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PRE-COMPETITION PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE OF ATHLETES (PRE-COMPETITION PSYCHOLOGY)

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ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the study of athletes' psychological state before competition, particularly pre-competition anxiety, emotional state, cognitive appraisal processes, and coping mechanisms. Pre-competition psychology is considered as a factor that directly affects athletic performance. Research findings indicate that moderate levels of anxiety, when properly managed, become facilitative by improving focus and increasing motivation, whereas excessive anxiety negatively impacts results. The article discusses types of anxiety, differences by gender and experience, the most effective psychological preparation methods, and practical recommendations for coaches.

Keywords

pre-competition anxiety, sport psychology, emotional regulation, cognitive appraisal, pre-performance routine, self-efficacy, mental toughness, athletic performance, psychological preparation

INTRODUCTION

Success in any competition requires an athlete to be highly prepared not only physically but also psychologically. According to many coaches and sports scientists, among two athletes with identical physical preparation, the one who performs better in competition is usually stronger mentally.

Pre-competition psychology studies the internal state an athlete experiences in the days, hours, or even minutes leading up to a competition. This state includes: • Level of anxiety and fear • Self-confidence and motivation • Ability to concentrate • Capacity to regulate emotional state

Numerous recent studies have shown that completely eliminating pre-competition anxiety is neither necessary nor desirable – properly directing and managing it can significantly improve athletic performance.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF PRE-COMPETITION ANXIETY

The theoretical foundations of pre-competition anxiety were established in the mid-20th century, beginning with the Yerkes-Dodson Law (1908). According to this law, there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between anxiety level and performance: low anxiety leads to low motivation, moderate anxiety produces optimal performance, and high anxiety causes performance decline. However, modern research has expanded this model, emphasizing that anxiety should be evaluated not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.

According to Multidimensional Anxiety Theory (Martens et al., 1990), anxiety manifests in two main forms:

1. **Cognitive Anxiety**
   - Related to the athlete's internal thoughts: “What if I lose?”, “Everyone will see my mistakes”, “I'm not ready”.

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- Theoretically, cognitive anxiety disrupts attention and complicates decision-making processes. Studies show that this type of anxiety is typically higher in individual sports (e.g., gymnastics, athletics), where responsibility lies entirely with the athlete.

2. **Somatic (Physiological) Anxiety**

- Physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling hands, shortness of breath, and muscle tension.
- Theoretically, somatic anxiety results from activation of the sympathetic nervous system and leads to adrenaline release. Some athletes perceive this state as an "energy surge" and use it to their advantage, while inexperienced athletes experience it as a hindrance.

Anxiety levels are influenced by the following factors:

- **Type of Sport**: Higher in individual sports due to limited social support; lower in team sports because of group relationships.
- **Gender**: Women tend to report higher cognitive anxiety, while men experience more somatic anxiety. This is associated with social stereotypes and upbringing.
- **Age**: Adolescents and young athletes (14–18 years) show higher anxiety levels due to strong self-evaluation and fear of failure.
- **Experience**: Experienced athletes learn to interpret anxiety as "energy", while novices perceive it as an obstacle.
- **Cultural and Ethnic Differences**: In some cultures (e.g., East Asia), collective approaches reduce anxiety; in Western cultures, individual pressure is higher.

According to Catastrophe Theory (Hardy, 1990), when high anxiety combines with high cognitive pressure, performance drops sharply ("catastrophe"). This theory has been confirmed in numerous empirical studies and helps predict athletes' pre-competition states.

COGNITIVE APPRAISAL THEORY AND EMOTIONAL STATE

Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) is one of the central theories in pre-competition psychology. According to the theory, an athlete evaluates the competition through "primary appraisal" (threat or challenge) and "secondary appraisal" (can I cope with this?).

- If the competition is perceived as a "major threat", anxiety becomes debilitating and negative emotions (fear, panic) dominate.
- If perceived as "my opportunity", anxiety becomes facilitative and positive emotions (excitement, interest) intensify.

Theoretically, emotional state is explained by the Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) model (Hanin, 2000), according to which each athlete has a unique optimal emotional zone. For example, high excitement may be optimal for one athlete, while calmness is required for another.

Athletes who consistently achieve the best results typically report the following emotions:

- **Excitement and Interest**: The most common positive state; enhances focus and motivation.
- **Confidence and Self-Belief**: According to Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977), this emotion increases belief in one's abilities and reduces anxiety.
- **Pride and Self-Respect**: These emotions remind the athlete of past successes and strengthen mental toughness.

Among negative emotions, the most common are:

- Dejection: Negative thoughts about the outcome intensify.
- Anger: Often leads to loss of control.
- Fear and Panic: Amplifies somatic anxiety and disrupts actions.

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Theoretically, according to Gross's Emotional Regulation model (1998), athletes can manage emotions proactively, for example, by reappraising negative thoughts into positive ones.

MOST EFFECTIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION METHODS

№	Method Name	Main Purpose	Effectiveness Level	Timing of Application
1	Pre-performance routine (PPR)	Focuses attention, creates automatism	Very high	30–90 minutes before competition
2	Positive self-talk	Increases self-confidence	High	Regularly + before competition
3	Visualization	Imagining successful actions	High	Evening and before competition
4	Breathing techniques	Quickly reduces somatic anxiety	Medium-high	Anytime, especially pre-competition
5	Progressive muscle relaxation	Relieves muscle tension	Medium	1–2 hours before competition
6	Mindfulness / present-moment focus	Controls thoughts, reduces panic	Medium-high	As regular practice
7	Attentional Bias Modification	Shifts attention away from threatening thoughts	High (digital format)	Via computer/mobile

The most effective method among them is the pre-performance routine (PPR). This is a consistent sequence of actions an athlete performs before every competition (e.g.: breathing → stretching → positive self-talk → visualization → specific movement).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

To improve pre-competition psychological state, the following steps are recommended:

1. Develop and consistently repeat a personal pre-performance routine for each athlete
2. Teach athletes to reframe anxiety from “threat” to “energy” and “opportunity”
3. Conduct regular psychological exercises aimed at increasing self-confidence
4. Introduce special psychological preparation programs for young athletes
5. Establish close cooperation between coach and sport psychologist
6. Prevent “overthinking” on competition days by focusing attention on the process

In conclusion, pre-competition psychology has become an integral part of modern sport. No matter how perfect the physical preparation is, if an athlete is not mentally ready, achieving the highest results becomes very difficult. Therefore, today every serious athlete and coach must pay special attention to psychological preparation.

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