

## **THE COGNITIVE COMPONENT OF COMPETITIVE STATE ANXIETY IN SEMI PROFESSIONAL SOCCER: A CASE STUDY†**

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### **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 debilitating. 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**

*Yarışma durum kaygısının performansın üzerine etkisi söz konusudur. Bu çalışmada yarışma durum kaygısının bilişsel ögesi yarı profesyonel bir futbolcu olgusunda niteliksel olarak irdelenmektedir. Veriler beş aşamalı bir sorgulama yöntemiyle toplandı. İçerik analiziyle veriler gruplandırılıp irdelendi. Katılımcı bazı bilgileri pozitif ve kolaylaştırıcı, bazılarını negatif ve zorlaştırıcı olarak algulayıp bu sonuçular ile başa çıkma stratejileri geliştirmişti. Analiz maç öncesi düşünce şekilleri için altı ayrı evre ortaya koydu. Ancak katılımcı bu düşünce şekillerinin yoğunluğu hakkında bğıntı ortaya koymadı.*

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

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## **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.

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

## **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.

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