Abstract

Playing sport at any level can be stressful, especially for high-level adolescent rugby league players who are hoping to forge a career in their sport. These athletes could potentially experience stressors of playing for their academy side, loan team, and first team. In this article I provide a summary of a presentation I gave to rugby league academy and assistant academy managers from each super league club within the United Kingdom and France. I also explain elements of the presentation and the rationale for the inclusion of content.
Competing in sport, especially when an athlete is attempting to forge a career, has the potential to be very stressful (Holt & Dunn, 2004). Stress has been defined as “an ongoing process that involves individuals transacting with their environments, making appraisals of the situations they find themselves in, and endeavoring to cope with any issues that may arise” (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006, p. 329). Research indicates that adolescent athletes may experience stressors relating to failure (Sagar, Lavallee, & Spray, 2007), being evaluated by other team members or coaches (Reeves, Nicholls, & McKenna, 2009), and having pressure to perform from other people such as coaches (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). Stress can negatively influence performance because it can distract an athlete’s focus (Hardy, Mullen, & Martin, 2001). Further, stress can have a detrimental influence on an athlete’s psychological well-being (Lazarus, 2000). A self-regulatory mechanism that enables athletes to manage stress more effectively is coping, which refers to thoughts and behaviors to manage any demands (i.e., opponents playing well or coach criticism) that have been evaluated as taxing a person’s resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

**Context for the Presentation**

There are currently 12 professional rugby league clubs (11 from England, and one from France, which will be reduced to 10 for the 2015 season), which compete in the Super League. Each club has an academy that is part of the Advance Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence scheme. Academy managers are responsible for the overall development of players within their academy and aim to increase the number of players who make the transition from academy to first team squad. It should also be noted that some of the players within the academy structure may also be first team squad members and/or dual registered with a club in the rugby league championship (second tier of professional rugby league).
Prior to the presentation, an audit had taken place by the Rugby Football League that revealed coping was a key factor in influencing whether academy rugby league players would make the transition to professional level (personal correspondence with national academy manager). I was invited to give a two-hour presentation on the 15\textsuperscript{th} of December 2012 at the John Smith Stadium in Huddersfield, by the national academy manager, regarding research that I have published and practical information on how academy directors can help their players cope more effectively. It should be noted that the majority of the academy managers or their assistants were ex-professional rugby league players who had played club and international rugby league.

The Presentation

Research among professional rugby union players (e.g., Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & Bloomfield, 2006; Nicholls, Jones, Polman, & Borkoles, 2009; Nicholls & Polman, 2007) indicates that coping effectively with stressors is associated with the deployment of particular coping strategies (e.g., blocking negative thoughts), so a large part of the presentation was dedicated to coping. Researchers from mainstream psychology (i.e., Williams & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1999) have also found that self-awareness is important in managing stress. As coach interactions can be stressful for academy soccer players (Reeves, Nicholls, & McKenna, 2009), I deemed it important to include information on this in presentation. As such, the presentation contained three distinct themes, (a) understanding stress and appraisals, (b) coping, and (c) effective coach behavior.

Understanding Stress and Appraisals

Having mentioned to the delegates that the presentation would be divided into three parts at the very start, with the first being understanding stress and appraisals, a definition of
stress was read out in the first slide. The aim of this part of the presentation was to increase
the delegates’ awareness of what stress is, the stressors their players may encounter, why
their players experience stress, and how appraisal may generate more positive emotions. The
definition of stress used in the presentation was “an ongoing process that involves players
making evaluations of the situations they find themselves in and trying to cope with issues
that arise,” which was adapted from Fletcher et al. (2006). The delegates were then asked to
identify the symptoms of stress followed by how these symptoms may affect a player’s
performance. The purposes of these discussions were to illustrate that stress can influence
people differently, in terms of the symptoms experienced and the effects it has on
performance. It was hoped that this would be useful in increasing the academy managers and
their assistants’ awareness of how stress influences people differently, so that they can
identify players who might be affected by stress the most. The symptoms of stress identified
by the delegates were similar to those that have been included in the previous literature and
included increased heart-beat, worry, shaking, and indecisiveness (Nideffer, 1992). With
regards to the effects it has on performance, the coaches said that it can be useful in terms of
getting players “psyched up for a match,” but have a negative impact on performance by
distracting players.

The academy managers were asked to discuss the stressors that their players face in
groups, which would be fed back to the group. The purpose of this exercise was compare and
contrast stressors that the coaches believed their players would experiencing with those
identified in published research with team sport academy players (e.g., Nicholls, Backhouse,
Polman, & McKenna, 2009; Reeves et al., 2009). Interestingly, the coaches identified
education, training, performance, and relationships as some of the key stressors, but failed to
identify how coaches might be a stressor for the players.

The see-saw analogy diagram (Figure 1), proposed by Lazarus (1999), was then used
to help explain why players experience stress. According to Lazarus, when a player believes that there is an equal balance between his or her resources to cope and the demands of a situation, little or no stress will be experienced. When a player believes that their resources to cope outweigh the demands of the situation boredom may prevail, and when a player believes that the demands of the situation outweigh his or her resources to cope, stress is experienced. This analogy and diagram was useful, because it helped the coaches understand why their players experience stress and helped me introduce the concept of appraisal. That is, the delegates were informed that players make an appraisal or evaluation of the situation in regards to their own resources and the demands.

Recent research featuring a sample of adult professional rugby players by Nicholls, Levy, Jones, Rengamani, and Polman (2011) found that appraisals of anticipated or actual gains (e.g., winning a match or receiving praise from coach) were associated with pleasant emotions such as happiness and hope. Conversely, appraisals of anticipated or actual losses (e.g., sustaining an injury or opponents scoring a try) were associated with unpleasant emotions such as anxiety and anger. Quotes from the players who featured in this study were presented to the delegates. The coaches were encouraged to communicate positive statements to players that focus on what can be gained from situations (e.g., “Drive the player in the tackle away from the try line,” as opposed to “don’t miss the tackle and let them score”). The delegates were then presented with a range of scenarios and asked to identify instructions that are more likely to generate gain appraisals and those that might generate loss appraisals.

Coping

The next part of the presentation was related to coping and how the delegates could teach their players to cope more effectively. Similar to the stress section of the presentation, I started with a definition of coping: “coping refers to ongoing thoughts and behaviors to
manage demands that tax a person.” In order to illustrate that coping is an ongoing process that includes thoughts and behaviors, the following quote from Michael Jordan (1994, p. 11) was presented:

If I had stood at the free-throw line and thought about 10 million people watching me on the other side of the camera lens, I couldn’t have made anything. So I mentally tried to put myself in a familiar place. I thought about all of the times I shot free throws in practice and went through the same technique I had used thousands of times. You forget about the outcome. You know you are doing the right things.

This example demonstrates how a variety of different coping strategies were used in such a short period of time. The delegates were then asked to describe experiences in which they had experienced stress as a player and what they did to cope with these stressors.

Following this discussion, the concepts of coping dimensions were discussed with the players. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping can be classified within two broad dimensions: problem- and emotion-focused coping. Coping strategies categorized within the problem-focused dimension manage or alter the problem that is causing the player stress. Examples of these strategies include speaking to a coach for advice, doing additional training to work on techniques, planning, and trying to solve any problems. Emotion-focused coping strategies are those that are deployed to regulate emotional distress. Strategies such as deep breathing, acceptance, blocking negative thoughts, or walking away from a stressful situation are considered to be emotion-focused strategies. The delegates were then asked to classify the coping strategies they had previously described into problem- or emotion-focused dimensions. These dimensions were discussed in the presentation because interventions that have utilized these dimensions have found evidence to suggest that people can be taught to cope more effectively (e.g., Chesney, Chambers, Taylor, Johnson, & Folkman, 2003; Reeves,
Nicholls, & McKenna, 2011). As such, I deemed it necessary that the delegates had an understanding of these different dimensions so that they could see how the interventions were developed and apply these to their players. Coping Effectiveness Training (CET; Chesney et al., 2003) was an intervention designed for individuals diagnosed with HIV to help them cope more effectively with stress. One of the main tenants of the intervention was based on the goodness-of-fit approach (Folkman, 1984), which states that problem-focused coping strategies will be more effective when the person can control the stressors, whereas emotion-focused coping are more effective when the person has little or no control of the stressor. The participants in this intervention were taught to deploy problem-focused coping strategies for controllable stressors and emotion-focused coping strategies for uncontrollable stressors.

Although the intervention by Chesney et al. (2003) was an non-sporting population, Reeves et al. (2011) developed a similar intervention for academy soccer players from an Football Association Premier League club. Both interventions had a positive impact on overall coping effectiveness.

A key aspect of coping effectiveness training (Chesney et al. 2003) is that people understand the difference between: (a) uncontrollable and controllable stressors and, (b) problem- and emotion-focused coping. A list of stressors, from a sample of English under-18 rugby union players (Nicholls & Polman, 2007), were presented to the delegates who were asked whether the stressors were controllable or uncontrollable. On the whole, there was common consensus on all stressors other than opponents. A delegate mentioned that a player can control his opponents by how well he plays. Another delegate stated that this was incorrect and that players cannot control opponents fully and that this is an uncontrollable stressor. The delegates were the presented with a variety of problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies that had been deemed to be relatively effective among samples of professional rugby union players and taught how they could teach these coping strategies to
their players. The coping strategies discussed were blocking negative thoughts, increasing concentration, acceptance, increased effort, and gathered information.

Coach Behavior

Research with high-level adolescent (Nicholls & Polman, 2007) and professional (Nicholls et al., 2006) rugby union players revealed that coaches were a stressor. Furthermore, Chow, Murray, and Feltz (2009) found that coaches of adolescent teams who had strong beliefs regarding their ability to coach were more likely to have players in their team who conducted acts of violence. Gucciardi, Gordon, Dimmock, and Mallett (2009) found that coaches are instrumental in the development of mental toughness in their athletes. High levels of mental toughness are associated with athletes who cope more effectively (e.g., Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). As such, it appears that coach behavior might be a contributor factor of stress levels among adolescent athletes and was included in the presentation. The section of the presentation regarding coach behavior was very interactive. The delegates, who were in small groups, discussed what types of coaching behavior might cause players to experience stress and how they can limit the stress that they cause. This topic was debated quite strongly, and it was felt that clarity regarding selection, avoiding publically humiliating players, and overly criticizing players could help reduce stress levels of players.

Presentation Reflections

The presentation was based on research with professional rugby union players given that both rugby league and rugby union are high impact team sports. The presentation included information how the academy managers could help their players to manage stress more effectively and was partially based on paper by Reeves et al. (2011). It should be noted that the intervention by Reeves and colleagues consisted of seven sessions, whereas this presentation was only two and a half hours long. As such, the depth of the presentation was
not as great as the study by Reeves. However, a challenge of working in professional sport settings and providing psychological support to professional teams is that the time available may be limited and that decisions have to be made regarding the content of such sessions.
References


Figure 1.

Adapted Version of Lazarus’ (1999) See-saw Analogy

Scenario 1: Little or no Stress

Scenario 2: Boredom

Scenario 3: Stress