

Coping Strategies before Competition: The Role of Stress, Cognitive Appraisal, and Emotions



Clara Simões¹, José Miguel Nogueira², Catarina Morais³, Paul Mansell⁴ & A. Rui Gomes^{*}
¹UICISA:E & Univ. Minho, Portugal ²Univ. Minho, Portugal ³Univ. Católica Portuguesa, Portugal ⁴Univ. Staffordshire, UK · jmgama@sapo.pt

INTRODUCTION

Sports practice can be a very stressful experience, with athletes reporting a wide variety of stressors, related to competition, especially not achieving the desired performance, the pressure from coaches, the expectations of others, or the organizational aspects (Arnold et al., 2017). Nevertheless, it is important to study together the dimensions of stress, coping, and cognitive appraisal because they are inextricably linked (Tamminen, 2021). Coping may be **defined** as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resource of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141).

To the best of our knowledge, there is not enough knowledge about the **predictors** of the coping strategies used by athletes to deal with specific stressors prior to competition.

AIM: The **main objective** of this study was to analyse the adaptation of athletes to a sporting stressor (“not achieving the desired performance in the next competition”), assessing which psychological variables (overall stress, cognitive appraisal, and intensity and direction of emotions) predict the coping strategies that athletes use to deal with this stressor, controlling for sex, age and type of sport.

METHOD

Participants. 383 athletes (60% M), aged 14-37 ($M = 22.85$), from individual (41%) and team sports (59%).

Procedure. Protocol applied 24-48 h before final-stage competitions of the season (ethics approval CEUM 026/2014).

Measures. PSCAS (Gomes & Teixeira, 2016; threat, challenge, coping and control). SEQ (Jones et al., 2005; intensity and direction of anxiety, dejection, anger, excitement and happiness). Reduced Coping Inventory (Nogueira & Gomes, 2025; overall stress; active coping, emotional support, denial and humour).

Analysis. Four hierarchical linear regressions (enter method), one per strategy, in six blocks, from demographics to the intensity $\times$ direction interactions.

RESULTS

Hierarchical Regression Results, Standardised β for all Coping Strategies

	Active coping		Emotional support		Humour		Denial	
	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p
Sex	.03	.519	.11	.048	-.11	.048	-.01	.058
Age	.09	.098	.04	.519	-.05	.443	-.05	.412
Type of sport	-.04	.542	-.21	.003	-.06	.373	.07	.300
Overall stress	.07	.216	.09	.109	-.09	.112	-.06	.248
Threat	.04	.546	.07	.291	-.03	.707	-.04	.579
Challenge	.11	.082	.04	.579	-.02	.785	-.05	.426
Coping	-.02	.789	-.03	.613	-.21	.002	-.06	.322
Control	.16	.013	.06	.417	.13	.057	.05	.418
Anxiety (I)	-.07	.337	-.09	.236	-.13	.084	.18	.011
Dejection (I)	.12	.141	.09	.259	-.02	.844	.05	.494
Anger (I)	-.04	.594	.01	.865	.24	.002	.33	.001
Excitement (I)	.28	.001	.28	.001	.06	.504	.02	.798
Happiness (I)	-.05	.549	.11	.228	.11	.243	.23	.008
Anxiety (D)	.06	.322	-.01	.922	.08	.186	.06	.291
Dejection (D)	.08	.411	.02	.855	.13	.191	-.19	.040
Anger (D)	-.17	.084	.01	.975	-.19	.061	.18	.057
Excitement (D)	.02	.845	-.16	.039	-.02	.805	-.17	.019
Happiness (D)	.10	.195	.08	.279	-.15	.044	-.10	.175
R^2	.21		.17		.16		.26	

Note: Bold = significant predictors ($p < .05$). I = intensity; D = direction. Intensity $\times$ direction interactions were tested and predicted none of the strategies.

CONCLUSION

The prediction of coping strategies is distinct and should be analysed separately. **Intensity of emotions** emerged as the most significant set of predictors, especially for denial, while overall stress did not predict any of the coping strategies, and primary cognitive appraisal did not predict the use of any adaptive or maladaptive strategy. Both cognitive appraisal and emotions are important as determinants of the use of coping.

References

Arnold, R., Fletcher, D., & Daniels, K. (2017). Organizational stressors, coping, and outcomes in competitive sport. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 35(7), 694–703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2016.1184299>
Gomes, A. R., & Teixeira, P. (2016). Stress, cognitive appraisal, and psychological health: Testing instruments for health professionals. *Stress and Health*, 32(2), 167–172. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2583>
Jones, M. V., Lane, A. M., Bray, S. R., Uphill, M., & Catlin, J. (2005). Development and validation of the Sport Emotion Questionnaire. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 27(4), 407–431. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.27.4.407>
Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer-Verlag.
Nogueira, J. M., & Gomes, A. R. (2025). Sports adaptation to competition in Portuguese athletes: The role of cognitive appraisal. *Análise Psicológica*, 43(1), 79–96. <http://publicacoes.ispa.pt/index.php/art/view/2174/pdf>
Tamminen, K. A. (2021). Coping. In R. Arnold & D. Fletcher (Eds.), *Stress, well-being, and performance in sport* (pp. 78–94). Routledge.

Funding