

NAVIGATING PRE-COMPETITION ANXIETY AMONG FOOTBALLERS AND IN REFEREEING

KEHINDE R. EMMANUEL
Email: erotheme@gmail.com

Abstract

The write-up underscores the profound impact of pre-competition anxiety on footballers and referees in sports, highlighting its potential to immobilize and impair performance due to overwhelming fear. It explores symptoms, escalation to competitive anxiety for referees, and instances from the UEFA Champions League finals. Personal experiences, including the author's anxiety before a national fitness test, vividly depict the overwhelming nature of pre-competition anxiety. Coping mechanisms for both referees and athletes, such as reframing thoughts and controlled breathing, are discussed, along with stress reduction techniques like progressive muscle relaxation. Stress management techniques, exemplified by ice bath exercises during the 2023 FIFA Membership Association course, are portrayed as dual-purpose mental and physical therapy for coping with anxiety and achieving psychomotor optimization. Overall, the article aims to illuminate the challenges of pre-competition anxiety in sports and provide effective strategies for managing it.

Keyword: Anxiety, Coping Mechanism, Muscle Relaxation, and Stress Management

Introduction

Referees can experience immobilization, silence, or impaired performance due to overwhelming fear, known as pre-competitive anxiety. This anxiety can hinder their ability to focus on upcoming events or competitions. In sports and refereeing, where excellence is vital, pre-competition anxiety is a common and significant challenge. Anxiety is a persistent emotional unease arising from perceived threats, particularly in uncertain or vulnerable situations. It encompasses tension, worried thoughts, and physiological changes like increased blood pressure. Gopinathan, (2021) opined that pre-competition anxiety is marked by discomfort, tension, and reduced concentration, often accompanied by symptoms such as sweaty palms, disrupted sleep, restlessness, and reduced appetite. Referees often experience state anxiety before matches and fitness tests, facing immense pressure to meet and excel beyond standards, which can develop into competitive state anxiety. Recognizing the impact of anxiety on referees' performance, this research aims to delve into the intricacies of pre-competition anxiety and explore referees' coping mechanisms to effectively manage it.

Impact of Pre-Competition Anxiety on Top Teams and Athletes

One aspect that has always fascinated me about pre-competition anxiety is its potential to impact even the most skilled teams or athletes. A notable example is the 2006 UEFA Champions League final between Arsenal and Barcelona. Arsenal held a 1-0 lead, and it seemed like they had the game in their grasp. Yet, Barcelona staged a remarkable comeback to clinch the title. Perhaps, I thought, it was their first time in such a high-stakes situation.

This pattern repeated itself with teams like Chelsea in 2008, Dortmund in 2012, Tottenham Hotspur in 2019, and Manchester City in 2021. All of them succumbed to pre-competition anxiety in their respective Champions League final appearances. This

anxiety likely played a significant role, especially for these newer entrants to the final stage.

Drawing from personal experience, I recall my anxiety when I was invited to participate in the Nigeria Premier League, facing the daunting national fitness test of completing twelve laps of the FIFA high-intensity test. The night before the race was sleepless, filled with fear and nervousness. It's safe to assume that players and entire club communities undergoing this experience for the first time in those years would have felt similarly overwhelmed.

Interestingly, teams like Chelsea and Manchester City found success in subsequent finals, possibly due to improved coping mechanisms. In my case, I diverted my focus from the race and concentrated on less immediate concerns, which served as my coping mechanism.

I've often pondered the differences in Chelsea and Manchester City's approaches in their subsequent finals, specifically their coping mechanisms and anxiety management strategies that ultimately led to their success. It's a scenario worth reflecting upon, highlighting the significance of mental preparation and anxiety management for athletes and teams when competing at the highest echelons of their respective sports.

Navigating the Shadows: Understanding and Overcoming Anxiety in Sports

Anxiety, as an emotional state, is marked by a relentless sense of unease stemming from a personal perception of potential harm or danger. This emotion often surfaces in situations characterized by uncertainty or when individuals feel vulnerable. Such scenarios may involve ambiguous outcomes or elements of risk beyond their control (Weidenmann, 1981; Grubitzch & Rexilius, 1987; Zisis, Dimitrios, & Mpriakos, 2020).

According to the American Psychological Association, (2013) anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes such as increased blood pressure. It represents a persistent emotional unease arising from perceived threats, typically occurring in uncertain or vulnerable situations. It's characterized by tension, anxious thoughts, and physiological changes, including increased blood pressure, often in nebulous or risky situations.

Srinivas, Chenraj, and Sankar (2020) suggested that pre-competition anxiety is a sensation of discomfort typically marked by tension and reduced concentration, commonly experienced by athletes before an event. This state is often accompanied by symptoms like sweaty palms, disrupted sleep, restlessness, and sometimes a decreased appetite. Referees, too, frequently encounter state anxiety before matches and fitness tests. They face significant pressure not only to meet the standard but also to excel, a pressure that gradually escalates into competitive state anxiety.

Anxiety plays a pivotal role in a referee's performance and can significantly influence the outcome of a match. Consider the case of Joe Bryan, a 30-year-old Fulham left-back defender hailing from Bristol, United Kingdom, who vividly recalls the emotions that accompanied the pinnacle moments of his career. The memory of crucial goals, such as those against Brentford in the 2020

Championship playoff final securing Fulham's promotion to the Premier League and a substantial £170 million windfall, remains etched in his memory only through highlights. However, the memory of his sensational goal against Manchester United while playing for Bristol City in 2017 eludes him.

What persists, though, are the moments mid-match when anxiety gripped him tightly, compelling him to distance himself from the situation. On some mornings, he awakens with a profound sense of unease, a feeling that he experiences vividly. "I still question whether I have a right to be playing where I am, whether I'm good enough to be where I am," he candidly shared with ESPN. These persistent self-doubts continue to haunt him.

Gigi Buffon (2010), in his inaugural book, *"numero uno,"* shared profound insights into his personal struggles. The esteemed Italian goalkeeper, a prominent figure in the world of football, delved into the challenges he faced, shedding light on his battle with anxiety during his formative years with Juventus. Buffon's autobiography candidly reveals that he grappled with depression for approximately six months during this trying period, Graeme Scott reported (Graeme 2017).

Buffon recounted the sudden onset of his anxiety, a phase that left him apprehensive about stepping onto the pitch. He vividly recalled a significant moment during the European Championships held in Portugal, particularly during the Italy vs. Denmark match—an encounter that many described as horrendous. In stark contrast to the grim atmosphere, Buffon was the sole figure sporting a smile. This smile, he confessed, served as a coping mechanism, a façade to conceal the palpable anxiety that had also gripped his teammates (Graeme 2017).

Gigi Buffon's brave disclosure underscores the importance of seeking help and openly discussing mental health challenges, even for renowned athletes who seemingly have it all.

Seated before his television screen, a football enthusiast from some corner of the globe undergoes a spectrum of emotions during the course of a 90-minute match. Indeed, as fervent supporters, each one of us who backs a team possesses a tale to recount about that moment when our club nearly caused us a heart-pounding episode. If this rings true, then it should be quite effortless for us to relate to professional footballers and, indeed, athletes of all kinds. These athletes find themselves under relentless pressure, day after day. This narrative serves as a testament to the intricate relationship between anxiety and sports, shedding light on how even accomplished athletes and referees grapple with the shadows of anxiety in their pursuit of excellence.

Debuting in the Spotlight: The Impact of Anxiety on UEFA Champions League Finalists

It appears that a common thread unites the Champions League finalists mentioned, namely their inaugural appearance in the UEFA Champions League final. The exception being Dortmund, a club with a Champions League win in its history, although it occurred decades ago. In Dortmund's case, they faced Bayern Munich, a team well-versed in the final, having reached it thrice, including consecutive appearances against Inter Milan and Chelsea in 2010 and 2012.

The year 2013 was pivotal for Dortmund as they carried the weight of making history, particularly after their remarkable victory over the formidable Real Madrid in the semi-finals. It became increasingly evident that Dortmund was particularly vulnerable to anxiety, ultimately succumbing to its grasp. The primary contributing factor to this surrender was their status as relative newcomers to the final stage.

A parallel narrative unfolded in the 2022/2023 season, involving Napoli FC, as they faced their domestic rivals, AC Milan. Napoli appeared to be the stronger side, having dominated the domestic league and earning the moniker "Champion's elect." However, when pitted against AC Milan in the Quarter-finals of the UEFA Champions League, their first appearance at this stage played a pivotal role in favor of AC Milan.

AC Milan, boasting seven UEFA Champions League titles, possessed the advantage of experience. The anxiety that gripped Napoli, competing at this stage for the first time, likely influenced their approach and the mentality of both teams in the game.

These instances underscore the profound impact of anxiety on teams venturing into uncharted territory on the grand stage of the UEFA Champions League, demonstrating how it can tilt the scales in favor of more experienced competitors.

Battling Anxiety on the Grand Stage: My Personal Journey

I would like to share some of my personal experiences with pre-competition anxiety. There was a particular novelty match I officiated in 2017, held in honor of the King of Ile-Ife (*Ooni* of Ife), one of the most prominent traditional rulers in Yoruba culture and Nigeria as a whole. During this match, I couldn't help but notice that my palms were sweaty, my feet were trembling, and my heart was racing. These physical reactions were clear manifestations of the anxiety I was feeling, knowing I had to officiate in the presence of distinguished individuals and royalty who had gathered to honour the king.

Although I eventually managed to focus on the task at hand and navigate through the match, I must admit that I made three errors before I could fully regain my composure. The sweaty palms, shaky feet, and elevated heart rate were all direct results of the anxiety I was experiencing.

Another noteworthy instance was my first international competition, representing Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) in the 2015 West African University Games. I vividly remember making an error due to fear during a crucial moment. It happened during an OAU hockey match against the host team, the University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN), which was the opening game of the field hockey event. I was the goalkeeper for OAU, and within the first two minutes of play, I received a back pass from one of my defenders. To the surprise of everyone, including my teammates and the coaching staff, I failed to control the ball. I was overwhelmed by fear, the fear of making mistakes and losing the game. My mind was racing with various thoughts, and this initial anxiety significantly affected my performance.

Fortunately, my teammates and coaching staff provided invaluable support during that challenging moment.

Anxiety's Dual Role: Catalyst and Hindrance in Performance

Anxiety, a double-edged sword, can serve as both an advantage and a hindrance, wielding its influence over individuals and potentially shaping their performance outcomes. While it occasionally acts as a catalyst for improved performance, more often than not, it becomes a stumbling block to reaching peak and optimal performance.

I distinctly recall a particular job interview (2018) that left me visibly anxious. The interviewer seemed keen on probing my anxiety, initially unsettling me with his approach. However, this unexpected challenge surprisingly worked in my favor. When he questioned my pedagogical qualifications in sports, I found my voice and regained my confidence as I responded. My rebuttal not only allowed me to regain composure but also enabled me to assert my qualifications confidently.

Another memorable incident unfolded during a squash competition when the umpire made a questionable call against me. To add to the pressure, my opponent attempted to get inside my head by suggesting that challenging the umpire's call would have no impact on the outcome in his favour.

This statement triggered a surge of adrenaline and determination within me, making me unstoppable on the squash court.

While it is acknowledged that anxiety can sometimes act as a catalyst, boosting sports performance, it is imperative to employ appropriate coping mechanisms to harness this potential benefit effectively.

Referees, in general, undergo training to maintain composure, stay focused, and remain present in high-pressure situations. This focus equips referees with the tools necessary for sound decision-making and enhances their movement synchronization, effectively thwarting nervousness and anxiety.

Similarly, athletes are trained to repeat their performances, internalizing them to improve muscle memory and boost the capacity of Purkinje cells. Perfecting these visualized skills elevates athletes' confidence, consequently reducing anxiety.

The pursuit of these training methods to enhance referee performance may stem from previous experiences where referees grappled with anxiety. This coping mechanism is employed to inhibit the recurrence of past nervousness and anxiety, enabling referees to officiate at their best.

Strategies for Referees and Athletes to Tackle Anxiety

Referees possess the ability to reframe their thoughts and concentrate on the task at hand, redirecting their attention away from anxiety-inducing factors. This skill proves invaluable in mitigating anxiety during play. For instance, a match official might find themselves consumed by anxiety after making a critical mistake in a game. Their instinct may be to correct this error, but in accordance with the International Football Association Board (IFAB), "a referee cannot rectify a mistake previously made in a match once play has restarted." This underscores the importance of focusing on the upcoming task and diverting attention from anxiety-inducing situations. In the case of athletes, controlled breathing stands as a potent method for alleviating the physical symptoms of anxiety.

Stress-reduction techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation, serve as effective tools for referees to maintain both physical and mental equilibrium. Another strategy referees can employ to manage anxiety involves stress management techniques. A notable example occurred during the Federation De' Internationale Football Association (FIFA) Membership Association (MA) course in 2023, held in Abuja. FIFA mandated international Nigerian elite referees to engage in an ice bath exercise lasting eight minutes. Wim, (2022) explained that this exercise serves the dual purpose of relaxing their muscles and helping them cope effectively with anxiety. It provides not only mental therapy but also physical relief, granting participants the desired psychomotor optimization.

Conclusion: Conquering Pre-Competition Anxiety in Sports

In conclusion, pre-competition anxiety is an omnipresent challenge, affecting not only athletes but also referees in the world of sports. Its impact can be immobilizing, silencing, and performance impairing, making it a critical issue to address. As we've explored the experiences of athletes, the likes of Arsenal, Chelsea, and Manchester City, as well as personal anecdotes from my own journey, it becomes evident that anxiety can be a formidable adversary. However, it's a battle that can be won through effective coping mechanisms.

This research has shed light on the intricacies of pre-competition anxiety and the coping mechanisms that can empower individuals to manage it. Whether through reframing thoughts, maintaining focus, or employing stress management techniques, the path to conquering anxiety is paved with strategies that can help referees and athletes alike thrive under pressure.

As we continue to delve into this complex arena of emotions and performance, it's imperative to recognize that anxiety, while formidable, can also be a catalyst for excellence when harnessed effectively. The experiences shared here, coupled with the insights gained, underscore the vital role of mental preparation and anxiety management for individuals and teams competing at the pinnacle of their respective sports. In the end, the power to transcend anxiety lies within, waiting to be unleashed to achieve peak performance and excellence.

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