

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE COPING STRATEGY AMONG STUDENT-ATHLETES

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Abstract:

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the coping strategies of student-athletes at different level of participation at university level. A sample of 307 (female-213; male-94) university students-athletes in one of the public university in Malaysia were randomly selected for this study. The age of the student-athletes ($M=22.09$, $sd=1.35$) Out of the number, 210 represented college dormitory, 51 represented university at National level, and 46 represented state at national level, and representing Nation at International level.. The Athletic Coping Skills Inventory – 28 was used to measure the psychological coping skills for athletes. The instrument consisted of a 28-item scale measuring seven classes of sport-specific psychological coping skills including freedom from worry, coping with adversity, goal setting, coachability, concentration, peaking under pressure, confidence, and goal setting. Result shows that all of the seven coping strategies were significantly different with the four level of participations. However, the freedom from worry and coachability among college representative seem to be very low and needed distinct attention from the coaches. Results were further discussed and recommendations for future research also suggested in this paper.

Key Words: Coping Strategies, Student-athletes, The Athletic Skills Inventory (ACSI-28), National sports representative

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Introduction:

Sports has been a tremendous psychological and emotional fight especially among elite athletes. The higher the mental toughness and coping strategies one has, the more powerful their fighting spirit towards winning the game (Sheard, 2010). This means that those who be able to consistently sustain their psychological pressure regardless of the adversity or outside pressure enforced on them, the more successful the individual will be. Thus, this individual be able to change appropriate strategy, changing their tactical without feeling any constraints of doing it (Omar-Fauzee, Chansem et al., 2013). In other words, those who can maintain their emotional stability will facing all the doubts during the game without any stressfull situations (Connaughton, Hanton & Johns, 2009).

In the case of the professional athletes, their performance is also their income. Therefore, the pressure to uphold their capability at certain level give them pressure to compete in competitive sports (Kuethe & Motamed, 2010). They also have to face media and public regardless of their winning or losing the game. Therefore, athletes who unable to cope effectively with the encumbers of winning may experience not only a decrease in their ability to perform, but also lack of interest, unmotivated, mental distress, and incapable to perform at their best (Omar-Fauzee, Daud, Abdullah, & Rashid, 2009). No matter what type of games they involve, each of the games might have different difficulties and types of stress that subsequently they have to cope with in order to perform better (Kristiansen, Roberts & Abrahamsen, 2007). Therefore, each and every one of those who identify themselves as athletes, they have to master their physical, mental, strategies and technicals of the games involved to sequentially overcoming the pressure of competitions (Hogg, 2002).

According to Rattanakoses, Omar-Fauzee and Soh (2009), the application of mental strength ability including coping strategies, imagery, self-confidence, and goal setting will helps to raise their motivation in order to sustain their performance stability. These psychological set-up were essential, especially when athletes are in a situation where they feel unsecure of their ability that will make them nervous to perform competently (Dominikus, Omar-Fauzee, Abdullah, Meesin & Choosakul, 2009). Furthermore, athletes who are equipped with coping strategies and mental toughness are more confidence to to compete, always calm and are associated strong self- confidence to performance (Loehr, 1986; Omar-Fauzee, Saputra, Samad, Gheimi, Asmuni, & Johar, 2012; Sadeghi, Omar-Fauzee, Jamalis, Ab-Latif, & Chric, 2010). On

the contrary, Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffet (2002) also found that successful Olympic athletes acquire high mental strength which facilitate them to compete in a stressful competitive environment. This stressful situation should also be coped by student-athletes at the university level where their opportunity to push their potential forward is wide open (Omar-Fauzee, et al., 2014b; Omar-Fauzee, See, Geok, & Latif, 2008).

Furthermore, it had been shown that the athletes who lost their games also require social support as well as problem solving skills to cope with their emotional frustration (Omar-Fauzee, Abd-Latif, Tajularipin, Manja & Rattanakoses, 2011). Losing a game is upset enough, but waiting to get the first Olympic medal is frustrating for country like Malaysia. Thus, Malaysia athletes still unable to perform better at Olympic and International level. This can be compared with the far-East countries perform better at 2012 Olympic where China got 38 gold, Korea with 13 gold, and Japan 7 gold (Shroeder, 2012), it seems that the South East Asian countries were stagnant without gold which are at the same level as ten to twenty years back. What more worrisome is that South East Asia country unable to catch up with other far-East countries in sports. Consequently, this study will try to understand the psychological skills of how the Malaysian student-athletes cope with competition stress in order to understand their behavior as well as to recommend on how to improve it. This is true because with this psychological skills investigation it will help the coaches and athletes to restructure their training program in order to compete and cope their competition stress at higher level (Omar-Fauzee, et al., 2012; Omar-Fauzee, 2014a).

Methodology

Sample

A sample of 307 (female-213; male-94) university students-athletes in one of the public university in Malaysia were randomly selected for this study. The age of the student-athletes ($M=22.09$, $sd=1.35$). Out of the number, 210 represented college dormitory, 51 represented university at National level, 40 represented state at national level, and 6 representing Nation at International level. They are involved in both the team and individual sports representing a wide variety of sports (i.e. netball, swimming, badminton, softball, rugby, track and field, bowling, soccer, futsal, volleyball and field hockey).

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was divided into two parts, namely: demographic variables; and the athletic coping skills inventory – 28.

Demographic variables

The questionnaire also contained items that identified the gender, age, and level of sports representation in the university.

Athletic Coping Skills Inventory – 28

The Athletic Coping Skills Inventory – 28 (ACSI-28; Smith, Schultz, Smoll, & Ptacek, 1995) was used to measure the psychological coping skills for athletes. The instrument consisted of a 28-item scale measuring seven classes of sport-specific psychological coping skills including freedom from worry, coping with adversity, goal setting, coachability, concentration peaking under pressure, confidence, and goal setting. The respondents were asked to respond to each statement by indicating how often they experienced different situations using a 4 point Likert-like scale (e.g., I tend to perform better under pressure because I think more clearly, 0 = almost never to 3 = almost always). Each subscale consisted of four items that were averaged to provide a subscale range of 0 to 3. More over, the scales were then summed to yield a personal coping resource score. The internal reliability as reported by original authors, Smith, Schutz, Smoll and Ptacek (1995) were found to be internally consistent with alpha levels ranging from .62 to .78 and a total (personal coping resources) scale alpha of .86.

Figure 1: Terms and definitions of ACSI – 28 psychological coping skills

Sub-scales	Descriptions
Freedom from Worry	Does not put pressure on him/herself by worrying about performing poorly or making mistakes; does not worry about what others will think if he/she performs poorly.
Coping with Adversity	Remains positive and enthusiastic even when things are going badly; remains calm and controlled; can quickly bounce back from mistakes and setbacks.

Peaking Under Pressure	Is challenged rather than threatened by pressure situations and performs well under pressure; a clutch performer.
Goal Setting	Sets and works towards specific performance goals; plans and mentally prepares him/herself for competition and clearly has a 'game plan' for the competition.
Concentration	Not easily distracted; able to focus on the task at hand in both practice and competitive situations, even when adverse or unexpected events occur.
Confidence	Is confident and positively motivated; consistently gives 100% during practice and competitions and works hard to improve his/her skills.
Coachability	Open to and learns from instruction; accepts constructive criticism without taking it personally or becoming upset.

Source: Adapted from Smith, R. E., and Christensen, D. S. (1995). Psychological skills as predictors of performance and survival in professional baseball. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 17, 399-415.

Procedure

The permission was seek for granted from the Director of Sports Center of the particular university in order to conduct this research. Once approved, the researcher with the help of student leaders and coaches of the particular sports conducting the research at the courts. The respondents who agree to participate was briefly explain of the objectives of the research and they was also inform that they can quit at anytime if they feel unpleasant to continue answering the questionnaires. It took less approximately 25 minutes to answer the Malay translated questionnaire. This Malay translation was validated by English expert from the firts author university. The completed set of questionnaire answered by the respondents was collected after the respondents satisfied with their answered.

Analysis of Data

All the data were analyzed using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) program software version 19.0. In relation to the objective of the research which was to examine the relationship of the coping strategies employed among the participatory level of student-athletes at this particular university. The discriptive statistic (Mean, and standard deviation) was also

employed to identified the demographic of the respondents. In addition, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the significant differences among the four level of participation and coping strategies among student-athletes.

Results

The followings are the result obtained from the data analyses of demograpahic variables and the ANOVA of coping strategies among the four level of representation which are representing at college level (210), representing university at national level (51), representing state at National level (40), and representing Nation at International level (6). All of the coping strategies have the internal reliability between .65-.80 which is appropriate. The one-way ANOVA shows that all of the seven coping strategies were significantly different between the four levels of participation. The report of the ANOVA as follows: Coping with adversity $F(3,303)=26.99$, $p<.05$; Peaking under pressure $F(3,303)=39.85$, $P<.05$; Goal setting $F(3,303)=17.18$, $p<.05$; Concentration $F(3,303)=23.93$, $P<.05$; Freedom from worry $F(3,303)=16.30$, $p<..05$, Confidence $F(3,303) =16.30$, $p<.05$; and Coachability $F(3, 303) =64.87$, $p<.05$. The post-hoc also shows significant different between the level of representations and the coping strategies.

Table 1. Sports representations at University

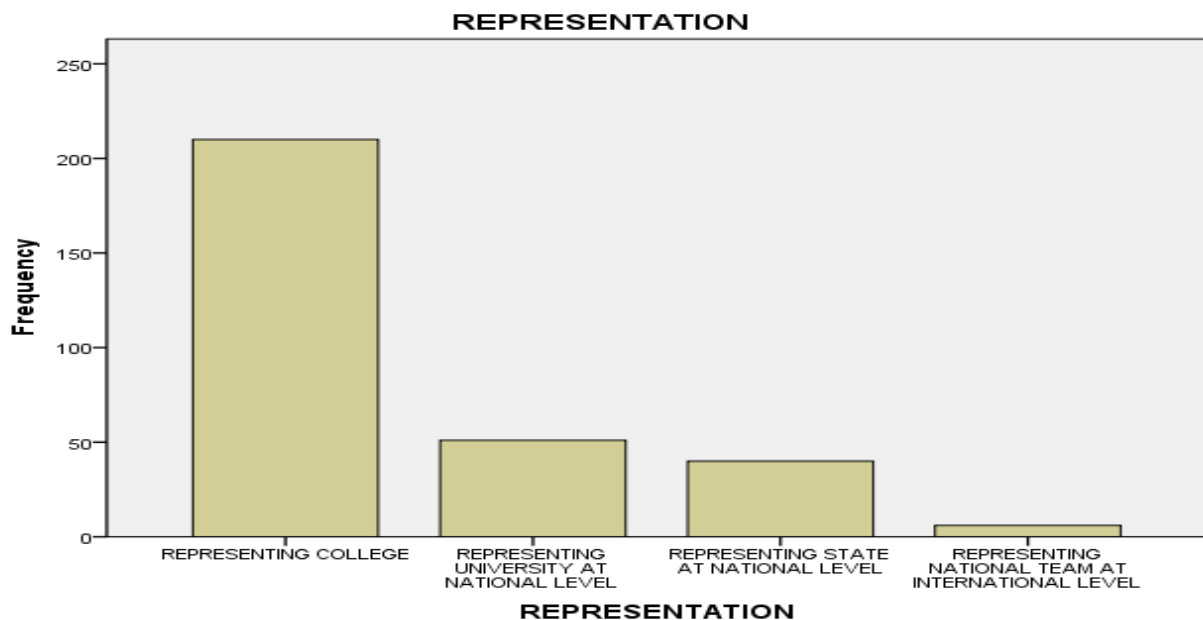


Table 2: Mean, standard deviation and F-values of ANOVA between level of representation and coping strategies

Variable	1	2	3	4	F value	P-hoc
Coping with Adversity	1.65 (.50)	1.70 (.47)	2.24 (.29)	2.75 (2.22)	26.99***	1<3,4; 2<3,4;3>1,2,4>1,2
Peaking under pressure	1.43 (.53)	1.47 (.53)	2.21 (.20)	2.79 (.18)	39.85***	1<2,3; 2<3,4; 4<3>1,2; 4>1,2,3
Goal setting	1.65 (.60)	1.67 (.43)	2.16 (.25)	2.75 (.27)	17.18***	1<3,4; 2<3,4 3>1,2; 4>1,2
Concentration	1.43 (.74)	1.56 (.45)	2.19 (.23)	2.88 (.14)	22.93**	1<3,4; 2<3,4 3>1,2; 4>1,2
Freedom from Worry	1.01 (.62)	1.31 (.73)	1.64 (.92)	2.66 (.26)	20.43***	1<1,2,3; 4<4>1 3>1,3<4; 4>1,2,3
Confidence	1.69 (.63)	1.60 (.53)	2.18 (.67)	2.83 (.20)	16.30***	1<3,4; 2<3,4 4<3>1,2; 4>1,2,3
Coachability	1.11 (.48)	1.12 (.40)	1.96 (.32)	2.75 (.22)	64.87***	1<3,4; 2<3,4 4<3>1,2; 4>1,2,3

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$

1. representing at college level, 2. representing university at national level, 3. representing state at National level, and 4. representing Nation at International level.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to examine the differences among level of representation and the coping strategies employed by student-athletes in a particular public university in Malaysia. Results had shown that the higher the level of representative, the better the coping strategies employed by this student-athletes. Thus, result also agrees with Omar-Fauzee, et al., (2009), Omar-Fauzee, et al. (2014a), Omar-Fauzee et al., (2014b). However, in the case of Omar-Fauzee et.al (2014b), the main focus is to compare the coping strategies between two nationalities of

students-athletes that are Indonesia (sample 226; mean age 21.05, sd 2.31) and Malaysia (sample 243; 21.41, sd 2.50) and results show that five of the coping strategies are significantly difference which are coping with adversity, concentration, goal setting, peaking under pressure and freedom from worry. From the findings, the researchers have suggested that a more complete research should be conducted and a 'resilience program' should be introduced in order to gain a more desirable standard of performance among student-athletes.

Based on the findings, a straight forward score have been found that the higher level one participated in, the more capable of their coping strategies. This is agreed with Crust and Azadi (2010) who have identified that the more experienced the athletes were, the more able they can cope with the external and internal thread which causing high stress level. This is true when the mean score for concentration and confidence level of student-athletes who representing Nation at International level were very high, almost double than those who only representing college (e.g. representing Nation at International level mean 2.88 (sd.14) compare with 1.43 (sd .74). Perhaps, the more experience the individual were, the more able their confidence and concentration level they able to handle (Sheard, 2010) Thus, knowing that the higher the representation of the individual does not make any sense if the coaches and athletes do not taking this findings into consideration of making a plan how to improve the mean score those who representing college. Perhaps, suggestions indicated by Omar-Fauzee et. al., (2014b) to develop a 'resilience program' for student-athletes and South-East Asia Research and development program (Omar-Fauzee, Chansem, et al., 2013) should take into account seriously.

Furthermore, results also the freedom from worry and coachability mean score were very low and should deeply considered. This is true for freedom from worry whereby the mean score is also low in Omar-Fauzee (2014b) with means score only 1.38 (.62) as compare to this study with 1.01 (.62). It could be that the Malaysia culture as a consequence of unable to free them self from being too worry of the things that not happen yet (Omar-Fauzee, et al., 2014b). The questions like the followings might be the reason, "*I worry quite a bit about what others will think about my performance,*" and "*I think about and imagine what will happen if I fail or screw up.*" So a result, it made the respondents unable to perform at their best because they worried about the unknown circumstances. Thus, Sheard (2010) also identified that the enemy of mental toughness is unable to free themselves from worrying the never happen things. On that account, athletes should able to judge their ability of competition and compete without being disturbed by

external factors that may distract them to compete successfully (Dahlkoetter, 2008). Due to the fact that sport psychologist in many country had not been acquainted to the student-athletes career development (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010) may be a reason why student-athlete at this level unable to cope with freedom from worry. The other finding that should also be recognized is the low score by the college representative level student-athlete is coachability. According to Smith and Christensen (1995), coachability is Open to and learns from instruction; accepts constructive criticism without taking it personally or becoming upset. In line with that, it shows that these Malaysian student-athletes unable to accept criticism by the authorities like coaches. Therefore, the process of learning will be suffered if one unable to accept any criticism and do not want to change accordingly. The concept of criticism is not to demoralise the student-athletes but is to help them to really understand the best way to learn and not making the same mistake over and over again. Those who unable to accept criticism would learn on how to overcome it in order to make them cope with the real situation on the field. On the field they have to control themselves to whatever decision made by the referees even though it is a bad call or bias to the team. More counselling and coping strategies training should be imposed to student-athletes especially in Malaysia to ensure they are well prepared mentally. Possibly the positive self-talk and to remain positive should be introduced to student-athletes on to overcome the intention of fighting back when the coach critique of their improper behavior or ineffective performance (Omar-Fauzee, Chansem et al., 2013). They have to learn to be positive to ensure they sustain their performance without external disruption (Khawari, Nazaruddin, Asmuni, & Ali, 2011).

Likewise, this study also has limitation that can be managed in the future. The first limitation is that the answer was driven by the questionnaire that has been developed by the West without considering the needs of the East or Asian perspective. Although the internal consistency was appropriate, however, it will be relevant if the original author of ACSI-28 also reconsider creating it for Asian population. Perhaps, more research on the same methodology with different sample of student-athletes should be conducted to ensure more relevant findings that revealed. On the other hand, the results of this study also agreed with Omar-Fauzee, et. al., (2012) and Omar-Fauzee, Chansem, et al., (2013) that more and more research on Asian respondents should be conducted to ensure the real-culture based understanding of Asian athletes could be understood. Perhaps a combination of coping strategies, and other psychological skills

such as self-talk, mental toughness and imagery should be inter-related to provide more comprehensive findings of student-athletes in Malaysia.

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