professional teams or national teams, i.e., matches during the whole season should be conducted too. The present findings, hopefully, will help coaches and sports psychologist to design more effective psychological skills training that include cognitive coping strategies, self-talk, relaxation, imagery, and thought control to deal with stress and anxiety rather than focusing merely on technical and tactical aspects of a game, For example, the PIM training programme helps to improve the psychological variables and skills performance of the athletes (Mazlan, 2015;2016; Mazlan, 2016; Nur and Mazlan, 2016). It is of utmost importance for sport psychologists to design their mental training programme with specific and attainable goals that can fulfil a team's requirements.

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