

Article

Competitive Anxiety in Young Basketball Players from the Real Madrid Foundation

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Received: 29 March 2020; Accepted: 27 April 2020; Published: 29 April 2020



Abstract: Competition during the sports training process should aid young athletes' overall development. The aim of this study was to ascertain the levels of competitive anxiety in athletes who practice basketball at the Real Madrid Foundation (RMF)'s Social-Sports Schools, and to analyze whether any differences exist in regard to anxiety in the various subscales that take into account gender, participation in the RMF's internal competitions, and basketball modalities (mini basketball/basketball). The study sample consisted of 320 players (224 boys and 96 girls) belonging to the following different age groups: 8–9-year-olds, 10–11-year-olds, 12–13-year-olds, and 14–15-year-olds ($M = 10.54$; $SD = 1.92$). The Sport Anxiety Scale-2 (SAS-2) was used in the version translated and validated in Spanish. It was found that the athletes displayed low levels of competitive anxiety in all three subscales. No significant differences were observed between the genders, nor between basketball modalities (mini basketball/basketball). Finally, a positive correlation was observed between the various subscales.

Keywords: cognitive anxiety; somatic anxiety; sports training; multidimensional theory of anxiety

1. Introduction

It has been demonstrated that sport brings benefits at the physical, emotional, social [1], and psychological levels. Furthermore, when properly planned, it can positively influence the mental well-being of young people [2] and reduce anxiety, among other things [3]. However, it is important to know that sport at early ages can have both positive and negative psychosocial effects, so the structure of the sporting context plays a very important role [4]. In fact, structured sports programs (e.g., with physical space, trained staff, funding, and community partnerships) have been shown to positively promote the psychosocial development of young people [5,6].

It is well known that sport, as a social phenomenon, implies competition, which must be understood as an important and essential element to contribute to the integral development of young sportsmen and women [7,8]. Some studies affirm that a competitive model in accordance with the characteristics of the formative sports context will be an instrument that generates motivation, satisfaction, commitment, and adherence to sport, as well as favouring the personal and social development of the individual [9,10]. However, competition is not free of negative connotations due to its selective and discriminatory nature, whether on the basis of gender or level of motor skills. In this

sense, some aspects of the traditional competitive model of the adult are transferred to the competitions of young people, generating low self-esteem in athletes with fewer sporting expectations, diminishing their participation and even causing episodes of stress, anxiety, or depression [11]. In this line, some researches underline the excessive importance given to competition at early ages [12–14], sometimes causing exclusion depending on the level of ability of the sportsman or woman, thus transmitting values that are far from those intended in education [15].

On the other hand, competition has been studied from different points of view, among which the most important is that of predicting the state of anxiety of the athlete and its relationship with sports performance, although this relationship is controversial [16]. In this way, the concept of competitive anxiety has been defined as the emotional state of the athlete caused by the worry and tension of the moment. Traditionally, this concept has been conceived as a negative emotional response of the subject to the competitive context [17], which has been questioned from the field of sports psychology [18]. Today, it is clear that the intensity or level of anxiety perceived by a person at a given time will depend on how the individual perceives that stress-generating situation [19]. Nevertheless, not all subjects will have the same degree of anxiety at any given time, nor will the same subject always show the same degree of anxiety in similar situations. Therefore, Spielberger [20] considers it necessary to differentiate between anxiety as an emotional state and anxiety as a personality trait. This author explains that state anxiety is characterized as an immediate emotional state which is modified according to the situation. In contrast, trait anxiety is a relatively stable personality characteristic over time and independent of different situations. However, although trait anxiety varies little, it will be influenced by how often an athlete experiences increases in anxiety [21].

Today, since competitive anxiety is a relevant concern, there are studies that analyse how it influences, at a cognitive and somatic level, in young athletes [22]. It seems clear that inappropriate approaches to competition at an early age can lead athletes to mental situations of anxiety and stress [21,23–25]. Anxiety has also been associated with decreased enjoyment of participation [26] and with an important predictor of sports abandonment [27]. Furthermore, it should be noted that the degree of anxiety perceived by the sportsperson will be determined by many aspects, including the experience and level of the sportsperson [28], the type of sport [29], the environment and model of sporting learning [30], the climate generated by coaches, and other agents surrounding the sportsperson [19]. Research has linked competitive anxiety to the gender and age of the subject. In this regard, studies indicate that women have higher levels of competitive anxiety compared to men [31]. On the other hand, Grossbard et al. [27], in their study with young people between 9 and 14 years old, in team sports, detected that girls had significantly higher levels of concern than boys, while boys showed higher levels of lack of concentration than girls. The age of the athletes is also shown as another differentiating factor. In this sense, Grossbard et al. [27] found that cadet athletes (15–16 years old) showed higher levels of anxiety than those in the lower categories.

In sports competition, in addition to the characteristics of the subject, other aspects such as the attitude of the spectators or the intervention of the coaches have an influence. The behaviour of these socialising agents conditions the behaviour and feelings of young people during competition itself and can even predispose athletes to future negative feelings. In this regard, Kaye et al. [32] studied the relationship between the goals that parents had in relation to the performance of their children, showing a direct correlation between those parents with unrealistic goals and the competitive anxiety experienced in their children. In this way, Omli and LaVoi [33] found that children prefer parents to act as supporters rather than coaches or fans. On the other hand, according to Goldstein and Iso-Ahola [34], many parents behave inappropriately because they believe their children should make a greater effort, as they have dedicated considerable time and resources to their children's sporting careers. The performance of coaches and even the team's climate can have a negative influence on the sports experience of young people [35,36], generating even higher levels of anxiety [37].

Nowadays, there are new sports models that contribute to the promotion of values [38,39] and that seek, among other issues, to facilitate the reduction of competitive anxiety [40]. In this sense, the aims

of the present study were to find out the levels of competitive anxiety of the sportsmen and women who practice basketball in the Socio-Sports Schools of the Real Madrid Foundation (RMF), to analyse if there are differences in relation to anxiety in the different subscales, taking into account gender, and the basketball modalities (mini basketball/basketball) in which the sportsmen and women participate.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 320 male and female athletes from the RMF's Basketball Schools in the Region of Madrid, aged between 8 and 15 years ($M = 10.54$; $SD = 1.92$). The sample consisted of 224 boys (70%) and 96 girls (30%). As far as the various modalities are concerned, 222 (69.3%) mini basket (8–12 years old) mode and 98 (30.7%) to the basketball mode (12–16 years old).

2.2. Instrument

The Sport Anxiety Scale [41] measures trait anxiety and is understood to be a relatively stable characteristic of the individual's personality, and which refers to the subject's predisposition to respond with anxiety to situations perceived as threatening [42]. This instrument was created to measure the state of anxiety in the adult population. Ramis et al. [37] indicated the need for more functional and reliable instruments to measure anxiety in young athletes in a competitive environment during the sports training years. To achieve that, they created a version of SAS adapted to grassroots sports, the Sport Anxiety Scale-2 (SAS-2) [43]. This instrument measures the somatic anxiety, worry, and concentration disruption. To evaluate these variables, the Sport Anxiety Scale-2 (SAS-2) devised by Smith et al. [43] was used in the version adapted and validated in Spanish by Ramis et al. [37]. This questionnaire is used to assess anxiety that athletes experience when facing a competitive situation. It comprises 15 items divided into three subscales: somatic anxiety, performance anxiety, and concentration disruption anxiety. Participants mark the phrase "Before or while I play or compete...". Each item is answered on a 4-point Likert scale where 1 = not at all and 4 = a lot.

In regard to psychometric properties, with the sample group in this study, the SAS-2 questionnaire reached an overall reliability rate (Cronbach's Alpha) of 0.780. As far as each dimension is concerned, the outcomes were as follows: somatic anxiety, 0.703; worry, 0.784; and concentration disruption, 0.687.

2.3. Procedure

The research was conducted after the RMF's ethics review board had approved the study and the informed consent form had been signed by parents. Athletes playing basketball in the RMF's Social-Sports Schools during the 2018/2019 season participated voluntarily. Before we started to collect data, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were given guarantees that the information collected would remain confidential, as required by Organic Law 15/1999 of 13 December on the Protection of Personal Data. The questionnaires were administered in the presence of the coaches from the respective Social-Sports Schools once the objectives had been explained and any queries from the athletes were clarified.

The study subjects had spent at least one year playing basketball at the RMF's Social-Sports Schools. The competition program the players take part in has a number of specific features, among others, that need to be defined: competition at the RMF's Social-Sports Schools is considered a key element in the development of a sportsperson, and a series of premises and adjustments are included to make it as educational as possible. One of those adjustments is that both teams warm up together, matches are played without a referee, and it is the players themselves that point out any fouls committed during the game. Coaches act as advisers, making sure the teams participate properly and intervening only when they consider it necessary. In addition, in situations when the two teams are clearly unequal, the coaches may change the rules of the game to encourage the learning of basketball concepts. Coaches also intervene in the public if any spectator behaves inappropriately. Briefly, other changes to the rules

they may make could be to make mixed teams, or in mini basket, to bring the size of each team down to three players. The basketball categories have the figure of a player–referee, so one player from each team takes on the role of referee during the match. Furthermore, they have a white card, which is used to denote an especially good action by a player, and which also forms part of the reckoning of the final score for the match [7].

2.4. Statistical Analysis

Basic descriptive analysis of central tendency and dispersion for each of the dimensions were carried out. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used for normality, producing values Sig. < 0.05, so that nonparametric statistical analysis was performed. To determine if there were any significant differences in the independent variables (gender, participation, different competition), the Mann-Whitney *U* test was used. Then, the size of the effect was calculated by means of the probability of superiority (*PSest*), taking into account the interpretative standards of no effect ($PSest \leq 0.0$); small ($PSest \geq 0.56$); medium ($PSest \geq 0.64$); and great ($PSest \geq 0.71$) [44]. To determine whether there were any associations between the different dimensions, the Spearman correlation coefficient was used. The statistical software used was version 21.0 of SPSS.

3. Results

3.1. Assessment Based on Gender

The data showed that the dimension with the highest values was worry about performance, while somatic anxiety and concentration disruption anxiety remained at considerably lower levels. Looking at the differences between genders, the data was almost identical, so that no significant differences were found (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive data of dimensions and differences between genders.

	Total (n = 320)		Girls (n = 224)		Boys (n = 96)		Z	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Somatic Anx.	1.400	0.486	1.40	0.522	1.38	0.410	−0.703	0.482
Worry	2.432	0.766	2.433	0.777	2.443	0.755	−0.050	0.960
Concen. Disruption	1.657	0.540	1.654	0.531	1.670	0.568	−0.014	0.989

M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; Z, p = significance. Grouping variable: Gender.

3.2. Differences Based on The Different Competitions

No significant differences were found between the different competitions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive data and significant differences in dimensions per comparison of different competition.

	Mini Basket (n = 222)		Basketball (n = 98)		Z	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Somatic Anx.	1.37	0.482	1.46	0.491	−1.946	0.052
Worry	2.436	0.764	2.421	0.774	−0.312	0.755
Concen. Disruption	1.646	0.540	1.682	0.548	−0.559	0.576

M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; Z, p = significance. Grouping variable: Participation in RMF in-house competition days.

3.3. Correlations Between the Different Dimensions

Spearman's rank correlation showed a direct linear relationship between different dimensions. Somatic anxiety appeared positively correlated with the worry dimension ($r_s = 0.199, p > 0.001$), and with the concentration disruption dimension ($r_s = 0.320, p > 0.001$). Likewise, the worry dimension displayed correlation with the concentration disruption dimension ($r_s = 0.288, p > 0.001$) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Pearson correlations by dimensions.

		Somatic Anx.	Worry
Worry	Correl. Coeff.	0.199(**)	
	Signif.	0.000	
Concentration Disruption	Correl. Coeff.	0.320(**)	0.288(**)
	Signif.	0.000	0.000

** Correlation is significant at a level of 0.01 (bilateral).

4. Discussion

The results obtained showed that athletes from the RMF's Social-Sports Schools had low levels of competitive anxiety compared to data from other similar studies, both in research on basketball [22] and on other sports [45]. These low levels of anxiety may be produced by the characteristics of the RMF's competitive model, where we can find, for example, the adaptation of the regulation. These adaptations are designed in accordance with the sportsmen and women's maturity stage, and their purpose is to make sportsmen and women face sport and perceive that the sport's objectives are achievable, aspects pointed out by Trigueros et al. [46]. On the other hand, the victory is not presented as the main aim of the competition itself, since during the development of the games, coaches can modify rules in the game to promote the learning of basketball concepts or to compensate for large imbalances between the teams. In this sense, it can be said that the feeling of social comparison as a basis for success judgments is diminished so that the climate involved in the task is encouraged at all times, an aspect that favors the reduction of anxiety of athletes [43]. In addition, another issue that should be highlighted as a result of the decrease in anxiety among competitors is the possible intervention of coaches with respect to the public, an aspect that has been pointed out previously. This will condition a pleasant sports environment and climate for the children during the competition, on the part of the coaches and other agents surrounding the athlete [19,30]. Finally, reducing the number of players encourages participation in the game and possibly contributes to greater enjoyment of the game, which again is closely related to feelings of anxiety [26].

When comparing the three factors of anxiety analyzed, it was found that the athletes showed higher anxiety scores in the worry about performance subscale, while the dimensions somatic anxiety and concentration disruption anxiety remained at significantly lower levels. This coincides with the results obtained by Grossbard et al. [27], Pons et al. [22], and Ponseti et al. [45].

In respect of competitive anxiety taking gender into account, the data showed that no significant differences existed between boys and girls playing basketball in the RMF, probably because participation and competition is mixed in all categories. This is because the value of equality between boys and girls is promoted, and because the coaches are trained in this sense. On the contrary, studies carried out in traditional competitions where participants are segregated by gender do confirm such differences. In this regard, Patel et al. [31], who conducted a systematic review of research on anxiety symptoms in young athletes with special consideration in the case of female athletes, say that a greater prevalence towards anxiety exists among women. In the same sense, Arbinaga [47] observed that women displayed less somatic anxiety but did not find significant differences compared to men in the cognitive anxiety subscales. Grossbard et al. [27] present data reflecting that girls display a higher level in the worry factor, a statement corroborated by Ponseti et al. [45], while on the other hand, they report lower values for concentration dispersion compared to boys. Abrahamsen et al. [48], León-Prados et al. [49],

Modroño and Guillen [50], and Ponseti et al. [45] also detected that women return higher values than men in all dimensions.

On another note, various research papers have tried to ascertain what influence competitive anxiety has in respect of the athlete's age category. In this sense, on the basis of the data obtained in our study, no significant differences in anxiety were found in any of the subscales. Perhaps, these results can be explained by the fact that the adaptations made to the RMF competition program are similar in both categories, and they have the same aim: to use the competition as a means of training, as educational as possible, and not as an end. Nevertheless, the data differ again in other similar research, where a significant increase in competitive anxiety among the 12–13- and 14–15 years old categories in the subscales relating to cognitive aspects was seen [22]. Grossbard et al. [27] detected higher levels of competitive anxiety in players aged 12–14 years old compared to the 9–11-year-old group. According to Crocker et al. [51], the fact that anxiety increases in older groups may be because adolescents at that age tend to experience a greater quest for victory. In this regard, it is worth noting that research studies are not unanimous about the idea of anxiety being related to the player's age [51]. Pons et al. [22] detected that athletes competing at higher levels return higher scores in the worry subscale. Similarly, Pinto and Vázquez [52], in their study on golf players, point out that players with lower handicaps have higher levels of somatic anxiety. In contrast, Perry and Williams [53] state that athletes competing at higher levels display higher values of cognitive anxiety, while somatic anxiety does not appear to be related to the athlete's competitive level. In light of the above, a comparison of athletes' anxiety levels depending on the format of competition during the initiation stage in sport is considered essential, since no research of this kind is currently available in the literature. Therefore, more research is needed. The results indicated a direct correlation between the three subscales, an aspect that also coincides with the studies by Pons et al. [22].

Finally, according to the above, it can be considered that the RMF's competition model is structured and organized according to the characteristics of the context and the stages of training of the athlete, which contributes to the sporting and personal development of young athletes. Research shows that these aspects can have a positive influence on the mental well-being of young athletes [2,6] and in the reduction of mental anxiety situations [3,21,23–25].

The main limitation of the study could be that not many papers have been found that investigate anxiety during sport in young athletes, and with which to discuss the data obtained. Another important limitation is the lack of control of relevant contextual variables.

Further studies are needed to increase the quality of evidence to clarify how anxiety affects young athletes. In this sense, future research could also examine the teaching and learning processes implemented in different sports models and their influence on player anxiety.

The main practical application of this study refers to the fact that a model focused on sports training and the development of educational values, where competition loses relevance, can be a valid alternative to reduce the anxiety of young athletes. These findings could be useful for teachers, coaches, managers, and sports leaders.

5. Conclusions

Athletes from the RMF's Social-Sports Schools display low levels of competitive anxiety in all three subscales. The dimension that returns the highest values is the one related to worry about performance, while the dimensions somatic anxiety and concentration disruption achieve considerably lower levels. There were no significant differences in respect of athletes' gender or between basketball modalities (mini basketball/basketball). Finally, positive correlation was found between the different subscales.

Based on this data, we can state that the sports-educational model implemented at the RMF contributes to young athletes experiencing low levels of anxiety in the face of a competitive situation.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, G.O.V., J.R.R., F.J.G.F.-G. and J.F.M.; methodology, J.R.R., F.J.G.F.-G. and M.T.A.R.; formal analysis, A.C.J.S. and L.J.D.G.; resources, A.C.J.S. and L.J.D.G.; data curation, J.R.R., F.J.G.F.-G. and M.T.A.R.; writing—original draft preparation, J.R.R. and F.J.G.F.-G.; writing—review and editing, G.O.V. and

J.F.M.; supervision, J.R.R., M.T.A.R. and F.J.G.F.-G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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