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# The Mental Demands and Coping Strategies of Professional Motocross Riders: A Qualitative Investigation

Ashwin J. Patel

*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Ashwin J. Patel entitled "The Mental Demands and Coping Strategies of Professional Motocross Riders: A Qualitative Investigation." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.

Leslee A. Fisher, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Craig A. Wrisberg, Glenn C. Graber, Jeffrey T. Fairbrother

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Jeffrey T. Fairbrother

Acceptance for the council:

Anne Mayhew  
Vice Chancellor and Dean of  
Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

The Mental Demands and Coping Strategies of Professional Motocross Riders:  
A Qualitative Investigation

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Ashwin J. Patel

May 2006

## Dedication

This is dedicated to my father. Much of who I am and who I have become is based on the lessons you provided throughout my life: (a) to follow your heart and find a path that best suits you; (b) to persevere when obstacles are in your way; and (c) to cherish the individuals that help you along your journey. I can never thank you enough for encouraging me to follow my dream and supporting me when I needed you most. I am so fortunate to have you as my father. I love you.

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My time here at UT has been a life altering one. While the education that I received here was invaluable, it was the friendships developed and fostered that made this experience so rewarding: Noah, Mooch, Hick, Grimey, Taryn, Matt, Camille, Maus, Harrell, and Naje. I would especially like to thank Dr. Vanessa Shannon whose assistance during the writing and re-writing phases was so much appreciated.

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Last but not least I would like to thank my family. Anil, Alisha and Alexis, I know this process has not been the easiest one, but because of your support I have finally received my Ph.D. – my dorky goal since I was a kid. I know that leaving home to pursue

my post-graduate career under the circumstances that I did, was probably not done with the greatest tact. Regardless you demonstrated unquestioned love and support helped me work towards my goal of gaining my doctorate. I love you guys and look forward to having a celebratory pint in the near future.

## Abstract

Professional motocross is one of the most physically and mentally demanding of sports. Riders often have to simultaneously execute various motor and cognitive tasks while remaining in a calm and focused state. The only published study suggests that detailed pre-performance planning and mental rehearsal are essential when developing motocross athlete's performance (Collins, Doherty, & Talbot, 1993). While there has been a good deal of information regarding how elite athletes in other sports like figure skating (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993b), wrestling (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992), and the decathlon (Dale, 2000) deal with the mental demands of their sport, there has been no opportunity for motocross athletes to articulate the mental factors they experience both on and off the track. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth, comprehensive understanding of professional motocross riders' experience of the mental demands and coping strategies of their sport. More specifically, an attempt was made to gain a greater understanding of how professional motocross riders view the word "mental demands" as well as how this perspective influences their mindset during practice, competition, around teammates and friends and family. To achieve this purpose, the following questions guided the research: (a) what do they think are some of the mental demands related to being a professional motocross rider?; (b) at what times/when do they experience these mental demands?; and (c) how do they cope with the mental demands that they experience, both on and off the motocross track? Answers to these questions were obtained from seven professional motocross riders who participated in semi-structured interview sessions. Four themes were derived from the interpretive analysis dealing with the athletes' mental demands. They included: (a) the racing



environment; (b) the nature of the sport; (c) expectations; and (d) relationship with others.

Three themes representing coping strategies used by the professional motocross riders also emerged. They included: (a) thought control; (b) staying focused; and (c) emotional control. Discussion centered on the consistency of the results with the current sport literature. Finally, implications for sport psychology consultants, riders, and researchers are offered.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In June 2004, I was approached by a professional motocross rider who was interested in developing a better mental plan for the upcoming motocross season. I told him that I would like to help him, but explained that I knew nothing about the sport of motocross. He sat down with me and spent nearly three hours explaining the nuances of the sport; included were comments about the grueling training and traveling schedules, the physical grind of competing ten months a year, the technical and mental differences in competing in the indoor (supercross) versus outdoor (motocross) seasons, and the constant pressure to keep sponsors and team managers happy. I was intrigued by the sport and excited by the fact that he felt mental training could enhance his performance during the upcoming outdoor season.

During our initial conversations, he conveyed to me that after consistently producing top ten results during the previous two supercross seasons he was unable to even crack the top 20 during the current motocross season. This occurred despite the fact that he enjoyed the openness of the motocross track more than the closed confines that define the supercross track. He expressed frustration at being unable to use his speed and superior fitness level, something that he explained was more beneficial during the motocross season than during the supercross season, to reach his desired results. He was getting poor starts, experiencing lapses in concentration, and making bad decisions when navigating through traffic and during turns. With these inconsistent results he wondered if he would ever erase the self-doubts that were hindering him during races. He also expressed to me that he had put the same amount of training into both seasons and that he was injury-free throughout both seasons.

During our first three sessions, we discussed the psychological skills that might benefit him in his professional career. Based on some of the suggestions that I made during these conversations, he decided to specifically implement four mental training techniques in the coming season. These included: (a) relaxation techniques to regulate arousal before races; (b) imagery to help him visualize good starts; (c) thought stoppage to help him eliminate distractions; and (d) attention control to regain focus.

In addition to identifying psychological skills that might improve his performance, we also discussed various extraneous demands that could negatively affect his performance. First, he suggested that his sponsors were unhappy with his results and were going to re-evaluate his contract after each race. Second, he mentioned struggling with comments from other professionals in the field who felt he was overrated, past his prime, and did not represent a threat anymore. Third, he stated that his family members frequently accompanied him to his races where he footed the bill, and that their presence often distracted him. Fourth, he pointed out that he was away from his girlfriend for extended periods of time. Fifth, he indicated that his team required him to spend the majority of his time training and practicing on the West Coast despite having a practice track and technical coach in another part of the country. Finally, he stated that he was often required by his sponsors to make appearances at venues the day before traveling to a race while other sponsored riders were not required to do so; this left him tired and sluggish once he arrived at the race site.

To gain a better understanding of what he experienced, he asked me to attend one of his motocross races in July of 2004. From this experience I was better able to appreciate all the nuances involved in racing during a professional motocross event, as

well as observe his pre-race routine and the many distractions he dealt with in the moments leading up to the race. While he ended up performing quite well, it seemed that he had to deal with a variety of issues that demanded his attention prior to competing in addition to the mental demands involved in performing during the race. After the races, I asked him if what he was experiencing was stressful. While he mentioned that there were some components of professional motocross racing that he deemed annoying, bothersome, or frustrating, he did not perceive the experience itself as stressful. Although I perceived him to be competing in a stressful environment, he seemed to have the impression that these were merely demands that he needed to combat mentally, just like the track was something he needed to conquer physically. For someone who claimed to be “just an idiot that could ride a bike”, I found his remarks to be insightful.

Upon further reflection I began to understand that there were several things about a professional motocross event that are unique. First, spectators are given a two-hour grace period to access the area where factory-sponsored trucks and ranked riders are located. While the fans are asked to leave one hour prior to the start of the first race, many continue to linger around the factory trucks to converse with the riders. Often, factory riders will return from practice sessions and have to sign autographs, pose for pictures, and interact with their fans. This takes the athlete away from preparatory activities such as reviewing video of the practice runs, replenishing the body with liquids, and resting or preparing for the upcoming race. This was very much the case for the athlete I was watching; he was constantly bombarded with various requests from fans to the point that he was almost late for his qualifying race.



Another interesting factor is that family members and significant others often position themselves around the factory trailers where athletes prepare for races. While many of the athletes are happy to have family members around them before and after a race, my rider was quite bothered by the constant questions asked by his parents and grandparents. Coupled with the attention demanded by the fans, he had little time to prepare for the upcoming race.

Two other factors were amazing to me: (a) the relatively young age of these professionals; and (b) the small amount of money they make. Like sports such as tennis and gymnastics where there are a number of competitors in their teens, many of the motocross riders turn pro between the relatively young ages of 16 and 18 years. In addition, the purse for winning a motocross race is quite small, around \$1500 for the winner, despite drawing up to 35,000 people for an event. As a result, many of the riders have to supplement their income with endorsements from racing-related corporations. What makes this process even less profitable is that motocross agents often charge up to twenty percent for the endorsements they help secure for their athletes. While it is true that those riders who have factory contracts can receive anywhere from \$30,000 to \$500,000 a year, riders without corporate sponsors are in an untenable situation when trying to leverage a deal (personal communication with team manager of a professional team, 2005).

My initial experience along with subsequent trips to other motocross events left me wondering whether other professional motocross riders shared similar experiences. I wondered about the professional riders who did not have the security of factory sponsors and whether they had similar experiences. While I did not think they had to worry about

fans interacting with them before races, there were other monetary demands that may be influencing their experience.

In the remainder of this chapter, a brief summary of the aspects of the sport of motocross is provided. Next, a statement of the problem and the purpose of the study are given. And finally, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and definitions used in this study are presented.

### *The Context: Motocross 101*

Often referred to as the original “extreme sport”, motocross started to gain popularity in the United States in the early 1970s (American Motocyclist Association Motocross, 2005). In 1971, the American Motocyclist Association (AMA) organized a professional motocross race at the Daytona International Speedway and a year later, as American interest in the sport soared, the AMA decided to create a Motocross Championship Series. That same year, in an attempt to further increase American interest, the Los Angeles Coliseum was chosen as the site for a Supercross event. The event was so popular that the AMA Supercross Series became the nation’s most attended motocross event (American Motocyclist Association Motocross, 2005).

*Motocross versus supercross.* While both AMA Motocross and Supercross Series have two classes of competition – the “Motocross Lite” class and the more prestigious “Motocross” class - there are differences between the two series (American Motocyclist Association Motocross, 2005). Motocross events are held in rural parts of the country on closed dirt courses that range from a half a mile to two miles in length. The course demands that riders navigate through naturally formed hills, jumps, and other types of terrain that require them to constantly shift gears. For each motocross event, there are two

races or motos for each class. There are 40 riders who compete in each moto, each lasting 30 minutes plus two laps. Riders earn points based upon their finish in each moto and the winner is determined based on the aggregate scores of the two motos. Results during the final moto act as the tiebreaker. For example, if Rider 1 places 1<sup>st</sup> in Moto 1 (25 points) and 2<sup>nd</sup> in Moto 2 (22 points) and Rider 2 finishes 2<sup>nd</sup> in Moto 1 (22 points) and 1<sup>st</sup> in Moto 2 (25 points), then Rider 2 would win the overall title based on his superior performance during the second moto, despite the fact that both riders have the same number of total points. The riders compete throughout the summer months with the overall title being awarded to the individual with the highest point total during the 12 races in the series (American Motocyclist Association Motocross, 2005).

Supercross, on the other hand, takes place on a man-made dirt track in a stadium environment, usually in an urban setting (American Motocyclist Association Motocross, 2005). Because of the stadium environment, the race tracks are usually narrower, the races much shorter, and the riders far fewer (25 for the “Supercross” class and 20 for the “Supercross Lite” class). This type of setting forces riders to navigate through tighter traffic areas and narrower turns than they do in motocross events. In addition, the Supercross events include only one 20-lap race per class. There are a total of 16 Supercross events with the Supercross Lite class being divided into separate East and West divisions. The Supercross Series riders compete in all 16 events during the season, which lasts from January to May. While supercross champions are often regarded as being technically superior for their ability to navigate under controlled conditions, motocross champions are usually respected for their strength, endurance and ability to

compete at fast speeds during conditions of extreme heat and physical hardship (American Motocyclist Association Motocross, 2005).

*Motocross and motocross lite class.* As previously mentioned, both the AMA Supercross Series and the AMA Motocross Championship Series includes two classes of competition – the Motocross Lite and premier Motocross class (American Motocyclist Association Motocross, 2005). The classes are based on the size of the engine of the motorcycles. The Motocross Lite class bikes are suited for riders who are often smaller in stature. These bikes accelerate quickly off the line and are easier to restart if a rider falls off. The Motocross bikes are more powerful than their Motocross Lite counterparts. However, they are generally heavier and more difficult to maneuver at lower speeds, especially when traction is less (American Motocyclist Association Motocross, 2005).

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Professional motocross is a physically and mentally demanding sport. Riders often have to simultaneously execute various motor and cognitive tasks while remaining calm and focused. They have to stay focused on their own bike, the course, and their competitors, who are often only a couple of inches away, while also communicating with the pit crews (Klarica, 2001). To date, there has been only one study addressing the mental demands of motocross riders (Collins, Doherty, & Talbot, 1993). The results of this study suggest that detailed pre-performance planning and mental rehearsal are essential when developing motocross athletes' performance (Collins, Doherty, & Talbot, 1993).

### *Significance*

While there has been a good deal of research investigating how elite athletes in other sports like figure skating (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993b), wrestling (Gould, Ekland, & Jackson, 1992), the decathlon (Dale, 2000), and cricket (Holt, 2003) deal with the mental demands of their sport, there has been little research investigating the mental demands and coping strategies of motocross athletes, both on and off the track.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth, comprehensive understanding of the mental demands experienced and coping strategies utilized by professional motocross riders. More specifically, an attempt was made to understand how professional motocross riders view the “mental demands” of their sport and how this perspective influences their mindset during practice, competition, and around teammates, friends, and family. To achieve this purpose, the following questions guided the research: (a) what are motocross riders’ perceptions of the words, “mental demands”?; (b) what are the mental demands related to being a professional motocross rider?; (c) when do the athletes experience these mental demands?; and (d) how do the athletes cope with the mental demands they experience both on and off the motocross track?

### *Assumptions*

The following assumptions were made relative to this study:

- 1) Participants were prepared to express themselves in a clear and coherent manner, to express feelings they experienced without hesitation or apprehension.
- 2) Participants truthfully described their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs based on the experiences of the mental demands of their sport.

- 3) An interview study based on a semi-structured interview guide was a valid methodology for obtaining qualitative data and for accurately describing the mental demands and coping strategies of professional motocross riders.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

As with most studies, there were several possible limitations to the present study. First, the findings of the present study characterized the experience of seven<sup>1</sup> professional motocross athletes and cannot be generalized to all motocross riders. Second, these athletes were involved in a very competitive and demanding sport and were not eager to discuss sensitive issues or issues that made them feel vulnerable. As a result, they could have answered questions in a socially desirable manner rather than being forthright. Third, they were asked to recall previous experiences; it is possible they had difficulty remembering those experiences because they occurred the previous year. Fourth, one of the athletes who participated in the study asked to have his interview protocol removed from the data analysis. It seems that when he was interviewed some of his responses were not too favorable towards members of a former racing team of which he was no longer apart. Incidentally a month later when he reviewed his transcript he was again a member of that same team and was uncomfortable with his comments being included in the study, even after being reminded of the anonymity of his statements.

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<sup>1</sup> One co-participant was interviewed but decided to withdraw after reviewing his transcript. This is explained in greater detail in Chapter V.

### *Delimitations of the Study*

For the purpose of this study, two delimitations were imposed:

- 1) Athletes had to have competed in either/both the 2005 AMA Supercross Series and AMA U.S. Motocross Championship Series.
- 2) Athletes had to be preparing to compete in the 2005-2006 AMA Supercross Series or U.S. Motocross Championship series.

### *Definition of Terms*

Constructivist Paradigm – “Constructivists assume a world in which universal, absolute realities are unknowable, and the objects of inquiry are individual perspectives or constructions of reality”(Hatch, 2002, p. 15).

Interpretive Analysis – Interpretation involves providing meaning to data. It involves “making sense of social situations by generating explanations for what’s going on within them. It’s about making inferences, developing insights, attaching significance, refining understandings, drawing conclusions, and extrapolating lessons” (Hatch, 2002, p. 180).

Qualitative Research – Researchers involved in qualitative analysis study things in the settings that they naturally occur and attempt to make sense of, or interpret the phenomena in question based on the meanings individuals prescribe to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.3).

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For many athletes, being able to compete and perform at the highest level of their sport (i.e., the Olympics, professional leagues) is an achievement in and of itself. Some athletes thrive once they reach this stage, while others struggle with the demands (real or imagined) of reaching their own pre-competition expectations. To get a better understanding of how athletes (specifically, motocross riders) dealt with these types of demands, one needs to examine the factors affecting performance.

In this chapter, research related to the various factors that affect performance; including, (a) psychological factors; (b) environmental factors; and (c) the role of mental training in motocross is reviewed. Additionally, coping strategies that are undertaken by elite athletes in an attempt to deal with the various pressures they experience are examined.

### *Psychological Factors Affecting Performance*

Previous research has identified a number of mental skills associated with peak performance (Orlick & Partington, 1988; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992a; 1992b; Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996; Williams & Krane, 2001). One of the first studies to examine these mental factors was conducted by Orlick and Partington (1988) in their work with Canadian athletes during the 1984 Summer Olympic Games. Through the use of interviews and surveys they found that athletes who were mentally ready to compete (e.g., able to focus their attention on the task as well as incorporate imagery into their preparation routine) achieved a higher level of performance than those who were not. Other factors that contributed to strong performances included being committed to the pursuit of excellence, having a detailed competition and fall-back plan in case something



went awry before or during a competition, and being able to deal with distractions.

Conversely, those athletes who did not perform up to expectations reported being unable to deal with such distractions. In addition, unsuccessful athletes expressed difficulties dealing with late team selections and with making changes when things were not going well. Orlick and Partington (1988) concluded that for athletes to be successful, particularly in an event as significant as the Olympics, they need to be mentally prepared and focused on their performance during both training and actual competition.

In a similar study, Gould, Eklund, & Jackson (1992a; 1992b) interviewed 20 members of the 1988 U.S. Wrestling team competing at the Seoul Olympics. While several wrestlers performed quite well during the games, USA Wrestling officials felt that others succumbed to the pressures brought about by the tournament. Disappointed with some of the performances, USA Wrestling commissioned a study to identify psychological factors that may have contributed to both successful and unsuccessful performances. The interview results indicated that there was a great deal of consistency amongst team members when recalling their best Olympic performance. All 20 wrestlers reported feeling quite confident, focused, and optimally aroused. All athletes suggested that they followed their mental preparation plans and were able to focus on the tactical strategies required for the successful execution of moves. Conversely, when asked to recall their worst Olympic performance, the athletes recalled feeling a lack of confidence, increased negative feeling states, and an inability to focus on task-relevant cues. They also experienced difficulty following their preparation plans. These results are consistent with those obtained by Orlick and Partington (1988) suggesting that mental skills play a vital role in elite-level performance (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992a; 1992b).

In another series of studies, Gould and colleagues (Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993; Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993a; 1993b) investigated the experiences of several national champion figure skaters. The goal of the three studies was to determine the “levels of stress, sources of stress, and stress-coping strategies” experienced by figure skaters (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993b, p. 134). The types of stress athletes identified included: (a) relationship issues with coaches, significant others and family members; (b) dealing with the expectations to succeed; (c) psychological, physical and environmental demands; and (d) life direction concerns (e.g., life-career and skating career concerns). The skaters identified a number of mental skills they used to cope with the various stressors they experienced. These skills included self-talk, maintaining a positive mindset, effective time management, arousal regulation, pre-competition routines, purposeful training, and ignoring stressors. The skaters suggested that taking risks and not being afraid to learn from mistakes, ridding themselves of the impossible notion of perfection, and surrounding themselves with a positive support system were effective ways of dealing with the stress of being a national figure skating champion.

These results parallel those obtained in an earlier study by Scanlan, Stein, and Ravizza (1991) examining the sources of stress of former elite figure skaters. Stressors identified by athletes in that study related to the negative aspects of competition such as concerns about significant others (e.g., interpersonal conflict), the financial and psychological demands of skating, and personal struggles associated with competing. Taken together, the results of these studies further strengthen the notion that mental skills play a significant role in elite level athletic performance, particularly when athletes must

deal with the various stressors involved in highly competitive environments (Gould, et al., 1993, 1993a, 1993b).

In their book dealing with the psychological preparation of elite performers in sport, Hardy, Jones, and Gould (1996) suggest that there are four basic mental skills that help athletes prepare for performance. These skills include relaxation, goal setting, mental rehearsal and imagery, and self-talk. With the appropriate mental skills training (i.e., arousal regulation, concentration and attention control, and coping with adversity), the athlete can enhance his/her prospects of achieving a desired performance level. In another examination of the characteristics of peak performance, Williams and Krane (2001) identified a number of psychological characteristics and mental skills of elite athletes. These included having a high level of motivation and commitment to the task, a well-defined practice and competition routine, and a strong belief in one's ability to perform. Athletes who demonstrate these skills during a performance are presumably in a better position to achieve success than athletes who do not (Williams & Krane, 2001).

#### *Environmental Factors Affecting Performance*

While it seems to be clear from the existing literature that mental skills play a key role in producing elite level performance, it is also important to consider the influence of environmental factors. More specifically, there are external components of an athlete's sporting life (e.g., training, rehabilitation, team meetings, contract negotiations) that need to be recognized when examining the athlete's performance (Noblet & Gifford, 2002). In an attempt to identify these factors, Woodman and Hardy (1998) found that various organizational stressors (e.g., politics within influential organizations, lack of administration professionalism and planning) could hinder an athlete's ability to perform.

Gould et al. (1999) interviewed athletes and coaches from eight teams competing in the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games in order to determine the factors that affected Olympic performance for successful and less successful U.S. teams. The results revealed that those who were successful felt they had met or exceeded expectations, were highly focused, committed to the task, participated in mental training programs, and had positive family and crowd support. Conversely, participants on less successful teams felt they did not meet expectations, had team cohesion issues, had problems with travel and with their coach, and were unable to remain focused and committed during their events. Based on the results of these studies, it seems that the ability of athletes and coaches to work together to reach peak performance, particularly at an event as demanding as the Olympics, is influenced by a variety of physical, social, psychological and organizational factors.

While the studies previously mentioned have examined the role of stress in the overall sporting experience of skaters and Olympic athletes, Noblet and Gifford (2002) felt that there was a need to understand the sources of stress experienced by professionals competing in team sports. Possible sources included being traded, facing contract disputes, relocation concerns, and fear of loss of job. Using a qualitative research design incorporating both semi-structured interviews and focus group responses, Noblet and Gifford (2002) found six themes representing the sources of stress experienced by professional footballers. These included: (a) problems associated with the work/non-work interface (e.g., relocation concerns, work-non work conflict); (b) demanding nature of the work (e.g., job content concerns, injuries); (c) negative aspects of interpersonal relationships (e.g., coaching staff, support staff); (d) career development concerns (e.g.,

uncertain football future, post-football uncertainty); (e) worries about performance expectations and standards (e.g., negative aspects of performance expectations, negative aspects of actual performance, performance uncertainty); and (f) negative aspects of organizational systems and culture (e.g., poor communication, low participation in decision making, negative cultural norms). The athletes also identified sources of stress that were unrelated to the stressors associated with the competitive environment, such as a lack of feedback, difficulty balancing football and school, and lack of job security. Taken together, the results indicated the importance of understanding both competition and non-competition sources of stress when developing strategies to manage these stressors.

#### *The Role of Mental Training in Motocross*

Motor sports competition is one of the most physically and mentally demanding of competitive activities (Klarica, 2001). As mentioned previously, drivers often have to simultaneously execute various motor and cognitive tasks while remaining calm and focused. Riders must maintain concentration on a number of situational factors in a sport where there is little room for error. When a rider loses focus, especially during difficult turns and jumps, serious injuries can result (Klarica, 2001).

While it is obvious that motocross riders experience a variety of mental demands, only one study has addressed these issues. Collins, Doherty, and Talbot (1993) reported a case study of a professional motocross rider who was experiencing concentration lapses during races. The researchers used psychological inventories and interviews to obtain a better understanding of the rider's mental state. They also used physiological assessments to identify the physical demands of the sport and determine the rider's

current fitness level. In addition, they conducted a simulated competition to better assess his nutritional and physiological levels. Data from the laboratory assessments suggested that the rider's concentration lapses were based on non-psychological factors. Through the manipulation of his dietary intake (based on educational counseling), changes to the race routine were recommended to promote more effective refueling. After making these modifications in his training schedules, the athlete reported a significant decrease in concentration concerns. Based on the test results, Collins and colleagues (1993) also recommended modifications in the rider's pre- and post-race eating and drinking habits in an effort to minimize fatigue and alleviate dehydration, which had been two barriers to his performance. The resulting diagnosis and intervention included a combination of physiological and nutritional adjustments.

In addition, Collins and colleagues (1993) felt that mental skills training was important for the sport of motocross. More specifically, they deemed that the athlete needed to "develop the most effective program possible and then to reproduce this response consistently, lap by lap, in the competitive situation" (p. 294). They also introduced the rider to three mental training skills - attentional control, pre-competition routines, and imagery - to strengthen his mental resolve when preparing for competitions. Over a three month period, the athlete conducted race-specific practices (and imagery sessions) based on the requirements and physical demands imposed by the upcoming race track. For example, once at the race site, the athlete walked the course and noted any peculiarities or modifications he needed to make prior to the race. The rider then noted technique-based cue words pertinent to each section of the track; these related to passing lines, paths he should take to prevent being passed, and mood words. He then gave a

condensed version of these words to his mechanic who put them on flash cards to help the rider remember the terms once the race began. After the three-month intervention, the athlete reported no recurrence of his original lapses in concentration, as well as no reports of the late-race mistakes that had plagued his performances prior to the intervention. These results suggested that the implementation of detailed imagery and a strong pre-race plan were helpful in maximizing the athlete's performance.

### *Coping Strategies in Sport*

A number of studies have identified mental skills and mental demands associated with peak performance (Orlick & Partington, 1988; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992a; 1992b; Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996; Williams & Krane, 2001). Recently, there has been a growing interest in identifying the stressors experienced by athletes. Researchers have found that athletes experience various forms of stress (e.g., performance, occupational, interpersonal and organizational) which are exacerbated by relationships with coaches, training facilities, and self-presentation concerns (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992; Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991). For example, in a study of elite figure skaters, Scanlan et al. (1991) found that athletes reported feelings of stress stemming from: (a) the physical and mental demands placed on skaters; (b) negative relationships with other performers and coaches; and (c) negative feelings associated with competition. In a similar study, Gould et al. (1993) found that relationship issues, as well as psychological, physical and environmental concerns had a direct affect on the stress level of national figure skating champions. James and Collins (1997) interviewed 20 competitors from a variety of sports and also found that many of these athletes experienced stress over leaving negative impressions on individuals within

their sporting context (e.g., teammates, coaches, friends, and strangers).

There has also been an increased interest in the behavioral and cognitive strategies incorporated by athletes in response to such stressors (Gould et al., 1992; Gould et al., 1993). Gould and colleagues (1992, 1993) found that elite wrestlers and figure skaters used cognitive (e.g., thought stoppage, self-talk), emotional (e.g., relaxation, visualization), and behavioral (e.g., time management, disengagement) strategies to deal with the various pressures to perform. These findings were particularly insightful because the coping strategies athletes used were linked to the specific sources of stress they mentioned in the first part of the interview study (Gould et al., 1993).

A qualitative study by Dale (2000) revealed that elite decathletes utilized coping strategies, including imagery and relaxation, prior to and during competitions. Athletes in this study used task-related cues to combat distractions, maintained a consistent routine throughout each event, and became friends with opponents in order to release competition-related stress (Dale, 2000).

Despite these findings, much remains to be learned about the stress and coping strategies of athletes. Lazarus (1999, 2000) recommended that future researchers explore the coping strategies of various athletic subgroups in order to better understand how various individuals adapt to stressful situations and why others do not. Furthermore, he felt that it is essential for researchers to document the coping strategies that athletes use when faced with various challenges and demands. This would be beneficial for both researchers and practitioners in identifying strategies athletes might use to manage stressful situations.

Another study examining the coping responses of a professional cricket player



was conducted by Holt (2003). Using a phenomenological approach, Holt (2003) conducted four in-depth interviews with one professional cricket player to better understand how he dealt with the daily hassles experienced in his sport. The results indicated that the athlete's stress appraisals were associated with the endangerment to performance-related goals and values. The coping strategies he incorporated to deal with these stressors included: (a) evaluation and planning (e.g., understanding environmental conditions, learning about opponents' strengths and weaknesses, reading new opponents); (b) proactive psychological skills (e.g., building confidence, maintaining concentration); and (c) reactive psychological strategies (e.g., displaying resilience, using self-talk).

Another study examining the role of coping strategies in sport was conducted by Giacobbi, Foote, and Weinberg (2004). The purpose of their study was twofold: (a) to fill a void in the stress and coping literature by exploring sources of stress experienced by skilled and moderately skilled golfers; and (b) to identify the most common coping strategies used by golfers. Giacobbi and colleagues (2004) identified four general stress themes: (a) evaluative others (e.g., people watching and concern over playing partners); (b) specific performance challenges (e.g., club selection, and course management); (c) psycho-emotional concerns (i.e., frustrations over play and attempts to maintain momentum); and (d) competitive stress (e.g., tournament and non-tournament pressure situations). They also identified six commonly used coping strategies: (a) cognitive techniques (e.g., mental imagery, self-talk reminders); (b) relaxation techniques (e.g., breathing exercises); (c) off-course efforts (e.g., club choice, judging distance, lessons); (d) golf-course strategies (e.g., pre-shot routine, evaluative others and mechanical concerns); (e) avoidance coping (e.g., the use of alcohol and distraction control); and (f)

emotion-focused coping (e.g., venting and humor). Golfers reported using various mental, behavioral and emotional-focused cues to effectively cope with each stressful situation and often incorporated more than one coping strategy in response to specific sources of stress (Dale, 2000; Gould et al., 1992; Gould et al., 1993). Although participants in this study were non-elite athletes, the results were rather consistent with those of previous coping research. Both the skilled and moderately skilled golfers maintained a positive mindset during adversity and incorporated cognitive, behavioral and emotion-focused coping strategies. However, unlike the findings from studies with elite athletes, moderately skilled golfers reported a greater variety of avoidance strategies (Dale, 2000; Gould et al., 1992; Gould et al., 1993). Giacobbi and colleagues (2004) posited that part of the reason less skilled golfers are less skilled is because they do not use more effective forms of coping, such as planning and seeking advice.

### *Summary*

While there is a good deal of information regarding how elite athletes in other sports like figure skating (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993b), wrestling (Gould, Ekland, & Jackson, 1992), and the decathlon (Dale, 2000) deal with the mental demands of their sport, virtually nothing is known of the mental demands encountered by motocross athletes both on and off the track. The only study to date suggests that detailed pre-performance planning and mental rehearsal have the potential to enhance motocross athlete's performance (Collins, Doherty, & Talbot, 1993). Therefore, the current qualitative study was undertaken to investigate motocross athletes' experiences of the mental demands and coping strategies of their sport. The intent of this study was to give voice to motocross athletes who have historically been neglected in sport psychology

research and to increase our understanding of the way these athletes experience the various mental demands of their sport and cope with them.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Prior to conducting qualitative research, it is important to select a paradigm, ontology, and epistemology. In this chapter, each of these issues is discussed. In addition, results from the bracketing interview are presented, co-participants are described, and the procedures and analysis used in the study are presented.

#### *Paradigm*

A paradigm demonstrates the researcher's philosophy, ontology, and epistemology. In essence, an individual's paradigm reflects his/her worldview, values, framework of beliefs, and research methods (Hatch, 2002). I believe that the mental demands of motocross riders are different than those of other professional athletes. I believe that due to the extreme nature of the sport, professional motocross riders experience heightened mental demands throughout the course of the indoor and outdoor seasons. I believe that years of experience, the type of bike and the type of sponsorship obtained by an athlete influences his perception of the mental demands of professional motocross. I believe that sport psychology consultants can benefit from a better understanding of the experiences, mental demands and coping strategies associated with the sport. I believe that knowledge is constructed and co-constructed and that reality and truth are created and defined within individual perspectives. Based on my beliefs, I chose to conduct the present research within a constructivist paradigm (Hatch, 2002).

*Ontology.* According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), each "researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework" (p.18) that constitutes how that researcher sees reality. According to Hatch (2002), "constructivists assume a world in which universal, absolute realities are unknowable, and the objects of inquiry are individual

perspectives or constructions of reality” (p. 15). Within sport psychology, a constructivist view would suggest that it is essential to understand how each athlete is affected differently by each situation or intervention. It is assumed that each athlete constructs his or her own reality regarding the sport experience based on his/her experience.

*Epistemology.* Epistemology is the process whereby an individual comes to know things about the nature of reality. Using a constructivist approach, I conducted this study from the epistemological belief that the co-participants<sup>2</sup> and I co-constructed knowledge about their experiences (Hatch, 2002).

#### *Bracketing Interview*

Bracketing requires that [researchers] work to become aware of our own assumptions, feeling, and preconceptions, and then, that we strive to put them aside – to bracket them – in order to be open and receptive to what we are attempting to understand. (Ely, 1991, p. 50)

It is imperative when conducting qualitative research that the researcher be aware of how her/his preconceived notions may lead to biased or leading questioning. These presuppositions, if unaddressed, may undermine the integrity of the data. Pollio, Henley and Thompson (1997) suggest that interviewers might possess three possible biases: (a) the interviewer unilaterally decides what is valid or invalid; (b) the interviewer judges participants’ comments to be illogical because they do not seem to follow traditional norms; and (c) the interviewer discusses the participant’s description of the "real" experience because it does not fall under a specific theoretical framework.

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<sup>2</sup> I chose to call this sample of athletes “co-participants” because the co-participants and myself co-created knowledge.

In an attempt to identify any presuppositions or assumptions I had regarding the mental demands and coping strategies associated with motocross, I participated in a bracketing interview prior to conducting the pilot interview and main study interviews (see Appendix A). The bracketing interview allowed me to become aware of any preconceived notions I had that could have lead me to ask biased or leading questions. The bracketing interview was conducted by a sport psychology professor who had previous experience with semi-structured interviews. The bracketing interview involved the essence of the interview guide I would be using with the participants with one exception: Since I had not competed as a professional motocross rider, my bracketing interview focused on what I assumed were the mental demands and coping strategies experienced by professional motocross riders (see Appendix A).

Results from the bracketing interview suggested that I expected each co-participant to discuss the fear of injury, strains of travel, separation from family, equipment concerns, and lack of security regarding sponsorship. I also felt that the riders would have difficulties interacting with other teammates and use various outlets to cope with the mental demands of their sport by doing things like working out, spending time with significant others/friends, drinking, sleeping, and watching video analysis of performances. Additionally, I felt that some athletes might use mental training to help face the demands of their sport, particularly that of recovering from injury. I also expected the riders to discuss the increased responsibilities they experienced as a professional compared to when they were amateurs.

### *Pilot Interview*

Prior to conducting the main study interviews, I conducted a pilot interview (see Appendix B) with a rookie professional motocross rider. The rationale for conducting a pilot interview was to gain experience with the interview guide and, more specifically, to see if any questions needed to be added or omitted based on the responses provided by the interviewee. From this interview, it was determined that two questions would be added to the guide. The first concerned motocross riders' relationships with teammates and the other involved the relationships riders had with their bikes. (Note: The pilot study rider mentioned on a couple of occasions during the interview that his bike would often break down during practice, which would leave him rather flustered). Several other minor changes were made to the sequencing of questions prior to conducting the main study interviews.

### *Procedure*

The revised semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C), was used in the main study. My role was to assist and guide the interview rather than dictate precisely what ensued (Smith, Harre & Van Langehove, 1995). Thus, I used the interview guide to address specific objectives while allowing co-participants the freedom to respond in any way they chose.

Since I had worked as a sport psychology consultant with a few motocross riders competing on the circuit, initial contact was made through verbal conversations I had with potential participants prior to a race I attended in August, 2005. Following the pilot interview, which was conducted in early January 2006, I asked the rider if he knew any other motocross athletes who might be interested in sharing their experience (Huck,

2000). From this initial interview, I was made aware of three other riders who subsequently agreed to participate in the study. Additional co-participants were recruited using a similar snowball technique.

Once a possible co-participant was identified, I contacted him by telephone to see if he was willing to participate in the study. If he agreed, we chose a mutual time and place for us to engage in the interview. Five of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in the hotel rooms of co-participants during a weekend race. The other three interviews were conducted over the telephone. The interviews varied in length from 28 to 66 minutes. Interestingly, the interviews conducted over the telephone were shorter in duration and yielded less qualitative data than those conducted face-to-face.

Before the interviews began, I informed each co-participant about the purpose of the study, that the interview was going to be audiotaped, and that confidentiality would be maintained by removing any identifiers, including team sponsors, teammates and locations of races from the transcripts. Each co-participant signed a consent form (Appendix D) and selected a pseudonym to represent themselves before participating in the interview.

At the beginning of the interview, I asked co-participants to provide general demographic information (e.g., years involved in the sport, who got them involved in the sport, racing team sponsors types of injury). Next, I asked the co-participant to respond to a series of open-ended questions designed to obtain insights into his experience of the mental demands and coping strategies of being a professional motocross rider (see Appendix C). These included questions like “What are some of the mental demands of being a professional motocross rider?”, “Do you experience any of these demands?”,



“How do you cope with these demands during practice?”, and “When are the mental demands a distraction for you?” This allowed me to further probe each co-participant’s response (Kvale, 1996). Probing questions such as “What was that like for you?”, “How does that make you feel?” and “Talk more about that” were asked to encourage a thicker and richer description of each rider’s experience of the mental demands and coping strategies of his sport (Pollio et al., 1997).

I asked the questions one after the other, allowing each co-participant sufficient time to exhaust his answer. As a result, the order of the questions varied depending on the direction that the co-participant chose to go when responding to questions. By allowing each co-participant to dictate the flow of the interview, I was able to maximize the potential richness of the data (Patton, 2002). On a couple of occasions, the co-participant’s response elicited further questions from me. In such cases, I posed the questions immediately following the co-participant’s response. All interviews were audio-taped using a digital recorder and later transcribed by me.

### *Co-Participants*

The co-participants in this study consisted of eight<sup>3</sup> professional motocross riders who competed in either the premier Supercross/Motocross class or the Supercross/Motocross Lite class during the 2005 AMA Supercross Series and/or the AMA U.S. Motocross Championship series (see Table 1). Their ages ranged from 19 to

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<sup>3</sup> One of the athletes who participated in the study asked to have his interview protocol removed from the data analysis. When he was initially interviewed he provided responses that were not too favorable towards members of a racing team of which he was no longer a part. A month later, when he reviewed his transcript he rejoined that same team and was uncomfortable with his original interview.

Table 1

## Co-Participants' Demographics

Athlete *	Race	Competed in 2005 Supercross/Motocross/Both	Age in Years	Years as Professional
Phil	White	Supercross and Motorcross	19	2
Rick	White	Motocross	19	2
James	White	Motocross	20	4
Mike	White	Supercross and Motocross	21	3
Ernie	African- American	Supercross and Motocross	23	4
Rob	White	Supercross and Motocross	24	5
Karl	White	Supercross and Motocross	24	5

\* = self selected pseudonym

24 years ( $M=21.43$ ) and their total years of experience as a professional rider ranged from two to five years ( $M=3.57$ ). Six of the co-participants were United States citizens, while one participant held dual citizenship. One co-participant self-identified as African-American while the other six self-identified as Caucasian. All seven of the co-participants were single with no children.

*Data Analysis*

According to Polkinghorne (1989), the premise behind qualitative data analysis is to provide structure and clarity in the results based on the raw data provided by the co-

participants. Several researchers have provided comparable frameworks for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data (e.g., Cote, Salmela, Baria & Russell, 1993; Dale, 1996; Hatch, 2002; Tesch, 1990). Using a hybrid of those approaches, I analyzed the data in this study in the following way. First I transcribed the interviews verbatim. I then read through the transcripts several times to become thoroughly familiar with the data as a whole (Hatch, 2002). Next, I re-read the transcripts and attempted to systematically create and record my impressions of what I believed occurred within the context of the data (Hatch, 2002). I wrote these interpretations down in memos on the margin of the transcripts and then attempted to search for patterns in the co-participants' experiences (see Appendix E for a sample). This process of discovering meaningful units involved highlighting and color-coding each statement according to a relevant topic or major area of discussion (Kvale, 1996). Following that, I re-read the data once more and began to code them (Hatch, 2002). This process helped me decide whether my initial impressions were supported by the data.

After identifying the major thematic areas emerging from the data for each individual, I compared and contrasted these themes across co-participants. This process allowed me to explore the similarities and differences in co-participants' experiences until I achieved consensus.

Finally, I summarized my interpretations of the memos by writing a draft summary for each transcript. This process forced me to put my interpretations of the data in a story form that others could understand (Hatch, 2002). Two other researchers familiar with qualitative data analysis also examined the transcripts independently (Patton, 2002). Each signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix F). I then met

with the researchers to compare our results and discuss the development of major themes. Various themes and subthemes were rearranged or removed entirely as a result of this discussion until we achieved consensus.

I then sent the draft summary and transcript to each co-participant and asked him if it represented an accurate summary of his experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989) of the mental demands and coping strategies of motocross. I gave each rider an opportunity to expand upon what I wrote and to convey any thoughts he may have previously left out during the initial interview. The purpose of this process was to gauge whether my interpretations accurately encompassed the experiences of the co-participants (Polkinghorne, 1989). One co-participant asked that several sections of his interview concerning his relationship with his teammates be removed because he felt his emotions during the time of the interview did not accurately reflect his true relationship with them. As previously mentioned, another co-participant asked that his data be removed entirely from the analysis as he was concerned about jeopardizing future sponsorships should his interview be published.

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## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the findings derived from the interpretive analysis are presented and discussed relative to previous literature. The findings were divided into themes and further divided into sub-themes. The major themes and their related sub-themes are discussed and quotes supporting each theme are presented.

Thorough examination of the data revealed seven major themes. The first four themes dealt with the mental demands experienced by the co-participants and included: (a) the racing environment; (b) the nature of the sport; (c) expectations; and (d) relationships with others. The remaining three themes dealt with the coping strategies used by motocross riders to deal with those demands and included: (e) thought control; (f) staying focused; and (g) emotional control. The related sub-themes and supporting quotes are discussed in two parts: (a) mental demands of the sport; and (b) coping strategies used to deal with those demands. A table illustrating the major themes and related sub-themes is provided (see Table 2).

### *Mental Demands*

The following themes and sub-themes illustrated the mental demands experienced by professional motocross riders.

### *Racing Environment*

The first major theme, *racing environment*, described the athletes' experiences with the mental demands of motocross. Many riders spoke about race-related concerns that go through their heads as they prepare to compete. The three sub-themes that supported this theme were: (a) bike issues; (b) opponents; and (c) "nerves".

Table 2

## Outline of Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
<u>Mental Demands</u>	
1. Racing environment	Bike issues Opponents “Nerves”
2. Nature of the sport	Training concerns Injuries
3. Expectations	Expectations from others Expectations of self
4. Relationship with others	Teammates Sponsors
<u>Coping Strategies</u>	
1. Thought control	Dealing with distractions Controllable factors Reframing
2. Staying focused	Focusing on the present Pre-performance routines
3. Emotional control	Regulating arousal Mental training techniques

*Bike issues.* Many co-participants mentioned that one of the more frustrating elements about racing was the uncertainty that sometimes arose with their *bike*. It seemed quite obvious to them that not having a bike they could rely on made focusing on other race important demands very difficult. Phil stated:

When I was on [name of bike], I definitely knew I had a good bike and a competitive bike. When I was on the [name of bike], I didn't feel like I had the best bike out there. Definitely it was a stressful issue for me cause when I get to the line, my bike wouldn't start, or something stupid would happen. Then I would think 'if my bike doesn't start now, what is going to happen on the track?' It was frustrating not really knowing what was going to happen with your bike.

Ernie expressed a similar attitude when he said:

Sometimes it is really frustrating. When you go test all week and then you go to the race and sometimes it is really frustrating, really hard to explain what is going on with the bike. So a lot of times it is really frustrating trying to work it out because if you don't go to the race ready there really is not a lot of time at the races to practice or to figure things out.

However, Mike talked about how it was easy for riders to use bike issues to rationalize their performance. He stated:

Sometimes you psyche yourself out that your bike is not good even though it is because you are not doing as good as you could. You are not thinking right things or whatever. Sometimes you will blame it on stuff like some people do.

It was clear from co-participants' interviews that bike issues were a source of frustration.

*Opponents.* Many co-participants indicated that concerns about their *opponents* affected the way they viewed a race. James mentioned that knowing who his opponents were could shape his feelings about racing. He stated:

You get psyched out sometimes if there is someone else faster than you. You can be like ‘oh crap, that guy is here, oh no’...happen[s] to a lot of people. I know tons of people that would be really fast during practice times, but then they go to a race, and they will be like, ‘oh man, there are a lot of people here, that guy is here’, so they just don’t think they can do it.

Phil also mentioned that sometimes he focused so much on his opponent that he lost focus on what he needed to do before races. He said:

At a pro race I always name all the names ahead in my class, and basically probably 25-30 of them are pretty much fast guys, and I always contemplate on that. I just dwell on it so bad. It sucks, but I get so nervous about it before a race and that is why I do so bad sometimes because I am thinking about it.

Many of the motocross riders in the current study showed feelings of concern and intimidation regarding the presence of other riders who they perceived as being better than them. Those feelings of intimidation could induce negative self-talk and maladaptive levels of arousal, which would have a negative affect on performance. Scanlan and colleagues (1991) also reported that worries about the performance of others can increase levels of stress for some athletes.

*Nerves.* The sub-theme *nerves* described the feelings of pre-performance anxiety experienced by many of the riders. They mentioned how the demands of a professional race, compared to their previous experiences with amateur racing, brought about such



feelings of anxiety. Specifically, Phil described nervous feelings he had lining up at the gate right before a race:

Definitely, right before the race starts, [when] going up to the line. [That is] the worst part for me at a race. I get so nervous sometimes. At amateur races I was never really that bad.

Ernie added that he had a hard time handling all the nervous energy and concentrating on what he needed to do, because there were so many thoughts running through his head. He stated:

For me, I still have the whole nervous jitters. ‘Wow, here I am racing in the outdoor nationals!’ So for me it is real exciting. I get really nervous and start thinking, ‘I hope the team will be happy with what I do’, ‘I hope I don’t choke’. There is a lot of things that are going through my mind that I try hard to block out. I try to concentrate on the start ‘I need a good start’. Get a good pace. There are several different things.

The term “nerves” in this study described riders’ feelings of nervousness and anxiety in addition their concerns regarding how they handled the pressures of competition and particularly being scared before competition. The nervousness and anxiety experienced by these riders may have been augmented by the tenuous nature of the sport. It is not unheard of for sponsors to terminate the contracts of their riders, especially those riders who are not performing to the sponsors/factory team’s expectations. Additionally, many of the riders in this study did not perform as well as professionals as they had when they were amateurs. This may have further heightened their feelings of nervousness. Feelings of competition anxiety experienced by these athletes prior to performance are consistent

with the findings from earlier studies (Scanlan et al., 1991; Gould et al., 1993; Noblet & Gifford, 2002).

### *Nature of the Sport*

The second major theme associated with mental demands dealt with the *nature of the sport* was on professional motocross riders. The two related sub-themes were: (a) training concerns; and (b) injuries.

*Training concerns.* *Training concerns* represented the perceptions co-participants had regarding the grueling physical and mental nature of professional motocross. Specifically, Phil suggested that it was difficult to get motivated to do all the little things during practice to prepare for competition:

Obviously, you have to deal with your training, eating right, doing everything right before a race, which sometimes it is hard getting motivated to do. But, that's part of the sport. That's what you got to do, train and get ready to race...

Sometimes I won't really want to do it just because I am not motivated to do it, because sometimes you just want a day off. It kicks your butt to do, but you know you are better for doing it.

Karl even talked about the mind games that other riders play during practice and how that affected the manner in which he approached practice sessions:

The biggest thing I have during practice [occurs] when riding with other guys.

Sometimes you are off your game a little bit in practice and someone else that you know you are faster than will be going faster and it is kind of frustrating. That is one of the biggest things I got, especially living out in [the western states]. There are so many guys that everyday when you go out riding and there are different

tracks and someone is faster at different tracks and everyone tries to hop in with you or you go to ride with someone else and they pull off because they don't want you to ride with them. Just the whole mental game that guys tend to pull out here is kind of frustrating.

Rick talked about needing an extended break at the end of the season because he was so burnt out from training and riding:

Especially towards the end of the year sometimes I get a loss of focus. Like I don't want to work out. I get burnt out. I should be like, 'I should keep on keeping on, and don't give up and keep going', but usually I am like, 'I don't want to do riding anymore'. Well, you know, racing all year-round and riding all the time, you start to get drained. It is not that fun for you anymore. You want a break. I always need a break for at least a month where I am not really riding so I can recoup so I get that drive to want to really race again.

*Injuries.* The sub-theme *injuries* described the mental demands associated with injuries, which many of the riders found to be central to the nature of the sport of motocross. Specifically, Rob described how difficult it was to go back and practice after sustaining an injury:

... whenever you get hurt, like say you got hurt on a set of whoops [bumps], it is kind of mentally demanding to be able to go out the next time and hit the whoops just like you have never crashed down. Sometimes you get scared, *not scared* (emphasis added), but you get that mental block in your mind that, 'oh, I can't hit those whoops' and then I crash. I guess that is kind of mentally demanding.

Interestingly, Rob edited himself by first saying "scared" but then taking it back.

However, James stated how important it was for him to return to the bike and face the nerves associated with potential re-injury:

Any racer when they get hurt, as quick as they can, [should] get back on that bike unless they are *really injured* (emphasis added). 'I got to get back on that bike, I got to try harder this time, it is only going to try to make you want to get fitter'. You want to learn from your mistakes. I know definitely after I broke my [leg bone] twice I have been a little sketched out sometimes when trying certain things. When there is a big jump, or something that normally I would not be scared to do, now I am thinking 'well is it worth it now?' I definitely get a little nervous about doing stuff in certain sections or something like that.

It appears that motocross riders feel that there is "injured" and there is "really injured". Phil faced the frustration of dealing with a multitude of injuries that kept him from competing at any consistent level during his rookie season as well:

About a week before the first Supercross started I broke my [arm bone] and had to sit the whole supercross season out. So the year didn't start out too well but I recovered from that and started getting ready for outdoors. Started doing some riding with the team in [western state] and the first round came along and I didn't even qualify. I had never not even qualified before. It was such a big shock. I didn't know what to do. I kind of regrouped a little bit and went back for the second round and I qualified.

He went on to say:

In the third round I hit a little bump. I ended up dislocating my big toe and tearing some ligament in it. So I sat the weekend out. This happened in the first moto and

I qualified no problem. I went to the doctor and he said I was good to go, I could ride. At the same time, in my mind, the pain was so bad that I didn't really realize. I didn't think in my mind that I could ride, but the doctor said 'yeah' so I sucked it up.

Motocross riders appeared to make a distinction between pain with a small p versus pain with a capital "p". Phil continued:

The pain got so bad that I had to [have] cortisone shots almost every weekend. We did that, and then I got a [arm injury] at one round, an injury here, bike problem there, just things left and right so I was out for the season. About a week after [name of race] we went to my doctor and he told me that I would have to have reconstructive [name of body part] surgery from the accident from [name of race]. It was definitely not a big turn on for me. So I ended up going through surgery, so I am going to miss the supercross season again in 2006. So it was just a down hill year all together.

It was evident from the co-participants' interviews that facing and dealing with injuries – in the manner consistent with the motocross environment – was a stressor for these athletes. One of the major themes coming out of the interviews related to how the nature of professional sports is demanding both mentally and physically. Motocross riders experienced these demands in two distinct ways: (a) via training concerns; and (b) via injuries. Riders mentioned how physically and mentally demanding the sport of motocross was and how its long and grueling seasons take a toll on the body. Injuries were also common. Both of these findings are consistent with previous research.

The importance co-participants placed on the mental demands associated with training concerns is also similar to results of earlier studies. Athletes feel that repetitive and grueling training sessions and the mental tasks inherent in their professional sport are extremely demanding (Scanlan, Stein, Ravizza, 1991; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Noblet & Gifford, 2002). In Noblet and Gifford's (2002) qualitative study, they found that professional footballers emphasized the theme, "nature of work". The "nature of their work" was related to long training sessions. However, they also acknowledged such things were a necessary evil if they wanted to compete and thrive at the professional level. Similarly, while motocross riders in this study felt that it was sometimes hard to get motivated for grueling training sessions, the benefits they derived in competition were worth the effort.

Many riders also identified the mental demands associated with injury as having a significant impact on their experience of motocross. Specifically, co-participants stressed the challenges of returning to practice after sustaining an injury. As would be expected, many of the riders became frustrated when they became injured and were unable to perform at a consistent level. These findings echo the concerns of golfers and elite level skaters in previous studies (Cohn, 1990; Gould et al., 1993; Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Further, motocross riders identified the injury itself and the setbacks associated with it as additional sources of stress. This may be due to the financial necessity of performing well in their sport. In contrast to athletes in other sports (Cohn, 1990; Scanlan et al., 1991; Gould et al., 1993), motocross riders derive all their income from their sport. If they sustain an injury that keeps them out of action for a prolonged period of time, it can mean much more pressure – both mentally and financially - to succeed when they return.

### *Expectations*

The third theme, associated with mental demands was *expectations*, which included the subthemes of riders' self-expectations and the expectations from others.

*Expectations from self.* The sub-theme *expectations from self* described the co-participants' experiences of their own expectations for performance. Ernie felt that the expectations he had of himself impacted how he mentally approached the sport of motocross once he became a professional. He said:

Now I have my own house. It is a job. This is my life. Before when I was younger my dad did everything. Now this is what I do, what I focus on, what I have time for, this is what I have to have happen. You have to make things happen. There is definitely financial stuff you have to think about. The whole atmosphere of riding, the pace of riding, the intensity of riding, the way you train is much different than when I was an amateur.

Interestingly, Mike suggested that his own expectations to perform changed based on who he thought was watching him. He stated:

In '04 there was a guy for a team that was looking at me. I did good in my first outdoor national. And there was a team looking at me at the next national. I went there and trained real hard for it and everything – harder than I did for the first national. I went there and just blew it. I didn't get good starts. I was in the back and I kept thinking, 'I got to get up there, I got to get up there' because they are watching me. It seems like the more you have to, the less likely you are going to get it or do it. So I was like, 'I have to get up there' and so, when it didn't happen right away, I gave up. I didn't give up, but yeah, I guess you could say my mind

gave up. I said, 'I can't do it.' I just kind of rode around. [problems occurred] when I had to do good. At the first one, nobody was expecting me to do anything. I was just whoever, I was just this guy who showed up. I went out there and ran top 5 with the guys. I was just like, 'let me show you what I can do'.

Mike's quote also contains his perception that his performance was linked to expectations from others.

*Expectations from others.* The sub-theme, *expectations from others*, described the people, such as sponsors, managers, and family members, who expect the riders to perform well. Phil mentioned that once he made the transition from amateur to professional the expectations he experienced from others changed. These increased expectations altered his perceptions about riding:

[As an amateur] I was there just to ride my bike and have fun. I did what I did. [Family] had no pressure on me. [They] knew it was my first year on a big bike. [They] didn't put any pressure on me at all. When I started to do very well in the amateurs and won my championship, pressure kind of started escalating. People then started expecting me to win races and doing good, you know. I moved into the pros and got that ride with the factory team. Mentally, I felt so pressured by everybody that I almost forgot why I was racing. Not racing for other people, I am racing for myself...to have fun. Then, I started not doing well and so much stuff happened, so when I moved into the pros I definitely felt like it was a different world. It seemed like everyone expected so much out of me. At the same time I wanted to perform for them so I didn't think about why I was doing it. It just seemed like everyone expected so much out of me and when I didn't perform for



them, it was a disappointment for me and them at the same time. I guess mentally it was really hard for me, during the 2005 season to take that (Phil).

Mike also felt the challenge associated with trying to live up to the expectations placed on him by others:

Well, pressure from people to do well and um...expectations. Like someone expects you to do well... Just pressure like...when you have a job. To do good. And so, that is the pressure they put on you to go out and perform. And get top 10, or win or whatever. I guess that is the pressure they put on you. Your boss, or your team manager, the owner, who[m]ever...you're mom and dad. Well, you know, 'you got to do good', so that is going through your mind. 'I need to go out here and, 'try your hardest' and give my best. Sometimes, it can be negative.

That's a problem. Sometimes, I am thinking, 'What if I don't?', and that will kill you every time. Just because then you start thinking about not making it, not what you have to do.

When riders started thinking about what *not* to do, they reported experiencing increased performance problems. This finding parallels the experience of elite level skaters and professional footballers who reported that striving to meet expectations from others and not letting others down were central thoughts in their mind during their worst performances (Scanlan et al., 1991; Gould et al., 1993; Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Riders in the present study were constantly aware of the expectations to be successful. These expectations came not only from themselves, but also from individuals within the motocross community (e.g., team managers, sponsors, etc.). With regard to the expectations of oneself, some riders identified financial dependence as a self-imposed

pressure. In other words, many applied added pressure to themselves to do well in order to obtain the financial rewards that were associated with success. This resonates with the findings from the Noblet and Gifford (2002) study regarding financial pressure expressed by professional footballers.

#### *Relationships with Others*

The fourth major theme associated with mental demands was *relationships with others*, which included the relationships these riders had with team members and sponsors from the motocross community. The two supporting sub-themes were: (a) teammates; and (b) sponsors.

*Teammates.* The sub-theme teammates represented the mental demands experienced by the motocross riders in terms of their relationship with some of their teammates. A number of co-participants mentioned that not having an open relationship with members of their team made the process of competing a more daunting task. James described how different he felt when he had teammates with whom he could share information. He stated:

Last year, I got along with my teammates really well. This year, I am a little more competitive with my teammates. It makes it a little bit harder, definitely, being competitive with your teammates. Last year, we would all talk and tell each other lines and try to help each other out. There was a really good vibe with everyone. Then you have someone who you are competing against who doesn't want to tell you nothing. So, you don't tell them anything. It makes it hard sometimes.

Rob felt frustration with a lack of team relationships as well:

When I was on this team, none of us ever rode together. We never did any testing...I just don't believe it was a very organized team. I don't think they were as serious as some of us were about racing...I don't know too much about it, but I don't think they were 110% behind me and fully into the bike.

This notion of lack of relationships experienced by the riders in this study is similar to feelings described by both professional footballers regarding their interactions with team members (Noblet & Gifford, 2002) and elite skaters in their interactions with peers (Scanlan et al., 1991; Gould et al., 1993). Riders suggested that not having an open relationship based on communication – with their teammates and/or sponsors - made the process of competing even harder. The sport of motocross is one where the ability to read the lines of the track and the tendencies of opponents can be greatly enhanced through communication with other riders. When there is a lack of a relationship with teammates it may serve to distract riders from concentrating on the task at hand.

*Sponsors.* The sub-theme *sponsors* focused on the influence of sponsors on the riders' ability to perform. Some of the riders mentioned that the inability to procure sponsors was especially mentally taxing. They indicated that such a slate of affairs made it difficult to focus on the task-related components of racing and training. Phil said:

Definitely, when you have a ride, there are a lot of things you don't need to worry about. You don't need to [be] worrying about calling all these sponsors. You just deal with one person, which is the manager of the team who controls all the sponsors on the team and all the bikes and all that. When you do sign with the team, really, a lot of the stress goes away. When you are by yourself you have to worry about what kind of gear you are going to wear, what kind of goggles you

are going to use, what kind of boots, what type of bike you are going to ride, your moto suit, your suspension, what type of pipe you are going to run. Everything. You have to find all your own stuff when you are on your own. For the team, they give you a package deal; you can make money. When you are with a good team, it seems like everything is so much organized so that all I have to worry about is training and riding your bike... But it is definitely tough to deal with things on your own. I kind of jumped out of amateurs straight onto a team and then straight onto another team. It was not like I went from amateur to privateer [rider without a sponsor from any team] and knew what it was like. Now, I know what it is like to be a privateer and doing it on your own. It is tough and now I have a better idea what is going on.

Phil points out the fact that there is a comfort but also a price to pay when one gets sponsorship. In contrast, Rob mentioned the advantages athletes have who are sponsored versus those who are not. He expressed his frustration about not being on a team at the time of our interview:

Sometimes, it can get a little frustrating, but I haven't really had to deal with much of that. I am sure, for getting on teams and stuff,...I am not on a real team so it kind of bums me out sometimes, because I am not there yet. I don't have all the good stuff that they have or get the luxuries they have.

### *Coping Strategies*

The remaining themes and sub-themes concerned the coping strategies these professional motocross riders used to deal with the mental demands of their sport. The first major theme, *thought control*, described the riders conscientious attempts to cope

and deal with some of the mental demands they experienced as professionals. The three related sub-themes were: (a) dealing with distractions; (b) controllable factors; and (c) reframing.

*Dealing with distractions.* The sub-theme *dealing with distractions* represented the motocross riders' attempts to cope with the distracting and irrelevant thoughts that occurred throughout their professional careers. Karl described the importance of putting non race-related issues out of his mind when practicing and performing. He said:

You have to be in the right mind state. That way, you are focused when you are out there. You got to get a good focus on. You have to kind of, if there is other stuff going on in your life or whatever, you have to put that aside. You are there to do your job, which is to race. So, you have to put everything else aside and just go do your job. I'm not married, but say you were, and your wife was mad at you or stuff like that. You can't let that get in the way. It has to be put on the backburner during the race.

Ernie talked about the importance of being able to block out any distractions prior to a race. He said, "Well, when I am on the line, I try to block things out. Usually I have headphones on when I come out the tunnel during Supercross. I try to get into a 'zone' and try to think about other things or focus on the start". However, James mentioned that he struggles to block out the names of some of his opponents at races, which often leads him to overthink. He said:

When you go to a pro race, you know who you are racing against already, you know how fast they are. You just think about it so much that it kind of gets to you

a little bit. I don't know. That is probably the worst mental part for me, just trying to block out everything and just go ride.

Rick described his awareness of potential distractions he might face when he said:

Mostly, I guess staying focused, at least that is for me. You know keeping up with training, riding, stuff like that, not getting into trouble, or you know, taking care of business, stuff like that...staying focused as in... you should be training, practicing, taking care of your business work instead of screwing around, or partying...stuff like that. [I am] trying to get there, but there are times when the mental focus thing sometimes distracts me a lot! I know I can do it, but sometimes I get sidetracked or something like that. I am trying the whole mental thing, trying to get my head straight sometimes so I can do it like I know I can do it.

Riders discussed how they attempted to “get a good focus” in order to deal with the mental demands of their sport. A key component of thought control involved the process of dealing with distractions. Several riders mentioned how they attempted to cope with distracting and irrelevant thoughts they experienced prior to and during their races. With the various distracters that motocross riders have to deal with (e.g., fans, family, race conditions, sponsors, etc.) - in addition to their relatively young age - it seems like it would be beneficial for them to develop appropriate thought control coping strategies.

This finding corresponds with previous research with Canadian athletes competing in the 1984 Olympic Games (Orlick & Partington, 1988). Successful athletes have plans in place to deal with the inevitability of distractions during their performances. Similarly, Gould et al. (1993) found that Olympic wrestlers attempted to “deny access to their consciousness of distracting, irrelevant, or irritating thoughts” (p. 88). Holt and

Hogg (2002) also found that players had to cope, ignore, or block out the distractions and irrelevant thoughts they experienced during practice and game situations, particularly when fatigue set in.

*Controllable factors.* The sub-theme *controllable factors* described the riders' ability to focus on controllable factors they experience as professional athletes. Rob suggested that not having a sponsor can be mentally demanding; however, he recognized that it was out of his control. He said, "I just have to deal with what I have". James believed that in order to achieve his goals he had to stay focused on things that he could control. He stated, "Once I perform, everything comes a lot easier. So, I just do my training and what I need to do, and once I start performing everything will come to me". Mike also explained how he focused on the things that he could do rather than letting any negative thoughts creep into his mind. He said:

Whatever you think about, that's the dominant thought in your mind, so you pretty much do it. So, if you are thinking about 'not crash', your mind is still thinking 'crash' and so you crash. The best way to try and do it is to just think about what you can do and then do it. It's like complicated, but it is simple, too.

Finally, Ernie recalled how he thought that, instead of taking shortcuts like some of his teammates did during practice, he focused on things that he could control during practices. This ultimately paid off during races:

I just try to keep focusing on what I am doing and as long as I am putting in my good motos that I know I can put in, then I know I am prepared for the weekend.

Because I see some of them that will hop in behind me for 10 minutes and do a 10

minute moto until I pull off. Then, 'hey, they only did 10 minutes while I prepared for the whole moto'.

Several riders mentioned staying focused on controllable factors rather than dwelling on uncontrollable events that might occur in their sport. This included dealing with sponsors or thinking about what might happen during races. Similarly, Gould et al. (1993) reported the technique wrestlers used called "perspective taking", where they would "place the event within a reasonable mental framework in which the wrestler felt comfortable or in control" (p. 88).

*Reframing.* The sub-theme *reframing* represented the ability of motocross riders to positively restructure some of their negative thoughts into more positive statements. Mike mentioned that he had a special way of getting rid of negative events in his mind and reprogramming them in a positive manner to help him during practices and races. He stated:

I just kind of call it like, 'taping over'. If you are seeing something on tape, you are recording yourself and you mess up, just rewind it and tape back over it like it was never there. So you can do that. It is kind of hard, but... the best way of thinking about what you want and not what you don't want. You kind of reprogram...you kind of block that thought out and think about, 'I can go faster, I will go faster'.

Karl discussed how he changed his focus from poor results to his previous successes by reconnecting with his previous performances. He said:

I forgot how to do that. I know how to ride my bike and I have proved that I can beat the [rider's name], the [rider's name], the guys who are winning the



nationals, who are winning supercrosses. I have beaten them before, so there is no reason why I can't beat them again.

Rick also described his ability to reframe the way he was judging his performance earlier in the week in order to focus on what he was going to do for his next race:

This past year at (race) I was doing crappy all week because of different things. I didn't like riding the bike that I was riding, and, generally not feeling good. I was kind of down. 'Man, this sucks, I hate this, it is bugging me'. By the end of the week, I set my mind back to a good spot and told myself to relax, 'I can do this' and I did well in my last moto.

Riders used reframing techniques to positively restructure the negative thoughts that entered their minds regarding practice and after performances. One co-participant used the interesting analogy of "taping over" an event after a poor performance and recording over it with a better performance. This finding is consistent with previous reports of athletes' use of positive thinking and "reappraising" (Gould et al., 1993; Holt & Hogg, 2002). One may assume that reframing thoughts is a key component to dealing with some of the stressors experienced by professional motocross riders. This coping strategy may be particularly useful when dealing with disappointing past performances.

### *Staying Focused*

The second major theme associated with coping strategies was *staying focused*, which described how the riders were able to stay focused on the immediate task at hand. The two related sub-themes were: (a) focusing on the present; and (b) pre-performance routines.

*Focusing on the present.* The sub-theme *focusing on the present* concerned the notion that staying present-centered was an effective coping technique. Rick stated:

Keep your mindset on certain things of what to do, or experiment with different things. So that is what I usually do. I usually try to just focus on what is ahead of me and try to not think about that person. So that is how I deal with that.

Karl suggested that the only thing he needed to worry about was what he was presently focusing on:

I just try to think about what is the best way I can go about this, or what do I need to be thinking about. I try not to think about things I don't need to think about out. Sometimes I think too much about things.

*Pre-performance routines.* The sub-theme *pre-performance routines* described the way in which the riders used pre-performance routines to cope with the mental demands of their sport. Phil discussed his use of the pre-performance routine of running prior to a championship he won:

The year I won a championship I [would] always go out right before a moto and run about a mile to clear everything out which I probably should be doing again, but we'll see. I always like to be moving around, because when you are moving around you really don't think about much except what you are doing at that time.

I would definitely have to be mobile I would have to say.

Other riders also identified staying focused in the present as a coping strategy for dealing with the mental demands of motocross. Similarly, Gould et al. (1993) found that one of the more effective ways wrestlers found to deal with stressors was to narrow what they were focusing on while ignoring previous performances. Riders used pre-performance

routines to help them focus during competitions and practices. Likewise, Orlick and Partington (1988) found that the use of precompetition plans by Olympic athletes gave them reminders of what to focus on during competitions. Furthermore, Dale (2000) found that elite decathletes incorporated consistent routines prior to and during competitions seemed to deal with stressors in their sport. Additionally, Giacobbi and colleagues (2004) found that the use of specific golf course strategies, such as pre-shot routines, helped golfers remain focused and deal with the sources of stress inherent in golf.

### *Emotional Control*

The last theme dealing with coping strategies was *emotional control*, which described the riders' attempts to manage their emotions immediately before the race began. The two related sub-themes were: (a) regulating arousal; and (b) mental training techniques.

*Regulating arousal.* The sub-theme *regulating arousal* represented the riders' ability to regulate their arousal level and how that arousal regulation helped them deal with the mental demands of their sport. Ernie believed that in order to calm his nerves prior to a race, he needed to work on getting a rhythm. He said:

I try to get into a 'zone' and try to think about other things or focus on the start.

When I am on the line I always try to get a rhythm going, think of a song and block everything out. When you get down there and not even hear anybody.

Everyone could be screaming and you could be so focused that you can't hear anybody. That is what I try to do most of the time. Sometimes it doesn't work.

James suggested that he listened to music prior to the race to regulate his arousal. He said, "Sometimes, I listen to some music. A lot of people do that...listen to music. Maybe

calm yourself or hype yourself up depending on what you have to do”. Phil used a relaxation script in addition to music to help him achieve his optimal state of relaxation:

I had this cd I listened to. It was a relaxing cd, it really helped me out, definitely, 'cause obviously I won. It really helped me out with relaxing stuff. Not really a motivational cd, it was a calming down cd.

When asked him to explain further, Phil said:

I get so worked up and stuff. That was one of my main things I used before my race... It was just someone talking to me. “Cool, calm, just relax before a race”. Anyone could have done it, really. My mom could have been there talking to me and it would have probably been the same thing. But she wasn't there. Things I try to do are listen to a little bit of music and try to get my mind away from things.

And finally, James said:

The worst part about this happening is when I just sit there and do nothing. I need to keep moving or laying down or doing something. Actually I need to be doing something. I need to be moving around.

Karl said that he used a relaxation script to help him deal with some of the stressors he experienced before races:

It was just me and my headphones laying down in my motor home and putting it on my head and not really falling asleep but closing my eyes and listening to it for 15 minutes. Just hearing that in my head and then go out and do a race.

*Mental training techniques.* The sub-theme *mental training techniques* represented the sport psychology techniques used by riders who were open to them – and who had access to a consultant - to help deal with the mental demands in their sport.

Specifically, Mike mentioned that he would go over handouts that his consultant gave him and would also have his trainer help him through difficult times. He said:

Well, I still have a bunch of those papers that [sport psychologist] gave me. They are in my room. I actually read them a couple of times through last year. But I go back when I am having trouble, but that is really the only thing. Other than that, our trainers are pretty good with that kind of stuff. They talk to us about what we need to be thinking about and stuff like that.

Emotional control strategies used by these riders were also consistent with previous research with other athletes (Gould et al., 1992; 1993; Giacobbi et al., 2004). In the present study, almost every rider mentioned the use of music and its role in getting him ready to perform. In a study examining the effects of pretest stimulation and sedative music on grip strength of participants, Karageorghis, Drew, and Terry (1996) found that music can alter arousal levels. More specifically, music can stimulate or slow down an athlete's arousal level prior to competition. In a follow up study, Karageorghis and Terry (1997) also found that music can affect the mood of athletes and help them disassociate from negative sensations inside their bodies.

The riders in the present study mentioned how the use of other mental training techniques were helpful in dealing with some of the stressors that occur in racing. Athletes in previous studies (Gould et al., 1993) reported using relaxation, breathing, and music to arrive at a more optimal emotional performance level. Furthermore, Gould et al. (1993) found that the use of mental training techniques such as visualization and breathing were useful in coping with some of the sports' mental demands.

*Summary*

The themes derived from the interpretive analysis included four that represented the mental demands of racing these were: (a) the racing environment; (b) the nature of the sport; (c) expectations; and (d) relationship with others. Three additional themes represented the coping strategies used by these professional motocross riders. They included: (a) thought control; (b) staying focused; and (c) emotional control. In the next chapter the new findings drawn from this study are discussed. In addition, conclusions are offered and suggestions for practitioners and future researchers are suggested.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND APPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the mental demands and coping strategies employed by professional motocross riders. An interpretive analysis of the semi-structured interviews resulted in seven major themes. Four themes related to the mental demands of motocross and three concerned coping strategies. The former included: (a) the racing environment; (b) the nature of the sport, (c) expectations; and (d) relationships with others. The latter included (a) thought control; (b) staying focused; and (c) emotional control. In this chapter, new findings that emerged in this study are discussed. In addition, several limitations are mentioned. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for both future research and application are offered.

### *New Finding #1: Mental Demands of Motocross*

The current study was one of the first to investigate the experiences of professional motocross riders. Therefore, it is hoped that it will add to the sport psychology literature on performance enhancement. While the previous study by Collins and colleagues (1993) yielded some insightful information regarding the tools needed to enhance performance little knowledge of the factors that affected riders' mental state was obtained. Based on the findings of the present study it seems that there are some similarities as well as differences in the experiences of these riders versus the one in the Collins et al. (1993) study.

### *New Finding #2: The Effects of the Bike*

One finding that did not parallel those of previous research in any sport was these riders' discussion of the role of the bike and how its status affected their state of mind. Several riders mentioned how having a bike they couldn't trust was extremely

detrimental to performance. Some stated that they had become very dependent on their bikes, so much so that they were only comfortable before a race if they knew their bike was sound. Additionally, a couple riders recalled how frustrating it was to mentally prepare for a race and then have their bike break down. This led to the perception of a lack of control over the situation which, in turn, affected their performance.

*New Finding #3: The Youth Subculture*

Another interesting fact was that most riders were young. The amount of time spent as a professional definitely related to riding performance and confidence, and most of the participants in this study had been competing as a professional for less than three years. Many riders recalled their experiences as amateurs when talking about how they dealt with the mental demands of their sport because they did not have much professional experience as of yet. Had there been some riders with more professional experience in this study, there may have been a greater breadth of responses regarding the mental demands of the sport, and the coping strategies used by the riders.

*New Finding #4: "Cool Pose" in Motocross*

A final interesting result was that many riders chose not to use the term "fear" when talking about competing in their sport. Many riders provided examples of experiencing troubling times in their sport, but would often minimize these demands or retract what they were saying in order to avoid appearing weak or vulnerable. It seems like many of the riders displayed elements related to the notion of "cool pose". According to Majors (1991), "cool pose" is defined as "channeling their creative energies into the construction of unique, expressive, and conspicuous styles of demeanor, speech, gesture, clothing, hairstyle, walk, stance, and handshake" (p. 111). It is also related to notions of



masculinity. Although this notion was created to help understand the coping strategies of African American males in dealing with the environmental obstacles in their lives, it appears that this type of posturing was present in the motocross participants. The motocross events I've attended also seem to be characterized by many riders who act, talk, dress similarly, and listen to the same type of music (e.g., punk music). The sense of coolness and hypermasculinity found in this study and in other research (Majors & Billson, 1992; Czopp, Lasane, Sweigard, Bradshaw, & Hammer, 1998; Hassbrook & Harris, 1999; Martino, 1999) may be indicative of some male athletes' attempts to cope with the injuries and pressures they experience in their sport.

### *Limitations*

One limitation emerging during the study was the need to conduct phone interviews with three of the co-participants. While previous research has shown (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) that the manner in which people respond and self-disclose does not vary between face-to-face interviews and those conducted over the telephone, co-participants in this study who were interviewed over the phone did not seem as candid and forthright with their responses compared to those interviewed face-to-face. Certainly, my inability to analyze their body language and non-verbal cues may have limited my interpretation of their data.

In addition, many of the riders had not completed high school and seemed to have difficulty answering some of the questions. As previously mentioned, many had been professionals for only a short period of time. Perhaps adjusting to the grueling nature of the sport during their rookie years delayed their ability to develop effective coping strategies to help deal with these demands and also prevented them from articulating their

answers in greater detail. As is the case with many young athletes, these riders reported “partying” as a way of reducing stress instead of taking care of themselves via sound nutrition and pre-race planning.

### *Future Research*

Based on the findings of this study, two suggestions for future research are offered. First, future researchers need to investigate the mental demands and coping strategies of athletes in other “extreme” sport populations (e.g., arenacross, snowboardcross), including both males and females and those representing a variety of countries. Second, future researchers need to examine the experiences of self-sufficient professional motocross riders who have no funding from sponsors, teams, etc. These riders’ experience may be vastly different from those who participated in the present study.

### *Recommendations for Sport Psychology Consultants, Motocross Athletes, and Coaches*

Based on the results of this investigation, the following recommendations for sport psychology consultants, motocross athletes, and coaches are offered:

1. Professional motocross riders and team managers/mechanics should be aware of the mental demands of the sport associated with: (a) the racing environment; (b) the physical nature of the sport; (c) the expectations of oneself and others; and (d) relationships with teammates and sponsors. These individuals should also be aware of the coping techniques riders might utilize to meet these demands, including: (a) the incorporation of thought control to help deal with distractions; (b) staying focused on the present and having solid

pre-performance routines; and (c) controlling emotions using arousal regulation and other mental training techniques.

2. Team managers and significant others need to be aware of the affect their behavior can have on the riders' focus, emotions, and performance.
3. Motocross riders should consider working with sport psychology consultants to develop a "mental tool box" that would allow them to choose the appropriate strategy for dealing with the mental demands of their sport.
4. Motocross riders need to understand that in order to effectively deal with the mental demands of their sport, they must use consistent strategies (e.g., pre-performance routines) instead of randomly attempting different tactics and switching to new strategies if the previous strategy is unsuccessful.

### *Summary*

To summarize, the following information was gathered from the current study. First, professional motocross riders identified several mental demands of their sport, including the racing environment, the nature of the sport, expectations, and relationships with others. Second, they used various coping strategies (e.g., thought control, staying focused, and emotional control) to deal with the mental demands experienced in the sport of motocross. Third, they were relatively young and competed in a physically and mentally demanding sport where they often had to fend for themselves both financially and professionally. Fourth, the use of a qualitative investigation represents a powerful methodology to gain insight into the experiences of motocross athletes.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: BRACKETING INTERVIEW GUIDE

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “mental demands”?

What are some of the mental demands related to motocross?

When do you think they experience any of these mental demands?

Talk about the times that you think are mentally demanding for professional motocross riders (during practice/during competition).

Are there differences between the two? Is one harder than the other? Why?

How much time do you think they spend focusing on the mental demands before/during/after practice?

How much time do you think they spend focusing on the mental demands before/during/after competition?

What other demands are placed on motocross riders?

Has the way you think they experience the mental demands of motocross changed since they began participating in the sport? If so please describe the changes for me.

Can you describe for me a time when you thought they dealt successfully with the mental demands of motocross?

Can you tell me about a time when you think they had difficulties dealing with the mental demands of their sport?

Have they ever used any mental training techniques to help with the mental demands of motocross?

If so, please explain how successful were these? If not, why not? Are they available to them?

Is there anything else you think is important for us to talk about related to motocross?

APPENDIX B: PILOT INTERVIEW GUIDE

## Demographic Information

(start with age, ethnicity, race, citizenship, brothers and sisters, marital status, children, full-time professional motocross rider or other jobs, number and type of injuries related to motocross, other sports involved in, etc.)

Would you start by describing for me your background in motocross?

(Follow-up questions: When did you begin as a motocross rider? How did you get involved in the sport? How long have you been participating in motocross?

When did you first decide to become a professional motocross rider?)

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “mental demands”?

What are some of the mental demands regarding being a professional motocross rider?

Do you experience any of these mental demands? When? Talk about the times that are mentally demanding for you as a professional motocross rider.

What are the mental demands of practice?

What are the mental demands during competition?

Are there differences between the two? Is that typical for you? Are the demands harder in one than in the other? If so, in what way(s)?

What are your expectations for peak performance?

How do you deal/cope with the mental aspects of practice?

How do you deal/cope with the mental aspects of competition?

How much time do you spend focusing on the mental demands during practice?

How much time do you spend focusing on the mental demands before competition?

How much time do you spend focusing on the mental demands during competition?

When are the mental demands a focus for you?

When are the mental demands a distraction for you?

Has the way you experience the mental demands of motocross changed since you began participating in the sport? If so please describe the changes for me.

Can you describe for me a time when you dealt successfully with the mental demands of your sport?

Can you tell me about a time when you had difficulties dealing with the mental demands of your sport?

Have you ever used any mental training techniques to cope with motocross mental demands? If you have, how successful were these techniques? If not, what are some reasons you haven't? Are mental training services available to you?

Is there anything else you think is important for us to talk about related to motocross?

How do you feel the interview went?

APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE



## Demographic Information

(start with age, ethnicity, race, citizenship, brothers and sisters, marital status, children, full-time professional motocross rider or other jobs, number and type of injuries related to motocross, other sports involved in, etc.)

Would you start by describing for me your background in motocross?  
 (Follow-up questions: When did you begin as a motocross rider? How did you get involved in the sport? How long have you been participating in motocross? When did you first decide to become a professional motocross rider?)

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “mental demands”?

What are some of the mental demands regarding being a professional motocross rider?

Do you experience any of these mental demands? When? Talk about the times that are mentally demanding for you as a professional motocross rider.

What are the mental demands of practice?

What are the mental demands during competition?

Are there differences between the two? Is that typical for you? Are the demands harder in one than in the other? If so, in what way(s)?

What are your expectations for peak performance?

How do you deal/cope with the mental aspects of practice?

How do you deal/cope with the mental aspects of competition?

How much time do you spend focusing on the mental demands during practice?

How much time do you spend focusing on the mental demands before competition?

How much time do you spend focusing on the mental demands during competition?

When are the mental demands a focus for you?

When are the mental demands a distraction for you?

Has the way you experience the mental demands of motocross changed since you began participating in the sport? If so please describe the changes for me.

If you are a member of a team, what are some of the demands related to team issues? (Probes – are there cliques; does it help if you like your teammates; what is your relationship like with your teammates?)

How do you negotiate this being on a team vs winner take all mentality? (Probe - how do you negotiate the demands of your sponsors against the demands of your team members? How do you cope with this stuff?)

What is the process that occurs when you (hopefully not) get injured? Does the team help out with the medical expenses or are you on your own?

Can you describe for me a time when you dealt successfully with the mental demands of your sport?

Can you tell me about a time when you had difficulties dealing with the mental demands of your sport?

What are your thoughts on your current bike? Do you enjoy it? How do you deal with issues related to your bike and other mechanical concerns?

Have you ever used any mental training techniques to cope with motocross mental demands? If you have, how successful were these techniques? If not, what are some reasons you haven't? Are mental training services available to you?

Is there anything else you think is important for us to talk about related to motocross?

How do you feel the interview went?

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT

In this research study I would like to examine the mental demands and coping strategies of professional motocross riders. The research is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctoral Degree in sport psychology at the University of Tennessee. During the interview, I will ask you some questions about your experience with the mental demands and coping strategies of your sport in both competition and in practice. The interview will be open-ended and informal in nature and will take between approximately forty-five minutes and one hour. The interview will be recorded using a digital audio recorder and then transcribed. You will then be sent a draft summary and transcript. This will give you the opportunity to peruse the transcript and offer any additional comments for clarification purposes. This can be done at your leisure and will take approximately an hour to review and make your changes. The information you provide will then be thematized and coded into categories for research purposes. All discussions taking place during the interviews will be kept private and confidential and your responses will be used only for research purposes. Only the members of my research team and myself will have access to your transcript. Every effort will be taken to maintain your anonymity. Only with your consent will your name be used in any published report.

Furthermore, the audio taped interview will be digitally transferred and copied onto a compact disc. Only the primary investigator will have access to these audio files to help ensure that no one else will be able to recognize your voice. It will be locked and stored in a cabinet in my office (144 HPER) until May 2006 to allow adequate time for the interview to be transcribed. After this process is completed the compact disc will be destroyed through the use of an office shredder.

#### Statement of Consent

I understand that the Institutional Review Board at the University of Tennessee has approved this project and that I may contact a representative of the Office of Research Compliance Services (865-974-3466) if I have any questions about my rights as a participant.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print name), acknowledge that the research procedures described have been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been informed of all procedures in the study. I have been assured that records relating to me will be kept confidential and no information will be released or printed that would disclose my personal identity without my permission. I understand that participation is strictly voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at anytime or decline to answer any specific question without pressure or prejudice.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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APPENDIX E: SAMPLE INTERPRETATIONS OF A TRANSCRIPT

Q. Would you start by describing for me your background in motocross.

A. My background in motocross. I started when I was 5 years old and pretty much developed all my skills locally and when I started winning around [state name] kind of going to national level...traveling more. I am going to guess 1994 was my first year going to the nationals and ever since that year I made the nationals every single year qualified for them. In 1998, I should have had my first championship but with some bad luck I unfortunately did not. It was the one where I won my first moto at the nationals and realized kind of that this was going to be a stepping stone to a career for me. In [year], when I won my first championship, actually it was after the big amateur nationals, it was another amateur nationals in [state name] which was called the [name of race]. I won a 65 10-11 class. Picked up a ride with [factory sponsored team] and rode for them until I was... I believe 13 or 14. Then I went on the [factor sponsored team]. That point on it was 2001 I was [name of bike] until 2004. In 2003 I won my first [amateur] national championship in the [name of class]. Then I moved to A class where I won two 4 stroke nationals. I got 3<sup>rd</sup> at [amateur race] in 2004 and then I got a ride with [factory sponsored team] after that. I placed 12<sup>th</sup> overall at [name of race] and received top privateer award. In 2005, I signed with [factory sponsored team] which would rather be a forgotten year for me. I had an experience to learn a little bit more about racing in general and here I am now in 2006 trying to find out what is going on with me.

Q. How did you first get involved in this sport?

A. I got involved through a cousin of mine. He was a top 5 racer in [name of country]. He came over and introduced me to the sport. My dad was a car racer at the time. So I knew a little bit about it. He went to a race and it was really no big deal to me. We showed up...and as soon as I saw those bikes I was hooked immediately. About 2 months later it was my birthday and they bought me a bike so I started riding down the street from my house on a little lot. It kind of escalated from there. I never thought I would be here, but I am.

Q. You mentioned earlier when you almost won the amateur championship in 98 you mentioned, and then when you actually did win at [amateur race], when did you first decide that maybe being a professional rider was something that you would start to consider more seriously.

A. I am going to guess probably in 2003 when I won the [name of class] and intermediate because, obviously at that time I didn't know that the guys I was racing against would be top guys right now. I knew that those guys definitely would be at the top pro ranks. For me to be beating them was kind of like a huge goal for me. Not only just a huge goal, but kind of mentally I decided it then that I was going to be pro and this is what I wanted to do with my life. Pretty much it was a stepping stone for me to the pro ranks. After the championship I immediately turned [up to another class] and things went a little bit better. After I went to go race a couple of pros that actually qualified for outdoor nationals and I ended up winning. From that point I think I had a good idea that I was going to be doing this for a career...going to pursue this as a career. I didn't know that I would be here now and doing it for sure. I would definitely say [amateur race] nationals was the moment when I kind of got a good idea what was going on.

Q. What do you mean by the difference between the A and the B classes?

A. The B class is like the intermediate class when you move from small bike to big bike. If you are a top mini-bike rider you move directly into the intermediate class which is actually a rule if you are top three at the nationals...you move to intermediate. Usually people spend from a year to two years. I kind of went fast through it. I was not expected to win the championship class but I did so. The B class is the intermediate, and the A class is the pro-am class I guess you could call it. Or the expert class. After the A class is of course pro. So that is the classifications.

Q. We are going to move to the main parts of the interview. What do you think of when you hear the phrase mental demands?

A. Mental demands?

Q. Yes.

Q. Okay. What are some of the mental demands regarding being a professional motocross rider?

A. Definitely when I was amateur, when I was in the intermediate class, it was mentally for me it wasn't like I didn't expect to do good, it was more that I was there to have fun. I was there just to ride my bike and have fun. I did what I did. My dad had no pressure on me. He knew it was my first year on a big bike. My pops didn't put any pressure on me at all. When I started to do very well in the amateurs and won my championship, pressure kind of started escalating. People then started expecting me to win races and doing good you know. I moved into the pros and got that ride with the factory team. Mentally I felt so pressured by everybody that I almost forgot why I was racing. Not racing for other people, I am racing for myself...to have fun. Then I started not doing well and so much stuff happened, so when I moved into the pros I definitely felt like it was a different world. It seemed like everyone expected so much out of me. At the same time I wanted to perform for them so I didn't think about why I was doing it. It just seemed like everyone expected so much out of me and when I didn't perform for them, it was a disappointment for me and them at the same time. I guess mentally it was really hard for me, during the 2005 season to take that.

Increased pressure once he became a professional

Expectations from others to win

Wanted to do well for others because of these expectations > did poorly and felt bad.

Q. You mentioned a couple of things – pressure and expectations from self and others – would you talk a little more about that?

A. There wasn't pressure like they wouldn't come up to me and be like 'you have to do good'. It was more of me thinking it you know. My dad, honestly did not put all this much pressure on me. He would tell me, which I obviously needed to hear, that if I didn't perform in that year I wasn't going to have a ride next year which it happened. I didn't perform and now I don't have a ride. It was just a matter of me thinking so much about it. About doing good, when I just needed to focus on riding my bike, riding like I know how to ride. It was just a really stressful year in 2005 for me just because it wasn't like amateurs where I had my

Put pressure on himself to perform

Dad was blunt: perform or no sponsor next year.



own deal, and me and my dad were on our own. I was actually riding for a team and they expected a performance out of me and I didn't really perform for them.

Not just performing for self, but now on team who expected him to perform.

Q. You mentioned a couple of times that 2005 was a season that was really tough and that things didn't go your way. Would you talk more about what happened during that season?

A. The first thing that happened at the very beginning of the year, I signed my contract with my new team [factory sponsored company]. We weren't expected to buy bikes. It was in my contract that they were going to provide us with everything, which they didn't. So we bought our own bikes and we went down to [southeastern U.S. city], well I came down to [southeastern U.S. city] to start riding and training. About a week before the first Supercross started I broke my wrist and had to sit the whole supercross season out. That was a big disappointment for me, my team, my family, everybody. They really expected me to jump in supercross and get a learn for it. I know there was no pressure for me in supercross because it was my first year, they just wanted to see how I was going to do. So the year didn't start out too well but I recovered from that and started getting ready for outdoors. Started doing some riding with the team in California and the first round came along and I didn't even qualify. I had never not even qualified before. It was such a big shock. I didn't know what to do. I kind of regrouped a little bit and went back for the second round and I qualified. In the third round I hit a little bump. I ended up dislocating my big toe and tearing some ligament in it. So I sat the weekend out. This happened in the first moto and I qualified no problem. I went to the doctor and he said I was good to go, I could ride. At the same time, in my mind, the pain was so bad that I didn't really realize. I didn't think in my mind that I could ride, but the doctor said 'yeah' so I sucked it up. The pain got so bad that I had to cortisone shots almost every weekend. We did that, and then I got a dislocated shoulder at one round an injury here, bike problem there, just things left and right so I was out for the season. About a week after [race] we went to my doctor and he told me that I would have to have reconstructive foot surgery from the accident from [race]. It was definitely not a big turn on for me. So I ended up going through

Frustration over bike purchase with sponsors.

Tried to race through new injuries, until it became unbearable.

surgery, so I am going to miss the supercross season again in 2006. So it was just a down hill year all together.

A. It was a mix of bike problems, injuries, and the team, and me, myself.

Q. Wrist, shoulder and reconstructive foot surgery. It sounds like a bunch of injuries for one year. You talked about some of the mental demands. Talk a little bit more about the times that are mentally demanding for you as a professional motocross rider.

Nerves

A. Definitely right before the race starts, like going up to the line. The worst part for me at a race. I get so nervous sometimes. At amateur races I was never really that bad.

Q. Is there any other parts that are mentally demanding for you?

A. There is really not to tell you the truth. Just going to the line and trying to relax as much as possible is so hard for me to do. Everyone tells me to lay down, but I can't lay down because I am all jittery. It is one thing that I need to work on is definitely working on being calm before a race, not worrying about who I am racing against because every weekend is the same person for me.

Try to calm nerves before his races.  
Try not to focus on opponents.

Q. Talk about the mental demands of practice?

A. To tell you the truth, in practice, I seem to ride a lot better during practice than I do during a race. I don't know why it is, maybe it is because I don't have anyone pressuring me and I don't really care if I win or not because it is practice. But in practice, I seem to block everything out and just have fun with practice. Last year was a different story because I don't know it was just different. I wasn't really enjoying motocross period last year. But I spent a lot – its' been 4 months since I have been out and now I am itching to ride and having fun riding again. I am really out of shape. Really in practice I don't see any mental demands in practice.

Able to block out distractions in practice

No pressure

Q. How about with the technical stuff?

A. Of course, every once in a while if you mess up something - around a corner – it gets to you a little bit. In practice you can always turn around and do it again, go do it, go do it and practice on it until you get it. You know then you can connect to the next part of the track and then you have a whole lap going. I don't really think there are many mental demands of practice.

Sometimes working on improving skills in practice, but doesn't feel demands.

Q. What are some of the mental demands of competition? You have mentioned about before the race trying to block out everything else when you are at the line. Are there any other things?

A. To tell you the truth, as far as being mentally ready for a race, being at the line, it really doesn't sound like much, but for me it really is. It is hard to explain what goes on in my head before a race, but it is just nerves right before a race. Just thinking about everything. I need to focus on not thinking about everything and just focus on riding.

Nerves right before a race.  
Extraneous thoughts

Q. How much time do you spend focusing on the mental parts of practice?

A. Probably not enough time to tell you the truth. Should be probably more, but I really don't. We go to the gym and then come back and practice all day. We do motos and sprints and stuff. Of course I think about when I am on the track what is going on, how can I do this faster? How can I do that faster? How can I not make a mistake there? Or here? I definitely think about a lot of stuff, but sometimes you just don't do it in practice. Those are some of the things I think about, but it is definitely not like a race. It is hard to explain so it's so much different for me. I wish it wasn't because I am really faster in practice than I am...sometimes if I just treat it like practice it would be good, but that is not the case.

Issues about training he thought about.

Q. How much time do you spend focusing on the mental aspects of competition?

A. At a race, quite a bit. At a pro race I always name all the names ahead in my class, and basically probably 25-30 of

them are pretty much fast guys, and I always contemplate on that. I just dwell on it so bad. It sucks, but I get so nervous about it before a race and that is why I do so bad sometimes because I am thinking about it. When you get nervous you tighten up, and you ride bad all this stuff happens. I definitely spend too much time thinking about it I think.

Others focused prior to races.  
Nervous feelings.

Q. How do you cope? How do you deal with the mental demands of practice? Competition?

A. Practice, I don't really need to cope too much. When racing, um, things I try to do are listen to a little bit of music and try to get my mind away from things. Try to relax as much as possible – lay down, ride a bicycle – try to get warmed up a little bit, try not to think too much about racing. The year I won a championship I always go out right before a moto and run about a mile to clear everything out which I probably should be doing again, but we'll see. I always like to be moving around, because when you are moving around you really don't think about much except what you are doing at that time. I would definitely have to be mobile I would have to say.

Before competition he uses music to help relax

Avoid distractions

Goes for a run prior to a race to help clear his mind – moving keeps his mind distracted.

Q. Say a little more about music and how it 'gets you away from things'.

A. I don't know. I love music almost more than anything almost. Music is a huge part for me. What I can listen to music wise, will get my mind pretty much away from anything. Sometimes it doesn't. If the race is really nervous for me or nervewracking it doesn't work, but most of the times, music is one of the only things that will get my mind away from things.

Music – gets his mind away from things

Q. Okay thanks. Are there any coping strategies you use during a race to deal with some of the mental aspects of the race?

A. Once I got to a race, say [amateur race] the year I won, I had this cd I listened to. It was a relaxing cd, it really helped me out definitely cause, obviously I won. It really helped me out with relaxing stuff. Not really a motivational cd, it was a calming down cd. I get so worked up and stuff. That was one of my main things I used before my race.

Use of relaxation cd helped calm him down prior to his race.

Since then, I haven't used it too much since then...actually at all. I probably should be getting back to that still. That was one of the things I used the most.

Q. We talked about some of the mental demands you faced during practice, during the race. How about some of the mental demands you experience off the track?

A. Not so many. Obviously you have to deal with your training, eating right, doing everything right before a race which sometimes it is hard getting motivated to do. But it's not too bad. I enjoy doing it so... that's part of the sport. That's what you got to do, train and get ready to race. To me there is no stress doing it. Sometimes I won't really want to do it just because I am not motivated to do it, because sometimes you just want a day off. It kicks your butt to do, but you know you are better for doing it..

Eating and training right are important demands off the track.

Q. Has the way you have experienced the mental demands of motocross changed since you began participating in the sport?

A. Obviously when I was small I really didn't care about anything. When younger I didn't care about anyone on the track. I just did my own thing and raced for fun. Now it just seems like more of a job and this is what I got to do. You have to train twice as hard, four times as hard to be good. The sport is at such a different level than when I started at. When I started, there were only a select few guys that were good. Now there are 20 guys in my class that are good. I really think the competition has stepped up. The pressure is a little bit harder to take at times. Other than that I think those are the only things that have changed in this sport. I don't think things have changed dramatically, just a little bit.

When kid/amateur there was no pressure. Now it is more of a job

Competition is better.

Q. You mentioned about how you successfully dealt with some of the mental demands of your sport with the cd. Would you mind going more into detail with that?

A. The cd was like a relaxing cd. It was just someone talking to me. "cool, calm, just relax before a race". Anyone could have done it really. My mom could have been there talking to me and it would have probably been the same thing. But she wasn't there. The only thing it

Use of relaxation cd helped him relax prior to race.

really said was “Cool, calm, relax, everything is going to be fine.” Kind of like that.

Q. Now on the opposite side can you talk about a time that you had difficulties coping with the mental demands with your sport?

A. There have been plenty of times like that, especially this year. Probably every race this year. **This year has been tough because I was never confident in my bike. I never had a good bike.** It was hard for me to give it 100% when the team I was riding for wasn't giving it 110%. **So those were definitely stressful issues for me, including injuries. Always having that nagging in the back of your mind just trying to block it out, but sometimes it is so hard to block it out.** Definitely the team that I rode for wasn't backing me 110% because if they were I would have finished at least more than 1 moto out of 24 this year. Those were definitely some stressful issues I had this year.

Difficult to cope with demands when there are bike issues, injuries, and a lack of support from team.

Q. You just mentioned a couple of interesting things. Talk about the lack of confidence with your bike. Would you mind talking a little more about that?

A. Yeah. I don't feel like I had... **When I was on [name of bike] I definitely knew I had a good bike and a competitive bike. When I was on the [name of bike] I didn't feel like I had the best bike out there. Definitely it was a stressful issue for me cause when I get to the line, my bike wouldn't start, or something stupid would happen. Then I would think “if my bike doesn't start now, what is going to happen on the track? It was frustrating not really knowing what was going to happen with your bike.**

Stressed because lack of confidence in his bike – focusing on the bike versus his race plan.

Q. That is pretty interesting. What about with the injuries that you have experienced. Did your team help you out with the rehab.

A. **Not really to tell you the truth. I haven't really got much help from them. I don't really want to bag them and all that stuff. We are still having issues with them up to this day, so I would rather leave this stuff behind.**

Lack of team support when in rehab.

Q. You mentioned how you cope with various mental demands of your sport. What are your expectations with regards to performing at your best?

A. What are my expectations as to where I want to be?

Q. Yes.

A. I definitely expect myself to be a top 15 overall rider in the outdoor season, which I definitely know that will provide me a ride in 2007. I also want a couple top 10 finishes here and there in the outdoor season. But I just want to be a solid top 15 rider which I don't believe is definitely not out of my range. Those are my expectations for 2006. If that happens, which I really hope it does, I believe I can get a ride for 2007 and not have to worry about struggling right now trying to get a ride, try to see what is going on.

Expectations to perform in the 2006 season will hopefully lead to sponsors the following year.

Q. You mentioned the stress about being uncertain about having a ride. Talk a little bit more about that if you don't mind.

A. Okay. I misunderstood the question.

Q. We have talked about the mental demands you have dealt with. You have mentioned a couple of times about the stress of not having a ride. Can you talk a bit more about that process?

A. Definitely when you have a ride there are a lot of things you don't need to worry about. You don't need to worrying about calling all these sponsors. You just deal with one person which is the team manager of the team who controls all the sponsors on the team and all the bikes and all that. When you do sign with the team, really a lot of the stress goes away. When you are by yourself you have to worry about what kind of gear you are going to wear. What kind of goggles you are going to use, what kind of boots, what type of bike you are going to ride, your moto suit, your suspension, what type of pipe you are going to run. Everything you have to find all your own stuff when you are on your own. For the team they give you a package deal you can make money. **When you are with a good team, it seems like everything is so much organized so that all I**

When sponsored, the team takes care of some of the daily hassles you would otherwise have to deal with.

Allows you to just concentrate on riding and training.

have to worry about is training and riding your bike.

Q. So how have you been able to cope with that now without the sponsors?

A. It has been really tough for me. Very difficult. Some things are coming along slowly. I wish a little bit faster but I got my motorcycles and have started to ride again from my surgery. But it is definitely tough to deal with things on your own. I kind of jumped out of amateurs straight on to a team and then straight on to another team. It was not like I went from amateur to privateer and knew what it was like. Now I know what it is like to be a privateer and doing it on your own. It is tough and now I have a better idea what is going on. So it kind of makes me want to try harder.

Having no sponsors motivated him to work harder to secure a future deal.

Q. One last thing. Is there anything else that I may have forgotten to mention that is important to know about some of things you have to deal with as a professional motocross rider?

A. It's just definitely having fun in whatever you do. If you are not having fun there is no point doing it. I tell myself everyday. Last year was a point where I wasn't having any fun. I really contemplated on quitting motocross because it wasn't fun anymore. But know that I am back it is fun again I just recommend having as much fun at whatever you are doing and giving it everything you got.

Importance on focusing on the fun of the sport.

Q. How were you able to reconnect to having fun?

A. It has been 4 months when you are thinking about riding the whole time . I also spent 15 years of my life doing it. Most of it on daddy's money. I definitely thought about that a lot. Try to think about it for the last four months. I was itching to ride for the last 4 months.

Q. Thank you for your time.



APPENDIX F: RESEARCHER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

This is a research study that will examine the mental demands and coping strategies of professional motocross riders and is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ph.D. degree in sport psychology by Ashwin J. Patel. During the data analysis, I, along with two other individuals skilled in qualitative research, will examine the transcripts independently to further strengthen the validity of interpretation of the obtained information (Patton, 2002). The transcribed interviews will be thematized and coded into categories by each individual in the group. The group will then meet as a whole to interpret the data by taking turns reading the participants' transcripts, pausing to discuss potential meanings immersed in the data, and then attempting to find relationships within the text. Only the primary researcher and members of this research team will be permitted access to the transcripts.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print name) understand that as part of the research team in this project, I am expected to maintain the confidentiality of the participants' data. I acknowledge that I will have access to personal information and will keep such information private. I will only discuss the information provided by the participants with other members of the research team.

This important issue of confidentiality has been discussed with me and I accept the terms of this agreement.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## VITA

Ashwin John Patel was born in London, Ontario, Canada on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1975. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a double major in Psychology and History from the University of Guelph, Ontario in June 1999. In August of 2000, Ashwin entered the masters degree program in Sport Psychology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The following year, he was awarded the A.W. Hobt Memorial Award for excellence in teaching while working as a Graduate Teaching Associate in the Physical Education Activity Program. In August of 2001, Ashwin entered the doctoral program in Sport Psychology at the University of Tennessee. Over the following four years he taught physical activity courses, assisted in teaching the introduction of sport psychology class, and served as a team facilitator for the MBA program. Since January of 2003, he has provided mental training services for the Knoxville Ice Bears, a professional minor league hockey team, as well as for several tennis players and motocross riders in the Knoxville area. Ashwin received his Masters degree from the College of Education, in August 2005. He plans to receive his Ph.D. in Education with a specialization in Sport Psychology in May 2006.