

Editorial

The tense or constricted mind

Eduardo Cervelló

Sport Research Center. Department of Sport Sciences. Miguel Hernández University

*Correspondence: (EC) ecervello@umh.es.  ORCID ID n° 0000-0001-5854-6354

Keywords: Competitive pressure, high-pressure situations, sports performance, managing stress

"I felt cramps due to nerves and the tension of playing with a legend like Djokovic. I had never felt anything like that before. The cramps started in my hand, then in my legs, and ended up affecting my whole body. He pushes you to the limit and squeezes you slowly. If someone plays against Djokovic and claims not to feel any tension, they're lying. I have to learn the lesson for the next time. The tension took its toll on me after two very tough sets. I attribute what happened to me to a mental issue; I entered the match more tense than necessary." Carlos Alcaraz statements, Diario Marca.

Managing competitive pressure is one of the most relevant aspects of sports performance. However, despite its significant importance, there is a lack of a scientific approach that defines its nature, identifies the factors that trigger it, and presents effective strategies for managing it.

Baumeister (1984) defined pressure as "any factors or combination of factors that increase the importance of performing well on a particular occasion" (p.610). On the other hand, when athletes perceive a situation as detrimental to their performance, surpassing their physical and psychological capabilities,

it is referred to as a stressor (Nicholls et al., 2009). A negative perception of a stressor can have adverse effects on the mental and physical skills the athlete can employ during that situation, ultimately impacting their overall performance negatively.

Several factors influence the occurrence of competitive pressure. As highlighted in a recent meta-analysis on the effects of pressure training in competitive pressure management (Low et al., 2021), one of the initial steps in training for pressure situations is to identify high-pressure situations and their sources. While higher pressure is often associated with increased stress, subjective assessments of a situation can also moderate the stress effect. Factors such as unpredictability, the novelty of the situation, the feeling of lack of control, or the perception of evaluation by others regarding one's success or failure can also influence the assessments and interpretations of each situation (Staal, 2004).

Novelty and uncertainty have been extensively studied issues (Staal, 2004). One strategy that can help manage novelty and uncertainty is closely related to studying the



characteristics of the opponent and planning technically and tactically appropriate responses. In the terminology of Flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), it involves aligning one's skills with the presented challenge.

Novelty is clearly closely related to uncertainty. Therefore, the development of game plans that incorporate pre-established strategies based on the opponent's characteristics is essential. From a technical perspective, this also involves equipping the athlete with resources to propose different tactical scenarios depending on how the game unfolds. Strategies such as imagery practice have proven useful in training game plans before a competition.

Similarly, managing uncertainty requires adopting an internal evaluation perspective, where the individual takes an approach focused on the areas under their control. Managing frustration is crucial in this regard. It means that the athlete must train a proactive and positive attitude towards their performance outcomes. One of the strategies that have been shown to be most useful in reducing uncertainty, managing frustration, and focusing attention on aspects of execution that depend solely on the athlete is the use of self-talk (Latinjak et al., 2019). Self-talk, in its various forms, can help manage pressure in specific high-pressure situations. Specifically, strategic self-talk, which focuses attention on instructional aspects of the sport situation (e.g., "Toss the ball up and accelerate" in tennis serve), helps the individual direct their attention to technical aspects of the moment of execution rather than the potential consequences (uncertainty).

Another type of self-talk that is highly useful for managing frustration and adopting

a proactive attitude is goal-directed self-talk. This type of self-talk involves obtaining information from performance outcomes and exploring different execution alternatives that may be more adaptive for performance. We can understand this strategy, once again drawing from Flow theory, as clearly perceiving the goals of one's execution. If these types of self-talk are not trained, another less desirable type of self-talk may emerge, known as automatic self-talk, which may not always be adaptive and is regulated by negative emotions that arise from errors or low performance.

If we talk about the feeling of lack of control, we refer to those situations in which the athlete is unable to control their mental and physiological responses. It is one of the most unpleasant situations of competitive stress, as the mind uncontrollably drifts towards past fears or future uncertainties, accompanied by physiological disturbances associated with this sense of lack of control. In this regard, there is an increasing body of knowledge on the effect of mindfulness on behavioral control, allowing one to live in the present moment, treat oneself kindly in the face of errors, and also regulate physiological responses through breathing. In a recent meta-analysis on the effect of mindfulness on performance (Lochbaum et al., 2022), the available evidence base for the use of mindfulness interventions suggests a very large beneficial effect on performance ($d = 1.35$).

Lastly, the criticism that others may develop towards the player leads to a negative interpretation of this interaction with social agents, which can be teammates, coaches, family members, or the audience. Assisting the athlete in adopting a task-

oriented focus, focusing on what is within their control, helps control the effect of criticism. The formative role of coaches is crucial here, both in avoiding excessive criticism towards athletes and in correctly interpreting the external signals emitted by social agents.

From a practical perspective, it is important to incorporate all these factors/stressors into controlled pressure situations during training (Low et al., 2022). This implementation has several advantages. First, it allows for the practice of the skills and behavioral strategies discussed earlier. Second, it changes the type of relationship the player establishes with pressure situations. Training in these situations helps athletes accept pressure as a normal occurrence in competition and have confidence in the strategies they possess to cope with it. Third, it enhances the quality of training by bringing the athlete closer to more realistic competition situations.

In conclusion, interventions aimed at helping athletes manage competition stressors should not only focus on the athletes themselves but also require evidence-based training for coaches and individuals in the athlete's immediate environment. This will improve the mastery of tools that allow for effectively facing pressure situations, in accordance with scientific evidence.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Baumeister, R. F. (1984). Choking under pressure: Self-consciousness and paradoxical effects of incentives on skillful performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46(3), 610–620.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Latinjak, A. T., Hatzigeorgiadis, A., Comoutos, N., & Hardy, J. (2019). Speaking clearly . . . 10 years on: The case for an integrative perspective of self-talk in sport. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 8(4), 353–367.
- Lochbaum M, Stoner E, Hefner T, Cooper S, Lane AM, et al. (2022) Sport psychology and performance meta-analyses: A systematic review of the literature. *PLOS ONE* 17(2): e0263408.
- Low, W. R., Freeman, P., Butt, J., Stoker, M., & Maynard, I. (2022): The role and creation of pressure in training: Perspectives of athletes and sport psychologists, *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*,
- Low, W. R., Sandercock, G. R. H., Freeman, P., Winter, M. E., Butt, J., & Maynard, I. (2021). Pressure training for performance domains: A meta-analysis. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 10(1), 149–163.
- Nicholls, A. R., Levy, A., Grice, A., & Polman, R. C. J. (2009). Stress appraisals, coping, and coping effectiveness among international cross-country runners during training and competition. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 9(5), 285–293.
- Staal, M. (2004). Stress, cognition, and human performance: A literature review and conceptual framework, (August 2004). Retrieved from <http://ntrs.nasa.gov/search.jsp?R=20060017835>