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PRE-COMPETITIVE ANXIETY IN YOUNG ATHLETES:

a case study from the perspective of sports and
social psychology

ANSIEDADE PRÉ-COMPETITIVA EM JOVENS ATLETAS:

uma análise de caso sob a perspectiva da psicologia do
esporte e social

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ABSTRACT

One of the most analyzed psychological phenomena in sports, particularly among young athletes, is pre-competitive anxiety, due to its direct connection with performance, motivation, and emotional well-being. This article presents a case study conducted over a semester with female Artistic Gymnastics and Handball teams, examining expressions of pre-competitive anxiety, related elements, and psychological interventions performed. The research indicates that psychoeducational interventions, strengthening group identity, and cognitive-behavioral techniques resulted in more effective emotional regulation, greater cohesion, and improved emotional awareness among the athletes. The importance of constant and integrated psychological intervention in the youth sports context is discussed.

Keywords: Pre-competitive anxiety; Adolescent athletes; Psychology.

RESUMO

Um dos fenômenos psicológicos mais analisados no esporte, particularmente entre atletas jovens, é a ansiedade pré-competitiva, por causa de sua conexão direta com o desempenho, motivação e bem-estar emocional. Este artigo expõe um estudo de caso realizado durante um semestre com equipes femininas de Ginástica Artística e Handebol, examinando expressões de ansiedade pré-competitiva, elementos relacionados e intervenções psicológicas executadas. A pesquisa indica que intervenções psicoeducacionais, fortalecimento da identidade grupal e técnicas cognitivo-comportamentais resultaram em uma regulação emocional mais eficaz, maior coesão e melhor consciência emocional entre as atletas. A importância da intervenção psicológica constante e integrada no contexto esportivo juvenil é debatida.

Palavras-chave: Ansiedade pré-competitiva; Adolescentes atletas; Psicologia.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a phase characterized by profound cognitive, emotional, and social transformations, playing sports practice a relevant environment for the development of identity and relationships (Rubio, 2013; Samulski, 2002). In the competitive setting, young athletes frequently experience pre-competitive anxiety, characterized as an emotional state that precedes competitions and encompasses feelings of apprehension, worry, and physiological activation (Weinberg; Gould, 2017; Machado, 1997).

Pre-competition anxiety can affect athletic performance positively or negatively, depending on the intensity of emotional activation and the athlete's cognitive interpretation (Samulski, 2002; Fabiani, 2009). Therefore, understanding the elements that influence it (cognitive, social, motivational, and behavioral) is essential for effective interventions.

This article describes a longitudinal case study with two youth teams, aiming to understand the occurrence of pre-competitive anxiety, the psychological processes involved, and the impacts of the implemented interventions.

2 PSYCHOLOGY AND ITS CONTRIBUTIONS TO SPORT

Psychology, in its scientific and applied dimensions, offers relevant contributions to understanding the factors that influence anxiety in the sports context. The literature on Sports Psychology indicates that pre-competitive anxiety results from the interaction between intrapersonal variables - such as self-confidence, individual expectations, and subjective interpretation of one's own emotions - and environmental factors, such as external pressures, performance demands, and group dynamics (Weinberg; Gould, 2017). The relationship between these elements directly affects the athlete's emotional regulation and their ability to respond appropriately to situations perceived as evaluative.

Among the psychological patterns frequently identified in young athletes, rigid perfectionism, fear of failure, and an exaggerated perception of responsibility for results stand out. These characteristics, widely discussed in general psychological literature, tend to intensify physiological activation, excessive focus on potential errors, and self-criticism - factors associated with increased competitive anxiety (Leahy, 2018). These maladaptive patterns include recurring thought patterns such as catastrophizing ("if I make a mistake, everything will be lost"), personalization ("the team depends exclusively on me"), and

demands for perfection (“I can’t fail”), which increase emotional vulnerability in pre-competitive moments.

In addition to contributing to the understanding of these processes, Psychology offers empirically validated strategies for managing anxiety and strengthening psychological skills that enhance athletic performance. Techniques such as controlled breathing, guided visualization, establishing pre-competitive routines, emotional education, and mindfulness-based practices have demonstrated effectiveness in emotional regulation, improving concentration, and increasing self-confidence (Hayes, 2012; Weinberg; Gould, 2017). The systematic use of these strategies, supported by scientific evidence, promotes the athlete's psychological adaptation, contributing to greater emotional stability and consistent performance.

3 PRE-COMPETITIVE ANXIETY IN SPORTS

The DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022) defines anxiety as an anticipatory reaction to possible future threats, marked by excessive worry, tension, and physical symptoms such as accelerated heart rate and muscle tension. In the sports context, this state can manifest in the hours or days leading up to competition, being affected by elements such as others' expectations, self-criticism, competitive environment, and social pressure (Machado, 1997).

Anxiety is an adaptive emotional response to situations perceived as challenging or threatening. In the sports context, it commonly occurs in the moments preceding competition, characterizing the phenomenon known as pre-competitive anxiety (Fabiani, 2009). In Sports Psychology, this type of anxiety is one of the most analyzed psychological aspects, due to its direct impact on the athlete's performance, motivation, and well-being.

The emotional impact tends to be even more profound in adolescent athletes, since this age group undergoes intense processes of development, self-efficacy, and social relationships (Samulski, 2002). Therefore, understanding pre-competitive anxiety and creating techniques for its control is essential to promoting mental health and balanced athletic performance.

Pre-competitive anxiety presents cognitive symptoms such as worry, fear of making mistakes, and excessive self-criticism, as well as somatic symptoms such as muscle tension and tachycardia. Its manifestation is strongly affected by the perception of the situation as threatening (Weinberg; Gould, 2017). Classic and contemporary research highlights its connection with performance, particularly when there is a discrepancy between personal

expectations and perceptions of competence, suggesting that this anxiety is divided into anxious cognition (which involves negative thoughts related to performance) and somatic activation, linked to physical symptoms such as tachycardia and muscle tension (Samulski, 2002).

Current cognitive-behavioral approaches characterize anxiety as a consequence of the interaction between distorted thoughts, biased attention patterns, and avoidance behaviors, which together perpetuate and aggravate the anxiety cycle (Hofmann, 2024). According to the author, people who are more sensitive to social evaluation - such as young athletes exposed to competitive environments and constant assessments - often interpret neutral situations as potentially threatening, exaggerating risks and underestimating their own performance ability.

Hofmann (2024) further highlights that hypervigilance regarding signs of failure, coupled with a propensity to selectively focus on potential failures or negative evaluations, intensifies physiological activation and diminishes the feeling of control. This mechanism is of great importance in the sports field, where competitions act as intense evaluative triggers, increasing susceptibility to pre-competitive anxiety.

Young athletes, from a social and developmental perspective, generally show greater sensitivity to the expectations of others, social comparisons, and pressures from their environment. These are elements that increase the risk of pre-competitive anxiety (Rubio, 2013). Therefore, understanding anxiety as a cognitive and social phenomenon is fundamental for effective interventions. Thus, each athlete possesses a particular degree of emotional activation that improves performance.

In young people, social elements such as coach evaluation, family expectations, and comparison with peers increase the experience of anxiety (Rubio, 2013; Machado, 1997).

The use of screens increases anxiety and decreases concentration ability, directly impacting the athletic performance of young people. Cognitively, frequent use of social media is associated with increased social comparison, deterioration of self-image, and reduced frustration tolerance. These elements are related to pre-competitive anxiety (Leahy, 2018; Hayes, 2012). Thus, psychoeducation on excessive screen use becomes an essential preventive strategy in the current sports landscape. Psychoeducational interventions on screen use are therefore considered preventive practices in Sports Psychology.

4 SPORTS MOTIVATION AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Motivation is seen as one of the foundations for adherence, continuity, and excellence in sports performance. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT), formulated by Deci and Ryan (2000), argues that athletes demonstrate greater engagement and well-being when their fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met.

According to Weinberg and Gould (2017), young athletes who feel emotionally supported and independent in their sporting contexts demonstrate greater intrinsic engagement and lower levels of anxiety. Conversely, authoritarian and controlling leadership styles, punitive feedback, and external pressures lead to demotivation, fear of failure, and increased somatic anxiety.

Thus, emotional regulation is not only an individual skill, but also a process influenced by the motivational environment established by coaches, technical staff, and colleagues.

5 SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SPORT: IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND GROUP COHESION

Social Psychology provides fundamental components for understanding how group dynamics affect emotional states and behaviors in sports.

When athletes see themselves as part of a united group ("we"), there is an increased sense of social support, shared trust, emotional recovery, and joint emotional regulation.

Haslam, Reicher, and Platow (2020) highlight that effective leaders (such as coaches) play the role of "identity entrepreneurs," promoting values, goals, and meanings that strengthen the feeling of unity. In adolescent groups, this collective unity acts as a protective element against anxiety, stress, and burnout.

Rubio (2013) and Machado (1997) also emphasize that sport offers a conducive environment for the development of social skills, self-concept and interpersonal relationships, which are fundamental for emotional management.

6 METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative and longitudinal case study, lasting approximately six months, encompassing two female teams (Artistic Gymnastics and Handball) aged between 13 and 18 years. The activities carried out included group discussions on anxiety, motivation,

screen use, group cohesion, and other topics in the sports context. Collective psychoeducational interventions and individual assistance were provided, in addition to weighted analyses after the competition.

The main objective was to understand pre-competitive anxiety and identify effective strategies for its control.

7 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Observations and reports indicated that the athletes in the sports studied identified symptoms of pre-competitive anxiety, such as nervousness, tension, and concentration problems before competitions. However, after the interventions, they also showed greater self-control and emotional awareness.

Among the gymnasts, anxiety was most pronounced in the days leading up to competitions, linked to the fear of making mistakes or disappointing the team. After group discussions, an improvement in communication between the athletes and the coach was noted, as well as an increase in cohesion and self-confidence.

In the handball team, issues arose related to pressure for results and professional future, as well as testimonies of self-criticism and fear of failure. Individual intervention with one athlete highlighted the relevance of emotional support and cognitive restructuring within the sporting context. These results corroborate the idea that pre-competitive anxiety can be controlled through psychological techniques and strengthening group relationships, according to Fabiani (2009), Samulski (2002).

8 CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that, despite being natural, pre-competitive anxiety requires constant psychological attention. The research results showed that strategies such as emotional psychoeducation, active listening, and strengthening group bonds proved effective in helping young athletes develop emotional self-regulation, promoting greater awareness of their affective states and expanding their coping resources in the face of competitive demands.

The connection between Sports Psychology and Social Psychology allows for a broader understanding of the athlete, who is no longer seen exclusively from the perspective of performance but is understood as a subject embedded in social relations, influenced by

group dynamics, collective expectations, and processes of belonging. In this sense, the emotions manifested in the sporting context are not only individual but also constructed and modulated by the interactions established within the group.

Therefore, the importance of the constant presence of Sports Psychology professionals in sports initiation and training contexts is highlighted, with the aim of promoting emotionally safe, welcoming, and collaborative environments. Such spaces contribute not only to the prevention of negative impacts of anxiety, but also to the integral development of athletes, promoting well-being, psychological well-being, healthy interpersonal relationships, and a more balanced and humanized sporting experience.

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