STUDY REGARDING THE LEVEL OF PRE-COMPETITIVE ANXIETY IN YOUNG FOOTBALL PLAYERS

**Daniel NICOLAE, Sorin ALBEANU, Marian DRAGOMIR, Daniel CIOCĂNESCU,
Cătălin FORȚAN**
University of Craiova
Correspondence author: nicolae_dani@yahoo.com

Abstract: The purpose of the present study is to measure the level of pre-competitive anxiety in performance athletes, football players (n= 370), aged between 6 and 35 years, M = 13.81, AS= AS = 5.11. Among athletes, 20% have been playing football for less than a year, 19% have been playing football for 1-3 years, 21% have been playing football for 3-5 years, and 40% have been playing football for over five years. In this sense, a set of sociodemographic data was recorded (gender, age, level of education, duration of practicing sport, number of coaches, the perceived training level) and a Sports Competitive Anxiety Test was used to measure pre-competitive anxiety (SCAT - A). The conclusions we reached through the study were that the higher the perceived training level of the athletes, the lower the anxiety before the competitions.

Keywords: *football players, pre-competitive anxiety, perceived training level*.

Introduction

Children and juniors football training must take into account the somatic growth and psycho-motor development, and during the competition, the player must be aware of each movement and make a decision before the opponent executes one, each time (Barbu&Stoica, 2020).

One of the psychological factors believed to have an effect on performance in sports is the level of anxiety experienced before an athletic competition (Guillen & Sanchez, 2009). It is called pre-competition anxiety (PCA) and has a decisive role in the way in which the athlete manages to master his emotions and transform them into functional ones, which help him to successfully overcome the competitive moment and not turn everything into a failure (Lizuka et al., 2005). There are several factors that compete for the appearance and intensity of pre-competition anxiety, among them age, gender, duration of sports practice, intensity of training, the perceived training level and many others (Jowett et al., 2016, Myer et al., 2015). In order to counteract the negative effects of pre-competition anxiety, athletes must learn to manage their emotions in a constructive manner, allocate a longer time to training, value more the positive feedback received from the coaches (Stoeber, 2018). Also, coaches are indicated to identify the athletes who have a much higher level of pre-competition anxiety and to try to encourage them and put them in as many situations as possible in which they experience the situation of winners and success, so that the confidence in their strengths and self-esteem would become as higher as possible during the competition (Tashman, Tenenbaum & Eklund, 2010). Pre-competition anxiety can be responsible for canceling the entire training program of the athlete, regardless of how elaborate and long it was and how good the results the athlete recorded during it (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009). If the athlete, in the only moment when he is asked to demonstrate his abilities and performances,

fails to do so, then all the previous effort made is useless, and the confidence in what he can do is diminished. At the same time, the pleasure of playing and experiencing positive emotions decreases, which, in the end, only leads to the abandonment of performance sports (Vierimaa, Bruner & Côté, 2018). In the field of sports psychology, anxiety is defined as a persistent state of negative affect and fear (E. Cashmore, 2002). All these felt before the competition, can have the effect of breaking the performances of which the athlete could be capable of and lead him very far from the expected results (Nascimento et al., 2017).

Methods

The aim of the present study is to capture the relationships between certain sociodemographic variables of athletes and anxiety before competitions.

The objective of the study was to establish the relationships between the sociodemographic variables of the athletes (gender, age, level of education, duration of practicing the sport, number of coaches,

the perceived training level) and anxiety before competitions.

The starting hypothesis was the fact that the sociodemographic variables of athletes are significant predictors of anxiety before competitions.

Participants and procedure

370 athletes between the ages of 6 and 35 participated in the present study, M = 13.81, AS = 5.11, of which 304 male (82%) and 66 female (18%), 103 being in I-IV grades (27%), 129 in V-VIII grades (34%), 104 in IX-XII grades (28%) and 34 in college (11%). Of the total participants, 75 have been doing sports for less than a year (20%), 72 have been doing sports for 1-3 years (19%), 78 have been doing sports for 3-5 years (21%), and 143 have been doing sports for over five years (40%); 154 had only one coach (41%), 145 had 2-3 coaches (39%), and 68 had more than three coaches (20%). According to the perceived training level, 49 consider that their level needs improvement (13%), 140 consider that they have a good level (37%), and 181 consider that they have a very good level (50%).
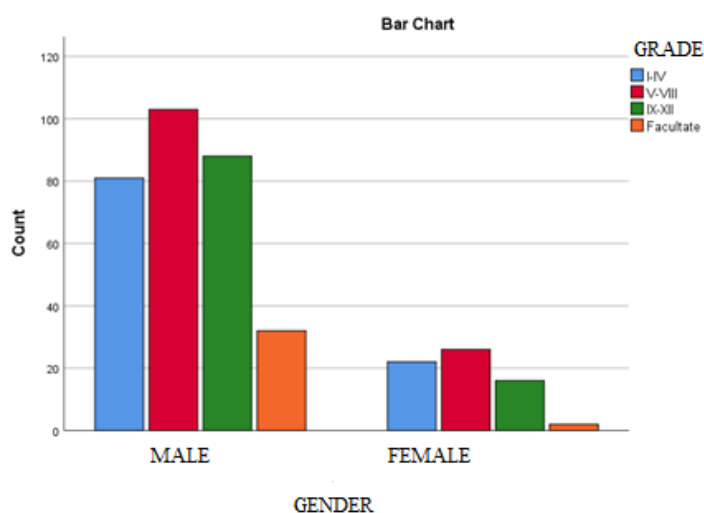

Figure 1. Graphic representation of the distribution of participants according to gender and level of education
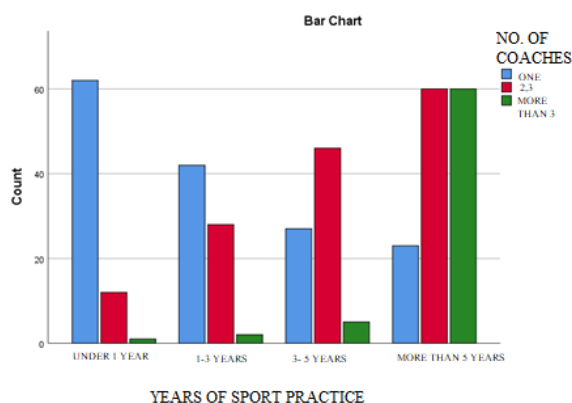
Figure 2. Graphical representation of the distribution of participants according to the duration of practicing the sport and the number of coaches
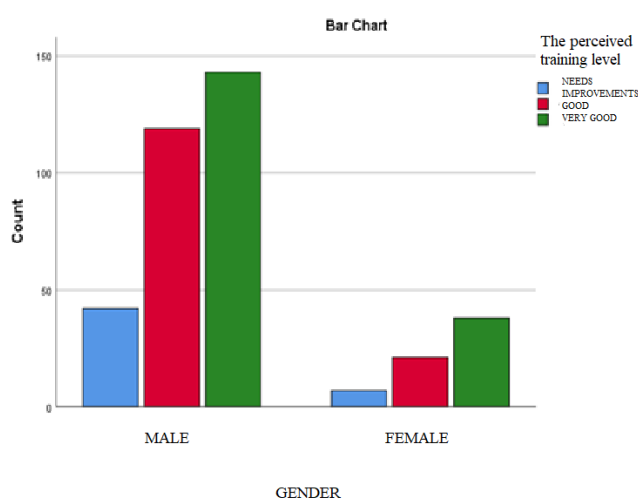

Figure 3. Graphic representation of the distribution of participants according to gender and the perceived training level

Participants were informed about the testing procedure. They responded positively to the invitation to participate in it, in a very large number (n= 370), and the application of the actual tests was carried out through google form.

Instruments
Sociodemographic data were measured based on a list of questions regarding age, gender, class (level of education), duration of sport practiced, number of coaches, the perceived training level.
Anxiety before competitions was measured with the SCAT – A (Sports Competitive Anxiety Test) questionnaire. SCAT is composed of 15 items and measures the trait dimension of pre-competition anxiety by asking questions about how the athlete generally feels in the moments before the competition. The total score can take values between 10-30 points. It has 15 items, of which 5 are insignificant - they are not taken into account (1,4,7,10,13), and 10 items are of interest (2,3,5,6,8,9,11,12,14 ,15). Example item: "Competing with others is pleasant".

Descriptive statistics

Mean scores, standard deviations, internal consistency coefficients, and Spearman correlations between variables are found in Table 1.

	M	AS	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	-	-	-	1							
2	13.81	5.11	-	-.09	1						
3	-	-	-	-.10	.85**	1					
4	-	-	-	-.04	.63**	.54**	1				
5	-	-	-	-.03	.61**	.57**	.58**	1			
6	-	-	-	.08	-.07	-.10	-.03	-.15**	1		
7	17.21	4.87	.86	.15**	-.01	-.06	.01	-.03	-.10	1	

** . $p < .01$, * . $p < .05$.

1. Gender, 2. Age, 3. Class, 4. Duration of practicing the sport, 5. Number of coaches, 6. The perceived training level, 7. Competition anxiety

It is observed that the scores obtained by the participants on anxiety before competitions are relatively low, $M = 17.21$, $AS = 4.87$.

Skewness and kurtosis are not within the range (-2, 2), which reflects a skewed distribution of the data. This fact requires the use of non-parametric tests for statistical analyzes testing differences.

Inferential statistics

In order to organize the data and test the hypotheses, the statistical analysis program IBM.SPSS.25 (IBM Corp, 2016) was used.

I1. Sociodemographic variables of athletes are significant predictors of pre-competition anxiety.

In order to test this hypothesis, a multiple linear regression analysis was performed with the sociodemographic variables, gender, age, level of education, the duration of practicing the sport, the number of coaches, the perceived training level and as the dependent variable the anxiety before the competitions as predictors.

Table 2. Multiple linear regression analysis for sociodemographic variables as predictors of pre-competition anxiety

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	B	ES	β	t	Sig.
Gender	1.87	.66	.15	2.84	.01
Age	.09	.08	.09	1.14	.26
Grade	-.71	.42	-.14	-1.72	.09
Duration of practicing sports	.31	.28	.08	1.12	.26
The number of coaches	-.35	.45	-.05	-.78	.44
The perceived training level	-.87	.36	-.13	-2.44	.02

$R^2 = .05$

It is observed that sociodemographic variables are responsible for 5% of the variation of anxiety before competitions, the regression equation being statistically significant, $F(6, 361) = 2.92$, $p < .05$. Among the six predictors, only two are significantly associated with anxiety before competitions, namely gender, in a positive sense, $\beta = .15$, $t(370) = 2.84$, $p < .05$ and the perceived training level, in a negative sense, $\beta = -.13$, $t(370) = -2.44$, $p < .05$.

Considering this result, we can say that the hypothesis is partially supported by the analyzed data.

Conclusions

Among the athletes who took part in the study, 49 consider that their level of physical preparation needs improvement (13%), 140 consider that they have a good level (37%), and 181 consider that they have a very good level of physical preparation (50 %). Anxiety, both pre- and post-competition, has been investigated quite a lot, due to the effects it has on athletes' performances, in competitive moments (Cheng & Hardy, 2016). Another research carried out on 144 young footballers (M age = 16.41 years, SD = 1.48) measured perfectionism, pre-competition anxiety and optimism 24 hours before an important competition (Dunn et al., 2020). Results indicated that athletes' pre-competitive mindset (as reflected by the degree to which athletes worry and feel optimistic) appears to be associated with athletes' perfectionistic orientations in sport. Pre- and post-competitive anxiety was also studied on a group of young tennis players (Martínez-Gallego et. al., 2022), with a M age= 13.74. The results revealed much higher levels of anxiety in girls, in terms of state and somatic anxiety, than in boys. No differences were identified regarding trait anxiety, cognitive anxiety and self-confidence, before the matches, neither in boys nor in girls. Another study proposed to measure pre-competition anxiety and self-confidence in the case of junior athletes (n= 35) and senior athletes (n= 50) and to compare the levels of anxiety in both groups (Serrano et al., 2019). Although there were differences between the

two groups regarding the level of anxiety, they were not significant, but regarding the level of self-confidence, it is much higher in the case of senior players. Kačúr (2016) conducted an experimental study, with a training program focused on communication, for 10 coaches and 160 performance athletes regarding the level of pre-competition anxiety and self-confidence of the athletes and the communication style of the coaches. The experiment was a success, and after 3 months, the anxiety levels of the athletes in the control group were much lower in intensity. Another study carried out on 112 football players between the ages of 16 and 24, analyzed pre-, post- and competition anxiety, predisposition to guilt and shame and the athletes' personality types (Kaplánová, 2021). The conclusions of the study were that football players with D-type personality are more afraid of failures in sports (guilt), somatize much more often and have much higher anxiety compared to athletes with other personality types. Another study carried out on 540 players and 60 futsal coaches studied the relationship between pre-competition anxiety and their performance, and the associations found were only negative (Mottaghi, Atarodi & Rohani, 2013). Of course, all studies converge to the conclusion that mental preparation for the competition is extremely important in achieving sports performance. Even among top athletes, this training is more and more present, it is also essential at the junior level because the mentality of a champion is then formed.

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