



Psychological variables that impact the performance of junior tennis players.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to discover the level of certain psychological variables of a group of junior tennis players, in order to set a path for the development of their psychological training. The research was made on 53 male junior tennis players from 8 clubs in the Murcia region, with an average age of $16.81 \pm 1,17$ years. The players completed Gimeno et al's Sport Performance Psychological Characteristics Questionnaire (2001). Findings show that most players present high values in stress control categories, impacting on performance assessment and team cohesion, while a group showed low values in the categories of motivation and mental skill.

Key words: Tennis, Psychological status, Performance.

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INTRODUCTION

Sport performance is the result of the integration of the player's physical (strength, speed, endurance, balance, and coordination), technical (command of the sport movements), strategic- tactical (knowledge of the sport strategies, tactical decisions) and psychological skills (keeping concentration, to self-regulate the arousal levels, self confidence or cooperation with the rest of the team) (Williams & James, 2001).

Even though athletes can differ at the physical, technical, and tactical- strategic level, at elite level they do not differ so much, and the command and management of psychological skills is more relevant when explaining their performance ups and downs or different performances at different times. Thus, the psychological aspect becomes very important for any sport activity, and the knowledge of these variables becomes also very important to understand how they impact the athlete's performance. They can then be trained during training sessions and competition to optimize both their game and their results (Campos, 1996).

Many researchers have tried to understand if these psychological variables really have an impact on top level athletic performance, and if so, to what extent (Ezquerro, 2008; Ruiz, 2008). This paper considers a group of junior tennis players, and discusses their psychological variables and what they are (Gimeno, Buceta & Pérez-Llanta, 2001):



- Stress control includes two categories, the first one has to do with the characteristics of the athlete response in relation to training and competition demands, the second one, considers those potentially stressful situations that can trigger stress and in which control is key to reduce its possible damage.
- Influence of assessment on performance: Characteristics of the athlete response to situations in which they evaluate their

own performance or think they are being evaluated by those who are significant for the athlete.

- **Motivation:** Athlete interest for continuous training and improving, setting and working on targets, the importance of sport as opposed to other activities and aspects of the athlete life and the cost/benefit relationship of the activity.
- **Mental skill:** It includes psychological skills that can favour sport performance.
- **Team cohesion:** It refers to the athlete integration in his sport group and it includes the interpersonal relationship with the other members of the team, the level of satisfaction when training with their team mates, the individualistic attitude towards the rest of the group and the importance they give to "team spirit".

Many authors have evaluated the level of these psychological variables in sports like football (García, Sánchez-Alcaraz, Gómez & López, 2012; Lavarello, 2005), judo (Gimeno et al. 2007), basketball (García, López, Borrego, Sánchez-Alcaraz & Gómez, 2012) and tennis (Pérez-Llanta, Buceta, López de la Llave, Gimeno & Ezquerro, 2001).

Thus, the aim of this research is to determine the level of certain psychological variables (motivation, stress control, team cohesion, impact of the performance and mental skill evaluation) in tennis players, so as to set certain guidelines for the direction in which to develop psychological training.

METHOD

Sample

The research was conducted on 53 male junior tennis players from 8 clubs in the Murcia Region, with an average age of 16.81 ± 1.17 years. All players had played tennis for over 3 years and trained an average of 8.56 ± 2.34 hours a week.

Instrument

The players completed Gimeno et al's Sport Performance Psychological Characteristics Questionnaire. (2001), it consists of 55 items that measure stress control variables, the impact of performance assessment, motivation, mental skill and team cohesion.

Procedure

The procedure used for the administration of the questionnaire consisted of personal visits to six tennis clubs, always bearing in mind that responses are anonymous and all questions must be answered. Finally, SPSS 20.0 for Windows was used for the statistic data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of each variable in the questionnaire. Findings indicate that players showed higher values in the following categories: stress control, impact of performance assessment and team cohesion, and lower values in motivation and mental skill that coincide with García et al. (2012), for a group of basketball players.

Figure 1 also shows the levels (high, medium and low) presented by the players in one of the psychological variables. Over 50% of the players showed high values in performance assessment (70,6%), stress control (64,7%) team cohesion (17,6%). On the other hand, the lowest values that players presented were related to the mental skill category I (41,2%). These values coincide again with those presented by García et al. (2012) in their research with basketball players.

VARIABLE	SCALE	MEDIA	TYPICAL DEVIATION
Stress control	0-80	56.00	9.07
Influence of performance assessment	0-45	31.23	5.83
Motivation	0-31	18.94	3.13
Mental skill	0-34	18.58	3.20
Team cohesion	0-24	19.84	2.78

Table 1: Levels presented by the players in each psychological variable.

CONCLUSIONS

The psychological factor is key for the success of sport practice. This paper studied the level of psychological variables (stress control, impact of performance assessment, motivation, mental skills and team cohesion) in junior tennis players.

Analysis of findings shows great deficiencies in the dimension of motivation and mental skill in particular, different from stress control skill variables, team cohesion and impact of performance assessment, whose values were very high.

Still, for a better understanding of this phenomenon, we suggest studying psychological variables by means of qualitative research to get a deeper knowledge of this issue. This paper concludes stressing the need and importance of the sport psychologist for athlete development in general, and tennis players in particular.

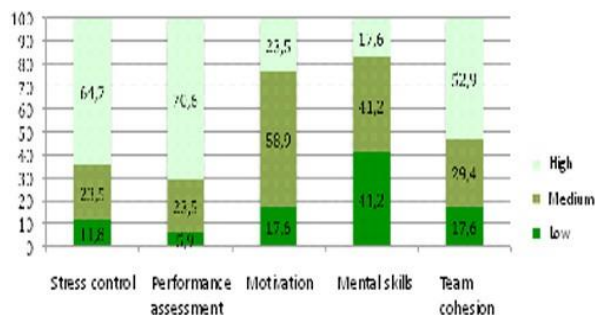


Figure 1: Levels presented by the players in each psychological variable.

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