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THE EFFECT OF THE COACH'S ABSENCE ON THE BEHAVIOUR
AND PERFORMANCE OF YOUNG ATHLETES IN AN IMPORTANT
COMPETITION IN INDIVIDUAL SPORTS

THEOPHILOS PILIANIDIS^{*}, NIKOLAOS MANTZOURANIS^{**},
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify whether the coach's absence could affect the young athletes' behaviour and performance in an important competition in individual sports. The athlete's version of the CARE Questionnaire was translated in the Greek language and completed by 100 athletes aged 14.9±1.1yrs who participated in the activities of Taekwondo, swimming, tennis and athletics. The varimax rotation of the principal component analysis gives 6 factors with eigen values greater than one. Conclusively, the coach's absence from an important competition affects negatively the young athletes' pre-competitive behaviour and it influences their performance in individual sports.

Keywords: Adolescence; communication; performance; feedback.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed that the job of the coach is to help athletes achieve their best possible level of performance. In a variety of athletic activities, the coach is an important factor preparing the athletes to win their competition. The effectiveness of the coach must be characterized by providing feedback, high-levels of corrections and reinstruction aiding the athlete to formulate productive and realistic reasons for success or failure, reasons that may later result in optimum performance (Doag and McAuley, 1992). Furthermore, it is commonly observed that the coach has a substantial impact on the athlete's behaviour, while the importance of the coach's presence in a significant competition is greater if the athlete is young with poor competitive experience (Barnett, Smoll, Smith, 1992, Petlichcoff, 1993).

A number of behavioral analysis studies have investigated the role of the coach in the athlete's competition in a variety of physical activities (Marger and Raglin, 1994; Duda, 1996; Jowett and Clark-Carter, 2006). Because of the fact that the most

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essential object of competition is winning, the athletes must be able to release both psychic and physical energy in order to succeed (Hall and Kerr, 1997; Adie, Duda, Ntoumanis 2008). In individual sports, the role of the coach is complicated, complex, crucial and similar to that of a business manager - both are reproducible for obtaining results through the effort of other people. A lot of coaches act like psychologists, attempting to improve performances by "psyching up" the participants. Also coaches want their athletes to be successful, regardless how they might measure success, and they want to manage their athletes' activities towards the achievement of success (Prendergast, 1994).

Furthermore, the coach-athlete relationship is a two-way voyage of exploration. Coaches are not merely people who provide training schedules, practice programs and motivation to their athletes before competition or assessors of worth. In particular, the coach-athlete relationship has shown to affect a young athlete's level of self-regard and his/her willingness to continue in sport (Ntoumanis and Biddle, 1998). The coach-athlete communication network fluctuates among the four types of stimuli (verbal, vocal, physical and situational) and it may be transmitted and received by the coach and athlete according to the level of their intercommunication which may range from novice to top-level athletes. In the well experienced athletes the relationship and the co-operation between the coach and the competitor is based on norms, reality and professionalism (Iso-Ahola, 1995).

The qualitative dimension of the coach-athlete relationship is based on factors like respect and trust in each other as well as in a good and clear communication between them. It is important for the coach to understand that young athletes are not simply little adults and that the methods which are appropriate in coaching senior athletes may not be the best for youngsters. In the last 20 years the importance of the coach's presence in an important competition in individual sports, has been surprisingly little assessed. The purpose of the present study was to identify whether the coach-athlete interpersonal relationship could affect the individual sports athlete's competitive performance when their coach was absent. Additionally, this study prospectively attempted to determine whether the coach's absence could affect psychologically the young athlete's behaviour before an important competition.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Instrument

In the present study, a modified questionnaire was applied in order to evaluate the changes which may occur in young athletes' pre-competitive behaviour and competitive performance when their coach was not present (Appendix) and it was based on the *Coach-Athlete Relationship Evaluation Questionnaire-CARE-Q* (Jowett and Ntoumanis, 2004). The research instrument (athlete version) was translated (back

to back procedures) in the Greek language by two expert professionals. In general, the questionnaire's sub-scales explored: general information for the participants' training background, the coach-athlete interpersonal relationship and the effects of the coach's absence on the participants' behaviour and performance before and during an important competition. The reliability analysis which was applied exhibited a satisfactory internal consistency for all the subscales of the instrument (Mantzouranis and Marigli, 2004). The 30-item questionnaire (Greek version) had a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "always" (1) to "never" (5) and assessed whether the changes in the psychological factors of insecurity, fear of failure, self-confidence, pre-competition stress, self-control and aggressiveness affect the competitive performance of participants in the individual sports of taekwondo, swimming, athletics and tennis.

2.2. Participants

The sample was comprised of 100 participants with a mean age of 14.9 ± 1.1 yrs. All of them were boys, high -school students and athletes in Cypriot Clubs of taekwondo (n=26), swimming (n=28), athletics (n=21) and tennis (n=25). The selection of this study's participants was based on the criteria of: i) the National or District performance level but not high experienced athletes, and ii) the coach-athlete relationship of at least 12 months.

2.3. Data collection

The participants were instructed to complete anonymously the study questionnaire according to their competitive background, recalling their most recent participation behaviour and performance in an important competition with the absence of their coaches. The athletes were requested to fill in the questionnaire without being given any explanation or additional details as to the research purpose, while the participants' coaches were fully informed for the objectives of the study. The athletes completed the questionnaire prior to their coaches' arrival in the evening training session because the researcher wanted to avoid the possibility of influence from their coaches' presence during the completion of the instrument. After the questionnaire's filling, a discussion took place with the study's participants, coaches and their parents who were escorting the athletes. The data collection of this research was held during the competition period of 2011 (1-30 July) in athletes of taekwondo, athletics, swimming and tennis clubs in Nicosia, Cyprus.

2.4. Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics with cross-tabulation was firstly generated for all questionnaire items. From the exploratory factor analysis, the sampling adequacy

(Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin) and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were firstly evaluated. The construct validity of the instrument was assessed by applying the principal component analysis. The non-parametric Krustal-Wallis analysis of variance was applied in order to assess the differences in the questionnaire's subscales of coach-athlete inter-relationship, athletes' behaviour and performance in an important competition with their coach absent in relation to each one of the individual sports (grouping variables). In addition, the independent samples Mann-Whitney U test was used in order to identify the inter sports differences in research instrument items. All statistical analyses were carried out by employing the SPSS-PASW software, version 18.0 for Windows, (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL).

3. RESULTS

The cross tabulation procedures illustrated general information regarding the participants' training and competition background in relation to each individual sport (Table 1).

TABLE 1: THE PARTICIPANTS' GENERAL INFORMATION REGARDING THEIR TRAINING BACKGROUND IN RELATION TO ATHLETIC ACTIVITIES (%)

		Taekwondo	Swimming	Athletics	Tennis
Items		Frequencies (%)			
Athlete's level	<i>National</i>	45	57.1	71.4	0
	<i>District</i>	35	25	4.8	36
	<i>Local</i>	20	17.9	23.8	64
Training experience	< 3yrs	0	0	14.3	0
	3-4yrs	10	0	0	52
	> 4yrs	90	100	85.7	48
Competition experience	< 1yr	3.8	32.1	19	32
	1-2yrs	23.1	42.9	14.3	28
	3-4yrs	11.5	10.7	38.1	0
	> 4yrs	61.5	14.3	28.6	60

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Important competitions	> 20	3.8	35.7	28.6	28
	19-12	0	7.2	4.8	12
	11-6	23.1	25	23.8	8
	5-1	73.1	32.1	42.9	52
Recent competitions	> 10	3.8	35.7	66.7	0
	5-9	3.8	14.3	4.8	28
	< 4	92.3	50	28.6	72

Source: Cross-tabulation statistics of the instrument items.

The varimax rotation offers six (6) factors with eigenvalues greater than one. The first factor was responsible for the 34.7% of the total variance and included 4 participants' behaviour items: "precompetitive stress - lose of self-control - insecurity-fear of failure" and 3 items related to the athletes' competitive performance: "participation with coach absent - fear of injury - advices & feedback". The second factor interpreted the 10.6% of the total variance influencing 4 variables which were strongly related to the subscale of the inter-personal coach-athlete relationship: "athlete's disappointment from the coach's absence - encouragement and discussion before the competition". Table 2 presents the questionnaire items with eigenvalues greater than one.

The Krustall-Wallis analysis revealed that the athletes differ according to the individual sports participation (taekwondo, swimming, athletics and tennis) in an important competition only in four items. Specifically, the reported items with statistical significance in the studied young athletes were: the importance of the coach presence ($\chi^2=12.61$, $df=3$, $p<0.05$), the athlete's belief that his/her performance is coach driven ($\chi^2=7.81$, $df=3$, $p<0.05$), the coach's pressure on the athlete to win ($\chi^2=13.88$, $df=3$, $p<0.05$) and the lack of the coach's advice to the athlete ($\chi^2=37.41$, $df=3$, $p<0.001$). The Mann-Whitney analysis presented that the coach presence in an important competition is more demanding in swimming and athletics. Furthermore, the coach-athlete relationships in relation to the competitive performance as well as the great pressure of the coach to his/her athlete to win were strongly related only with the sports of tennis and athletics. Finally, athletics reported to be the most demanding in relation to the other individual sports (taekwondo, swimming and tennis) regarding the importance of the coach' advice in a significant competition.

TABLE 2: THE REVEALED COMPONENT EXTRACTED FROM THE INSTRUMENT'S VARIMAX ROTATION OF THE PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS

Items	Component					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Athlete's fear of injury	.976					
Participation with coach absent	-.971					
Athlete's stress in competition	.959					
Athlete's competitive performance	.956					
Athlete's fear of failure	.949					
Athlete's insecurity in competition	.942					
Athlete's loss of self-control	.937					
Athlete's taking risks in competition	.914					
Importance of coach presence	.531					
Athlete's encouragement in competition		.821				
Lack of coach advice in competition		.780				
Coach-athlete conversation level		.545				
Athlete's disappointment in competition		.422				
Athlete's training experience			-.793			
Athlete's enjoyment of participation			.656			
Coach-athlete relationship & performance			.471			
Coach's pressure on the athlete to win				.796		
Coach's advice in competition				.617		
Replace coach (who)				.528		
Coach-athlete interpersonal relationship					.783	
Importance of competition					.713	
Athlete's coached years						.725
Athlete's performance level						-.661

Source: the component matrix of the factor analysis.

4. DISCUSSION

The sports participants' behaviour and its effect on the performance are widely examined over the last four decades. Especially, young athletes' participation in competitive sports is believed to foster acquisition of a variety of positive physical and physiological attributes, including fitness, responsibility and autonomy, morality and social skills (Feltz, 1986; Ntoumanis, Taylor, Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2012). In addition, it is generally agreed that the role of the coach is to prepare the athlete for the competition, especially the novice sport participants. The young athlete's behaviour and performance in an important competition with his/her coach's absence is strongly related to the quality of the coach-athlete interpersonal relationship. Coaches typically adopt either a positive or a negative approach when establishing relationships with their performers and the young athletes respond well to coaches who are open, friendly and encouraging (Mageau and Vallerand 2003; Lafrenière et al., 2008).

According to the findings of the current study, the coach's absence from their athletes' important competition affects negatively the athletes' behaviour and this may result in a notable reduction in the young competitors' performance. More specifically, due to the lack of the coaches' technical corrections the athlete may be overwhelmed with fear of failure or injury, loss of self-control, increase of insecurity and anxiety which make the athlete unable to create or take risks during an important competition. Furthermore, this study proved that the lack of the coach's encouragement affects the young athlete's performance during the competition. Similarly with the sport psychology literature, the feelings of insecurity and the loss of self-confidence are characterized by the perception that the studied athletes are not in control of what happens and the apprehension which accompanies the insecurity is always detrimental for the competitive performance in individual sports (Hardy, Parfitt, Pates, 1999; Ntoumanis and Biddle, 2000).

Regarding the differences among the young athletes in taekwondo, swimming, athletics and tennis, this study's findings showed that athletics seems to be the sport with the most negative effect on the athlete's pre-competition behaviour and competitive performance when their coach was absent. More specifically, the participants increase their aggressiveness level which results in denial and surrender phenomena during an important athletics competition. In accordance with the literature, the coach absence in an athletics competition leads to the disturbances in concentration and attention of the young athletes. The athletes may release both psychic and physical energy during a competition in athletics and take risks which come to contrast with their coach's advice affecting in a negative way their optimum competitive performance (Lauder, 1992; Spink, 1992; Prendergast, 1994).

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the clear inter-personal coach-athlete relationship is likely to harbour various feelings in individual sports. The coach who has a comprehensive understanding of his/her athletes' psychological structure and knowledge of the communication theory is better prepared to interact with them thus aids the athletes to achieve the particular goals they are striving for. The findings of this study justify that the coach absence in an important competition in individual sports leads to pre-competitive behaviour disturbances in young athletes which could differentiate the participant's success or failure in a significant competition. According to the nature of the sports, it was confirmed that athletics was the most demanding individual sport in relation to taekwondo, swimming and tennis while the coach's absence from an important competition was strongly related to both pre-competitive behaviour and competition performance of young athletes with poor training experiences in athletics.

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