1   **Nicholls, A. R. (2014). Coaching the Coaches: Coping effectiveness training for Super**

2   **League academy managers.** *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, 5,* **102-116.**

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5   Coaching the Coaches: Coping Effectiveness Training for Super League Academy Managers

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13   Abstract

14   Playing sport at any level can be stressful, especially for high-level adolescent rugby league

15   players who are hoping to forge a career in their sport. These athletes could potentially

16   experience stressors of playing for their academy side, loan team, and first team. In this

17   article I provide a summary of a presentation I gave to rugby league academy and assistant

18   academy managers from each super league club within the United Kingdom and France. I

19   also explain elements of the presentation and the rationale for the inclusion of content.

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21   Coaching the Coaches: Coping Effectiveness Training for Super League Academy Managers

22   Competing in sport, especially when an athlete is attempting to forge a career, has the

23   potential to be very stressful (Holt & Dunn, 2004). Stress has been defined as "an ongoing

24   process that involves individuals transacting with their environments, making appraisals of

25   the situations they find themselves in, and endeavoring to cope with any issues that may

26   arise" (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006, p. 329). Research indicates that adolescent

27   athletes may experience stressors relating to failure (Sagar, Lavallee, & Spray, 2007), being

28   evaluated by other team members or coaches (Reeves, Nicholls, & McKenna, 2009), and

29   having pressure to perform from other people such as coaches (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010).

30   Stress can negatively influence performance because it can distract an athlete's focus (Hardy,

31   Mullen, & Martin, 2001). Further, stress can have a detrimental influence on an athlete's

32   psychological well-being (Lazarus, 2000). A self-regulatory mechanism that enables athletes

33   to manage stress more effectively is coping, which refers to thoughts and behaviors to

34   manage any demands (i.e., opponents playing well or coach criticism) that have been

35   evaluated as taxing a person's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

36   **Context for the Presentation**

37   There are currently 12 professional rugby league clubs (11 from England, and one

38   from France, which will be reduced to 10 for the 2015 season), which compete in the Super

39   League. Each club has an academy that is part of the Advance Apprenticeship in Sporting

40   Excellence scheme. Academy managers are responsible for the overall development of

41   players within their academy and aim to increase the number of players who make the

42   transition from academy to first team squad. It should also be noted that some of the players

43   within the academy structure may also be first team squad members and/or dual registered

44   with a club in the rugby league championship (second tier of professional rugby league).

45   Prior to the presentation, an audit had taken place by the Rugby Football League that revealed

46   coping was a key factor in influencing whether academy rugby league players would make

47   the transition to professional level (personal correspondence with national academy

48   manager). I was invited to give a two-hour presentation on the 15th of December 2012 at the

49   John Smith Stadium in Huddersfield, by the national academy manager, regarding research

50   that I have published and practical information on how academy directors can help their

51   players cope more effectively. It should be noted that the majority of the academy managers

52   or their assistants were ex-professional rugby league players who had played club and

53   international rugby league.

The Presentation

55   Research among professional rugby union players (e.g., Nicholls, Holt, Polman, &

56   Bloomfield, 2006; Nicholls, Jones, Polman, & Borkoles, 2009; Nicholls & Polman, 2007)

57   indicates that coping effectively with stressors is associated with the deployment of particular

58   coping strategies (e.g., blocking negative thoughts), so a large part of the presentation was

59   dedicated to coping. Researchers from mainstream psychology (i.e., Williams &

60   McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1999) have also found that self-awareness is important in managing

61   stress. As coach interactions can be stressful for academy soccer players (Reeves, Nicholls, &

62   McKenna, 2009), I deemed it important to include information on this in presentation. As

63   such, the presentation contained three distinct themes, (a) understanding stress and appraisals,

64   (b) coping, and (c) effective coach behavior.

Understanding Stress and Appraisals

66   Having mentioned to the delegates that the presentation would be divided into three

67   parts at the very start, with the first being understanding stress and appraisals, a definition of

68   stress was read out in the first slide. The aim of this part of the presentation was to increase

69   the delegates' awareness of what stress is, the stressors their players may encounter, why

70   their players experience stress, and how appraisal may generate more positive emotions. The

71   definition of stress used in the presentation was "an ongoing process that involves players

72   making evaluations of the situations they find themselves in and trying to cope with issues

73   that arise," which was adapted from Fletcher et al. (2006). The delegates were then asked to

74   identify the symptoms of stress followed by how these symptoms may affect a player's

75   performance. The purposes of these discussions were to illustrate that stress can influence

76   people differently, in terms of the symptoms experienced and the effects it has on

77   performance. It was hoped that this would be useful in increasing the academy managers and

78   their assistants' awareness of how stress influences people differently, so that they can

79   identify players who might be affected by stress the most. The symptoms of stress identified

80   by the delegates were similar to those that have been included in the previous literature and

81   included increased heart-beat, worry, shaking, and indecisiveness (Nideffer, 1992). With

82   regards to the effects it has on performance, the coaches said that it can be useful in terms of

83   getting players "psyched up for a match," but have a negative impact on performance by

84   distracting players.

85   The academy managers were asked to discuss the stressors that their players face in

86   groups, which would be fed back to the group. The purpose of this exercise was compare and

87   contrast stressors that the coaches believed their players would experiencing with those

88   identified in published research with team sport academy players (e.g., Nicholls, Backhouse,

89   Polman, & McKenna, 2009; Reeves et al., 2009). Interestingly, the coaches identified

90   education, training, performance, and relationships as some of the key stressors, but failed to

91   identify how coaches might be a stressor for the players.

92   The see-saw analogy diagram (Figure 1), proposed by Lazarus (1999), was then used

93   to help explain why players experience stress. According to Lazarus, when a player believes

94   that there is an equal balance between his or her resources to cope and the demands of a

95   situation, little or no stress will be experienced. When a player believes that their resources to

96   cope outweigh the demands of the situation boredom may prevail, and when a player believes

97   that the demands of the situation outweigh his or her resources to cope, stress is experienced.

98   This analogy and diagram was useful, because it helped the coaches understand why their

99   players experience stress and helped me introduce the concept of appraisal. That is, the

100   delegates were informed that players make an appraisal or evaluation of the situation in

101   regards to their own resources and the demands.

102   Recent research featuring a sample of adult professional rugby players by Nicholls,

103   Levy, Jones, Rengamani, and Polman (2011) found that appraisals of anticipated or actual

104   gains (e.g., winning a match or receiving praise from coach) were associated with pleasant

105   emotions such as happiness and hope. Conversely, appraisals of anticipated or actual losses

106   (e.g., sustaining an injury or opponents scoring a try) were associated with unpleasant

107   emotions such as anxiety and anger. Quotes from the players who featured in this study were

108   presented to the delegates. The coaches were encouraged to communicate positive statements

109   to players that focus on what can be gained from situations (e.g., "Drive the player in the

110   tackle away from the try line," as opposed to "don't miss the tackle and let them score"). The

111   delegates were then presented with a range of scenarios and asked to identify instructions that

112   are more likely to generate gain appraisals and those that might generate loss appraisals.

113   **Coping**

114   The next part of the presentation was related to coping and how the delegates could

115   teach their players to cope more effectively. Similar to the stress section of the presentation, I

116   started with a definition of coping: "coping refers to ongoing thoughts and behaviors to

117   manage demands that tax a person." In order to illustrate that coping is an ongoing process

118   that includes thoughts and behaviors, the following quote from Michael Jordan (1994, p. 11)

119   was presented:

120   If I had stood at the free-throw line and thought about 10 million people watching

121   me on the other side of the camera lens, I couldn't have made anything. So I

122   mentally tried to put myself in a familiar place. I thought about all of the times I shot

123   free throws in practice and went through the same technique I had used thousands of

124   times. You forget about the outcome. You know you are doing the right things.

125   This example demonstrates how a variety of different coping strategies were used in such a

126   short period of time. The delegates were then asked to describe experiences in which they had

127   experienced stress as a player and what they did to cope with these stressors.

128   Following this discussion, the concepts of coping dimensions were discussed with the

129   players. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping can be classified within two

130   broad dimensions: problem- and emotion-focused coping. Coping strategies categorized

131   within the problem-focused dimension manage or alter the problem that is causing the player

132   stress. Examples of these strategies include speaking to a coach for advice, doing additional

133   training to work on techniques, planning, and trying to solve any problems. Emotion-focused

134   coping strategies are those that are deployed to regulate emotional distress. Strategies such as

135   deep breathing, acceptance, blocking negative thoughts, or walking away from a stressful

136   situation are considered to be emotion-focused strategies. The delegates were then asked to

137   classify the coping strategies they had previously described into problem- or emotion-focused

138   dimensions. These dimensions were discussed in the presentation because interventions that

139   have utilized these dimensions have found evidence to suggest that people can be taught to

140   cope more effectively (e.g., Chesney, Chambers, Taylor, Johnson, & Folkman, 2003; Reeves,

141   Nicholls, & McKenna, 2011). As such, I deemed it necessary that the delegates had an

142   understanding of these different dimensions so that they could see how the interventions were

143   developed and apply these to their players. Coping Effectiveness Training (CET; Chesney et

144   al., 2003) was an intervention designed for individuals diagnosed with HIV to help them cope

145   more effectively with stress. One of the main tenants of the intervention was based on the

146   goodness-of-fit approach (Folkman, 1984), which states that problem-focused coping

147   strategies will be more effective when the person can control the stressors, whereas emotion-

148   focused coping are more effective when the person has little or no control of the stressor. The

149   participants in this intervention were taught to deploy problem-focused coping strategies for

150   controllable stressors and emotion-focused coping strategies for uncontrollable stressors.

151   Although the intervention by Chesney et al. (2003) was an non-sporting population, Reeves

152   et al. (2011) developed a similar intervention for academy soccer players from an Football

153   Association Premier League club. Both interventions had a positive impact on overall coping

154   effectiveness.

155   A key aspect of coping effectiveness training (Chesney et al. 2003) is that people

156   understand the difference between: (a) uncontrollable and controllable stressors and, (b)

157   problem- and emotion-focused coping. A list of stressors, from a sample of English under-18

158   rugby union players (Nicholls & Polman, 2007), were presented to the delegates who were

159   asked whether the stressors were controllable or uncontrollable. On the whole, there was

160   common consensus on all stressors other than opponents. A delegate mentioned that a player

161   can control his opponents by how well he plays. Another delegate stated that this was

162   incorrect and that players cannot control opponents fully and that this is an uncontrollable

163   stressor. The delegates were the presented with a variety of problem- and emotion-focused

164   coping strategies that had been deemed to be relatively effective among samples of

165   professional rugby union players and taught how they could teach these coping strategies to

166   their players. The coping strategies discussed were blocking negative thoughts, increasing

167   concentration, acceptance, increased effort, and gathered information.

168   **Coach Behavior**

169   Research with high-level adolescent (Nicholls & Polman, 2007) and professional

170   (Nicholls et al., 2006) rugby union players revealed that coaches were a stressor.

171   Furthermore, Chow, Murray, and Feltz (2009) found that coaches of adolescent teams who

172   had strong beliefs regarding their ability to coach were more likely to have players in their

173   team who conducted acts of violence. Gucciardi, Gordon, Dimmock, and Mallett (2009)

174   found that coaches are instrumental in the development of mental toughness in their athletes.

175   High levels of mental toughness are associated with athletes who cope more effectively (e.g.,

176   Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). As such, it appears that coach behavior might be a

177   contributor factor of stress levels among adolescent athletes and was included in the

178   presentation. The section of the presentation regarding coach behavior was very interactive.

179   The delegates, who were in small groups, discussed what types of coaching behavior might

180   cause players to experience stress and how they can limit the stress that they cause. This topic

181   was debated quite strongly, and it was felt that clarity regarding selection, avoiding publically

182   humiliating players, and overly criticizing players could help reduce stress levels of players.

183   **Presentation Reflections**

184   The presentation was based on research with professional rugby union players given

185   that both rugby league and rugby union are high impact team sports. The presentation

186   included information how the academy managers could help their players to manage stress

187   more effectively and was partially based on paper by Reeves et al. (2011). It should be noted

188   that the intervention by Reeves and colleagues consisted of seven sessions, whereas this

189   presentation was only two and a half hours long. As such, the depth of the presentation was

190   not as great as the study by Reeves. However, a challenge of working in professional sport

191   settings and providing psychological support to professional teams is that the time available

192   may be limited and that decisions have to be made regarding the content of such sessions.

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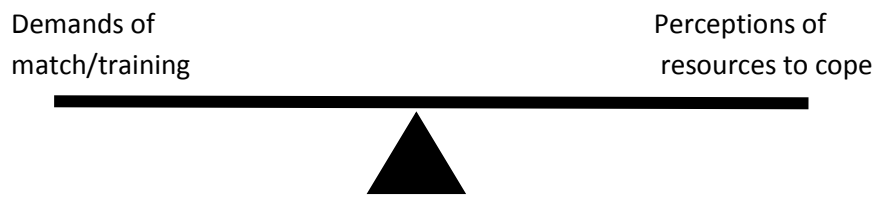
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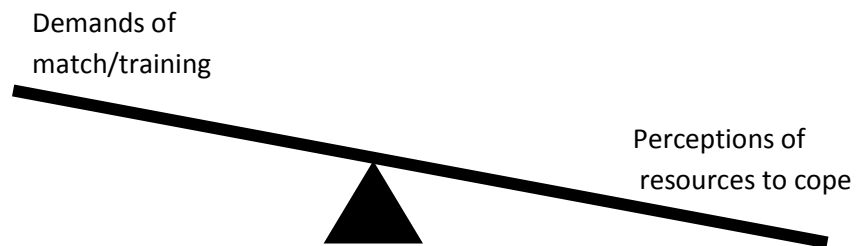
261   3973(99)00025-8

262

263   Figure 1.

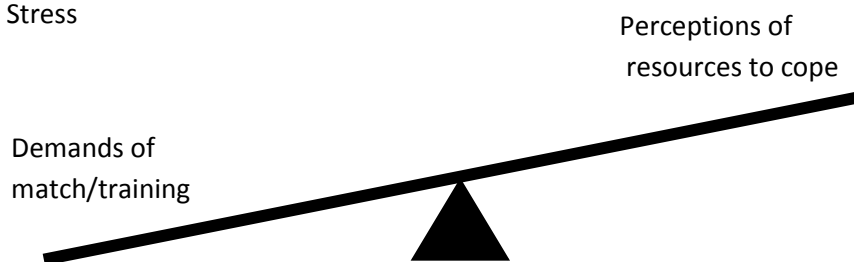264   Adapted Version of Lazarus' (1999) See-saw Analogy

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Scenario 1: Little or no Stress

Demands of   Perceptions of
match/training   resources to cope

Scenario 2: Boredom

Demands of
match/training

Perceptions of
resources to cope

Scenario 3: Stress

Perceptions of
resources to cope

Demands of
match/training

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