

Sources of Organizational Stress in Elite Sports Performers

David Fletcher

Loughborough University, UK

Sheldon Hanton

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, UK

This study extends recent research investigating organizational stress in elite sport. Fourteen international performers (7 men and 7 women) from a wide range of sports were interviewed with regard to potential sources of organizational stress. Consistent with Woodman and Hardy's (2001a) theoretical framework of organizational stress in sport, four main categories were examined: environmental issues, personal issues, leadership issues, and team issues. The main environmental issues that emerged were selection, finances, training environment, accommodation, travel, and competition environment. The main personal issues were nutrition, injury, and goals and expectations. The main leadership issues were coaches and coaching styles. The main team issues were team atmosphere, support network, roles, and communication. The findings are discussed in relation to previous research and in terms of their implications for sport organizations and personnel working with elite performers.

I know I'll probably regret the decision [to quit competitive swimming] for the rest of my life, but I just couldn't afford to carry on. . . . We were told about the changes in lottery funding just before the nationals. You don't need that sort of pressure. . . . When they [the National Governing Body of swimming] first started paying me lottery money, I thought I would be looked after through to the Olympics, so I put my education on hold. Now I have no swimming career, no qualifications and . . . I'll never know what it is like to go to the Olympics. (Linda Hindmarsh, ex-international British swimmer, quoted in Downes, 1999, p. 13)

David Fletcher is now with the School of Sport, Physical Education and Recreation, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC), United Kingdom. E-mail: DFletcher@uwic.ac.uk. Sheldon Hanton is also with the School of Sport, Physical Education and Recreation, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC), United Kingdom.

As illustrated in this quote, elite athletes invariably prepare for competition under conditions of considerable pressure (Jones & Hardy, 1990; Orlick & Partington, 1988; Patmore, 1986). As a result, performers will often consult with a sport psychologist on coping with a wide range of stressors, many of which stem from social, organizational, political, occupational, and cultural sources. With this in mind, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that researchers have tended to overlook the important role that social and organizational factors play in a performer's appraisal of stress (Gill, 1994; Jones, 1995). The general aim of this study is to contribute to bridging this gap in the sport psychology knowledge base.

Over the past decade or so, researchers have begun to use qualitative techniques in an attempt to unveil sources of stress experienced by elite performers (e.g., Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991). Stressors revealed include preparation and performance problems; judges decisions and competition organization; coach and teammate influences; coaching, managerial, and administrative decisions; social support; accommodation, travel, nutrition, and training facilities; and financial and time pressures. While such studies have illustrated the broad spectrum of demands placed upon elite performers, they generally do not differentiate between the specific origins of these stressors (Woodman & Hardy, 2001a). For example, some of the reported stressors will emanate from outside of the sport organization (e.g., family disturbances), while others are likely to be a direct consequence of the organizational climate (e.g., sport politics). Nevertheless, this line of inquiry provides an interesting backdrop to the present investigation because of the organizational stressors it has begun to unearth.

Shirom (1982) defined organizational stress as "work-related social psychological stress" (p. 21) and conceived it to be an interaction between an employee and the work environment to which he or she is exposed. Hence, it is neither an individual nor the environment that is central to this organizational stress process, but rather a person's cognitive appraisal of the work situation they find themselves in (cf. Cooper, 1998; Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001; Lazarus, 1966). In accordance with these assumptions, Woodman and Hardy (2001a) recently generated a theoretical framework of organizational stress in sport that emphasizes the interaction between an individual and the sport organization (cf. Hanin, 1993). They defined organizational stress as "the stress that is associated primarily and directly with an individual's appraisal of the structure and functioning of the organization within which he/she is operating" (Woodman & Hardy, 2001a, p. 208). In delimiting this description, they argued that although issues not normally directly related to the sport organization (e.g., family) might be sources of stress, they should not be regarded as potential sources of *organizational* stress. Conversely, they reasoned that issues directly related to the sport organization (e.g., coaches) should be deemed potential sources of organizational stress.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that although organizational stress has been repeatedly identified as an important priority for future research (e.g., Hardy & Jones, 1994; Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996; Jones, 1995; Woodman & Hardy, 2001a, 2001b), there remains a lack of scientific literature in this area. Indeed, Woodman and Hardy's (2001a) recent case study is, to the best of our knowledge, the only published investigation to have specifically addressed organizational stress in sport. This research involved interviewing 15 elite performers with regard to potential sources of organizational stress in preparation for major international competitions. Four main organizational categories were examined: environmental

issues, personal issues, leadership issues, and team issues. The main environmental issues that emerged were selection, the training environment, and finances. The main personal issues were nutrition, injury, and goals and expectations. The main leadership issues were coaches, and coaching styles. The main team issues were team atmosphere, support network, roles, and communication. These findings, together with those of Scanlan et al. (1991) and Gould et al. (1993), suggest that organizational stress is an important issue in preparing for major international competitions. For instance, interpersonal relationships and financial issues that are poorly managed are likely to result in impaired competition preparation (Woodman & Hardy, 2001b).

While Woodman and Hardy's (2001a) work has advanced psychologists' understanding of organizational stress in sport, one could argue that a possible drawback of their approach was that they chose to only sample performers from within a single sport organization. It appears they did this to allow for an in-depth examination and for practical reasons associated with Hardy's experience as a consultant with some of the performers from this sport. However, as the conceptual definition of organizational stress would suggest, it is highly likely that an individual's appraisal of a situation will vary across sport organizations. Therefore, in order to fully explore the issues relating to organizational stress, it would seem pertinent to sample as many different sports as practically possible.

The purpose of this study was to complement the findings of Woodman and Hardy (2001a) and extend them by examining potential sources of organizational stress in elite performers from a wide range of sports. Although the performers in Woodman and Hardy's research were of the elite level, they all participated in the same sport and consequently, their experiences were somewhat restricted to a single sport organization. Interview techniques were deemed the most appropriate methodology because detailed information of "rich" quality was required to fully investigate and understand the performers functioning within a complex social and organizational environment. Indeed, Jones (1995) pointed out the following:

Such an [interview] approach may be particularly valuable in the context that stress should be considered as a "biopsychosocial" process, since everything takes place within a social context (Lazarus, 1993; Gill, 1994). . . . The social context . . . has received little attention, but qualitative methods provide an important means of teasing out social influences involved in the process. (p. 470)

The exploration of these social factors and the further identification of sources of organizational stress will allow sport psychologists, coaches, and organizations to better help more performers from a wider range of sports prepare for major competitions.

Method

Participant and Sport Organization Selection Criteria

Twenty-one international performers were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in the study. During this initial contact, the first author explained the nature of the investigation and emphasized that all the participants' identities would

remain confidential. In order to address the research question, a purposive sample was sought which had to meet certain selection criteria (cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). First, it was important to establish that all of the performers were current national squad members, since changes over time in personnel involved in the sports will increase the likelihood of a change in the organizational climate (Woodman & Hardy, 2001a). This helped to ensure that the present study was set within a relatively short time frame and represented a perspective of the sport organizations that was as current as possible. Second, all potential participants were required to have performed at the highest competition in their sport (i.e., Olympic Games, World Championships and/or World Cup). Although the criteria used to define an elite performer has been the subject of debate for some time (see Highlen & Bennett, 1983; Vanden Auweele, De Cuyper, Van Mele, & Rzewnicki, 1993), this standard was considered appropriate because it allows for comparison, albeit tentatively, between the results of this investigation and Woodman and Hardy's (2001a) research.

Potential participants were drawn from a variety of sports to ensure that a broad range of organizations was sampled. Two important considerations in the selection of these organizations were Highlen and Bennett's (1983) sport typological hypothesis and the different ways funding is distributed to sport organizations within the United Kingdom (UK). Regarding the first consideration, Highlen and Bennett suggested that there are types of sport that can be identified with similar psychological characteristics, which could include, for example, the way performers appraise stress (cf. Hanton, Jones, & Mullen, 2000; Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990). Consequently, it seemed intuitively sensible to sample organizations representative of as many different types of sport (e.g., individual/team, subjective/objective scoring) as practically possible. The second consideration is based on an assumption that the different ways funding is distributed to sports in the UK (cf. Sport England, 2000; UK Sport, 2000a, 2000b) will likely affect the structure and functioning of their corresponding organizations. Hence, the researchers went to great lengths to sample organizations representative of the different sources and mechanisms underlying sport funding at a national level.

Participants and Sport Organizations

Participants who met the selection criteria were 14 elite performers who ranged in age from 21 to 38 years ($M = 27.36$, $SD = 4.96$). The sample consisted a male and female performer from seven different sports,¹ all of whom provided written informed consent prior to the start of the interviews. Over half of the participants were medal winners at major international championships, including Olympic Games, World Championships, World Cup, European Championships, and Commonwealth Games. On average, the performers had 6 years ($SD = 3.13$) of senior international experience.

The present sample was drawn from five individual sports and two team sports. Most of the individual sports did, however, comprise aspects of team competition (e.g., doubles in racquet sports, relays in athletics and swimming) and included both subjective and objective means of scoring. The sample also represented professional organizations that were predominantly self-financed and amateur organizations that were part-funded by UK Sport Exchequer Funding, UK Sport's World Class Performance Programme (lottery funding), and Sport England's World Class Performance Programme (lottery funding).

Interview Guide and Pilot Study

In order to fully investigate the research question and facilitate the interview process, an interview guide was developed.² This guide did not represent a rigid document, but rather a flexible evolutionary set of questions (cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Consistent with Woodman and Hardy's (2001a) theoretical framework of organizational stress in sport, the interview questions were broadly based on Carron's (1982) model of group cohesion because suboptimal group dynamics are emerging as a consistent source of stress within sport organizations. The participants were asked to discuss their experiences of "major international competitions such as the Olympic Games, World Championships and/or World Cup" as they related to environmental issues, personal issues, leadership issues, and team issues (cf. Carron, 1982; Woodman & Hardy, 2001a). The findings of Woodman and Hardy (2001a), together with the research addressing the broader area of sources of stress (e.g., Gould et al., 1993; Scanlan et al., 1991), provided the rationale and stimulus for many of the questions that were integrated into the interview framework. This literature was supplemented with insights from certified sport psychologists and qualified professional coaches from different sports. Through their work, these contributors had a combined wealth of knowledge relating to the potential organizational stressors that elite performers might experience.

A pilot study of the interview guide was conducted on 7 recently retired (i.e., less than 4 years) elite performers that were drawn from each of the sports under investigation. The purpose of these interviews was twofold: first, to ensure that the interview guide covered all the issues that might contribute to organizational stress; second, to enable the first author to practice and refine his interview skills and techniques. Advice and guidance on conducting interviews was received from the second author who had recent experience of interviewing elite performers (Hanton, 1996; Hanton & Connaughton, 2002; Hanton & Jones, 1999a).

Procedure

A standardized interview format was used, which involved participants being taken through an identical set of questions and being asked them in a similar manner. Despite being structured to this extent, the order of the questions varied with the flow of the discussion because the responses often led the interviewer to react to and explore relevant issues at that instant (Patton, 1990). This procedural flexibility enhanced the fluency of the interview and richness of the information gleaned, while still retaining the systematic nature of data collection between the participants. A priori probing rules, including clarification (e.g., "I'm not sure exactly what you mean, could you please go over that again?"), elaboration (e.g., "Could you please explain that in more detail?"), and general (e.g., "What effect did that have?") probes were established to ensure that responses were as consistent as possible in terms of their depth and complexity (Patton, 1990). At the end of each section, participants were asked whether there was anything else they could add concerning what had just been discussed.

All of the interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author and away from an environment the participant might associate with the sport organization. This helped ensure that the performers were given the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences in a neutral and confidential setting. The interviews

were tape recorded in their entirety and ranged in duration from 60 to 120 minutes. Discourse was subsequently transcribed verbatim, yielding 304 pages of single spaced text.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were formatted for analysis in the QSR N5 (2000) computer software package.³ A combination of inductive and deductive content analysis (Weber, 1985) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approaches were employed to analyze the data. Specifically, this involved the first author using QSR N5 to sift out and cluster extracts from the transcripts (i.e., quotes representing a meaningful point) around common underlying threads, which subsequently developed into raw data themes (Patton, 1990). This process was then repeated with the location of common underlying threads within these new emergent themes, resulting in the hierarchical process continuing to higher order themes. At each progressive stage of the (inductive) content analysis, consensus between the authors was sought, before continuing the analysis to themes of greatest abstraction. These final emergent themes were then (deductively) categorized under one of the following four general dimensions: environmental issues, personal issues, leadership issues, and team issues (cf. Carron, 1982; Woodman & Hardy, 2001a). The researchers agreed in 87% (319 out of 365) of their categorization of the quotes into their raw data themes, 91% (104 out of 114) of raw data themes into their higher order themes, and 93% (14 out of 15) of higher order themes into their general dimensions. The final structure of the content analysis was reviewed in its entirety for the achievement of consensus and the purpose of validation.

While this study has employed consensus validation techniques in order to satisfy qualitative validity criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990), it is our belief that the reader should also be given the opportunity to interpret the data in a way that may be more meaningful to them (cf. Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantic, & Sparkes, 2001; Sparkes, 1998). Consequently, the findings are reported using a combination of hierarchical content trees and direct quotes from the interview transcripts.⁴ This is to enable the reader to empathize with, and immerse himself or herself in, the participants' perceptions and thereby better understand the complexity of the issues being investigated.

Results

The results derived from the data analysis procedures represent the collated interview responses from all 14 participants. In total, 114 raw data themes arose from the transcripts reflecting the diverse sources of organizational stress in elite sports performers. These were abstracted into 15 higher order themes and categorized under one of the following four general dimensions: environmental issues, personal issues, leadership issues, and team issues.

Environmental Issues

The full range of environmental issues is displayed in Figure 1. The higher order themes within this dimension were selection, finances, training environment, accommodation, travel, and competition environment.

The most frequently cited themes within selection were “perceived unfairness in selection process” and “ambiguous selection criteria.” Selection appears to be a particularly sensitive issue for elite performers. The following quote is an example of how any perceived favoritism on the part of the selectors can led to feelings of distress:

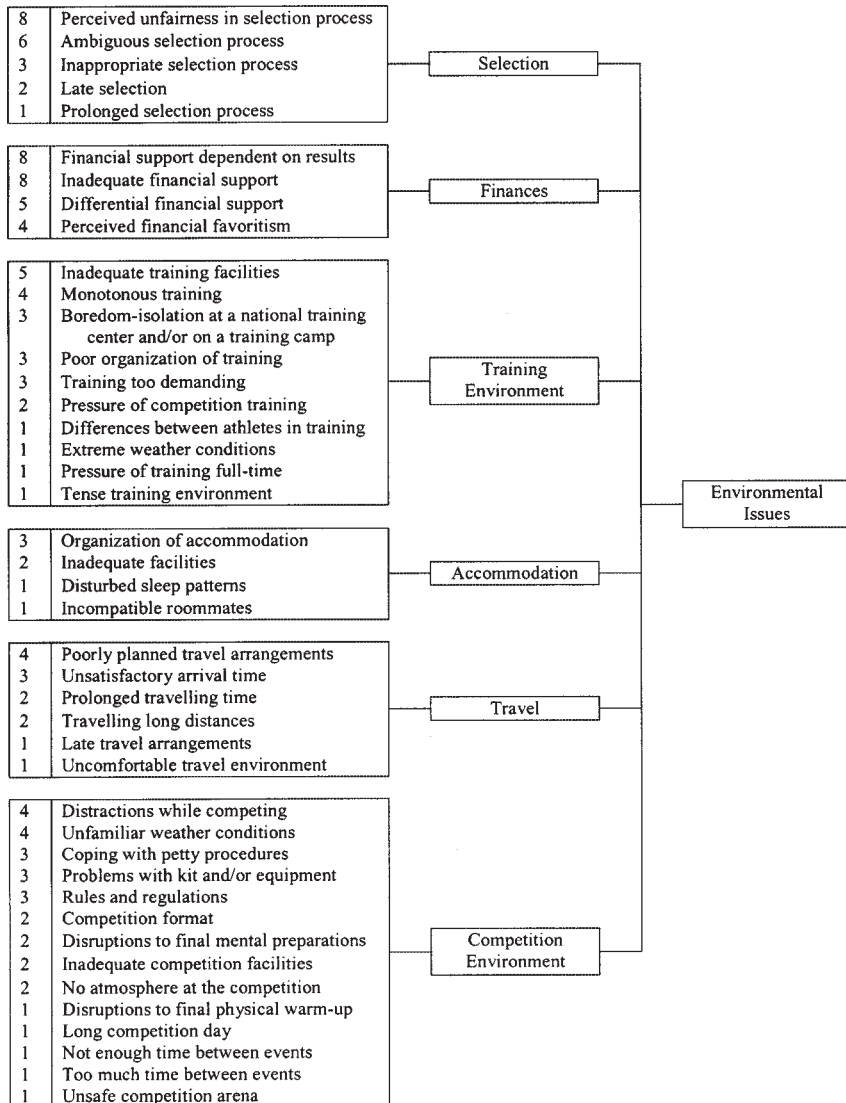


Figure 1 — Sources of organizational stress pertaining to environmental issues (a frequency analysis is provided in the first column to illustrate the number of performers mentioning each raw data theme).

The selection process is terrible. I remember not getting picked for one event. I'd been playing and training really hard for 6 months, and one girl she'd been out injured for those 6 months, but because she had more experience she went instead of me. And it was terrible, because that was a real insult to me because I'd been training. . . . I found that really hard to deal with . . . I wasn't happy.

Even a relatively minor confusion can easily escalate into a more serious problem, particularly when the selection policy is not clear, as the following quote shows:

John did a false start at the trials [for the World Championships] so he had to race in a specially arranged time trial and was told that it would be accepted [for consideration]. But then he was told it hadn't been accepted, so obviously he was in a bit of a huff about that 'cause he'd done the qualifying time and so threatened to sue. . . . It's all been changed around now . . . so he'll be able to race at the World's after all.

The most frequently cited themes within finances were "financial support dependent on results" and "inadequate financial support." Since many elite performers train and compete full time, they often have to rely on their family and organizations to help fund their athletic career. Not surprisingly, problems associated with financial issues were rarely straightforward as illustrated by these two contrasting perspectives:

Funding is a bloody nightmare. I mean since the lottery's come in it's better, but it's almost more frustrating now because there is money available for athletes but, if you imagine a triangle, they're sort of making the top of the triangle fantastically rich. . . . Whereas where it should be, in my view, is helping the base get stronger, and athletes like me who are on the brink of international finals never receive anything. But if you break into a final you receive the funding, but you receive everything else as well.

If you were contracted by a company, they'd give you a bonus if you performed. Whereas the lottery funding really penalizes you if you're succeeding, because anyone who succeeds earns income from elsewhere, which is understandable and how it should be. And obviously lottery funding then takes that into account and subtracts that away from what income you can get off the lottery. . . . Really a top athlete can earn less off the lottery funding than someone in a lower category, like top national level players who are never really going to do anything, so the money is wasted in that sense. . . . It doesn't encourage the top athletes to improve.

The most frequently cited themes within training environment were "inadequate training facilities" and "monotonous training." One might easily assume that elite performers have access to the training facilities they require as a matter of course. However, as the following quote demonstrates, this is not always the case and can be very frustrating for the performer:

Facilities have been an absolute nightmare. They've put a stop on a gym being built through red tape and whatever. . . . We've had the funding passed

and the equipment in storage for 2 years now, which should have been in place ready for our build up to the Olympics. Through red tape and bureaucratic nonsense, we haven't had those facilities.

When performers are able to train they must be careful to vary their training program as this quote suggests:

If I'm honest, I'm not a great fan of [sport]. I think I do it because of what I get out of it rather than doing it for the sake of it. It's hard for me to motivate myself through the year to train, you know, just the routine and everything . . . that's when you start to get irritable and stressed out.

The most frequently cited themes within accommodation were "organization of accommodation" and "inadequate facilities." Accommodation arrangements may seem at first glance rather innocuous but, if neglected, can result in final preparations that are far from ideal. An example of this is evident in the quote below:

I know we had one lad, I think he was about 6'6" and about 18 stone, he was huge, we called him "[nickname]", and he really did need a double bed to get into. Some of the competitions he just couldn't sleep.

Further, the importance of not taking anything for granted with regard to accommodation arrangements is illustrated in this quote:

For some reason, there was no air-conditioning in our room at the Olympic Games. It wasn't meant to be warm at that time of year, but it was blisteringly hot. . . . So that made it quite difficult because our room where we were staying at the holding camp did have air-conditioning. So you'd get accustomed to air-conditioning and you'd then move into the village.

The most frequently cited themes within travel were "poorly planned travel arrangements" and "unsatisfactory arrival time." The following quote is a performer's account of how poorly planned travel arrangements can quite easily encroach upon training:

In our sport, we travel around Europe and North America by driving ourselves . . . everything has to be done on the cheapest budget, therefore flying is not always an option. I remember once we had a twelve hour drive, followed by a seven hour ferry journey, followed by a little rail journey on the other side. We were knackered and the next day we were expected to get up early and train because that was the only time we could get use of the facilities.

It is not just training that can be affected but also final competition preparations as the following quote illustrates:

The one thing that is really annoying is when you're late [to the competition venue] because I have an hour before a game that is my personal preparation time: warm-up, kiting-up and knocking balls about. If that time gets cut into then that's bad, because that then rushes me and means that my preparation isn't as perfect as it should be. So that does annoy me.

The most frequently cited themes within competition environment were “distractions whilst competing” and “unfamiliar weather conditions.” The competition itself is clearly a very sensitive time for both performers and coaches. The potential difficulties presented by the competition environment are evident in the following quote:

We were playing in conditions of 30 degrees and 90 percent humidity, which was probably just about the worst conditions for a performance. You can’t actually get much worse than that. Heat is fine if you can evaporate the moisture, but as soon as you get heat and humidity your body just overheats. It’s uncomfortable, it’s almost painful and it’s dangerous.

Any unexpected events immediately prior to performance can be difficult to deal with as the following quote suggests:

I remember walking out about to race and I did get distracted by the fact that everyone was running in (toward the inside of the arena) because all the rain was blowing in on them, a sort of wind tunnel effect. That did throw me a bit.

Personal Issues

The full range of personal issues is displayed in Figure 2. The higher order themes within this dimension were nutrition, injury, and goals and expectations.

The most frequently cited themes within nutrition were “importance placed on diet” and “poor provision of food.” Nutrition is another sensitive issue for elite

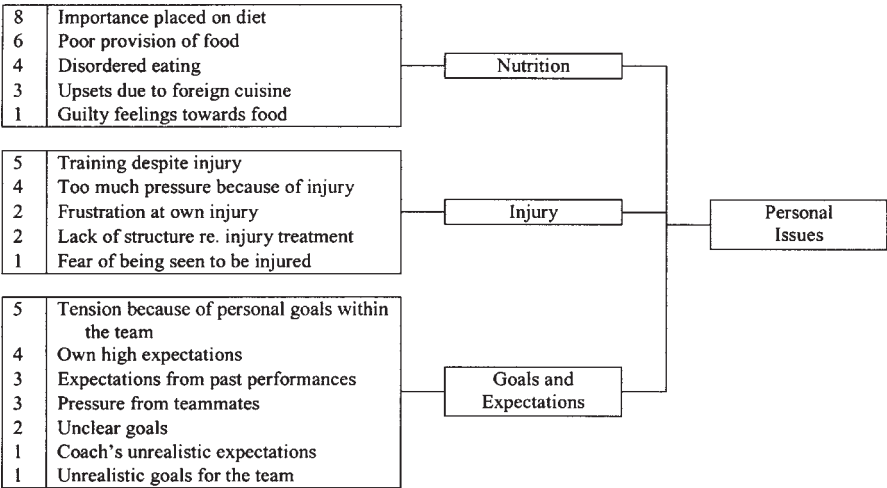


Figure 2 — Sources of organizational stress pertaining to personal issues (a frequency analysis is provided in the first column to illustrate the number of performers mentioning each raw data theme).

performers, particularly for the female participants in this study. The following quote illustrates how diet and body image can become a significant source of stress for some elite performers:

I think it [nutritional advice] can create an emphasis on what you eat all the time. I think it can worry people when you do get body fat tested a lot and you do morning body weight [testing]. It isn't very confidential, it's just a sheet on the door. So I think some people do get a bit paranoid about their weight. . . . Little comments are often made about certain people.

A lack of sensitivity and understanding on the part of the management can contribute to what is already a delicate issue as illustrated in this quote:

I have just been away on a training camp where one person was really told off about her diet . . . she's a vegetarian and she likes chocolate. . . . One day the team manager raided her room and picked up all the snack food. We had a team meeting, it was laid out on the table in front of us all, which we thought was quite funny, but we added it up to be about 2,700 calories worth of junk food. So we've been told that for the World's, anybody found with chocolate in their suitcase won't be going. This particular person is going to get her suitcase searched. . . . She's not very happy.

The most frequently cited themes within injury were "training despite injury" and "too much pressure because of injury." Sustaining an injury can be an extremely stressful experience for an elite performer. As the following quote illustrates, coaches can often exacerbate the problem by putting undue pressure on the performer to compete:

I played against [country] last year. I'd torn my calf and was given anti-inflammatory injections. I trained the Friday before the game and I was struggling through. I wasn't right. They were desperate for me to play so I played and I just wasn't right and ended up getting worse. I didn't play well. . . . There is pressure on key players to play. There are times when players play when they shouldn't. And they know themselves that they shouldn't.

It is also important for organizations and support staff to realize that this pressure can also be self-imposed as this quote indicates:

In the past I've had an injury and trained through it. You don't want to miss training. When you're not training you always think that you should be. There's a sort of guilt factor to it that if you don't train now you won't perform well later.

The most frequently cited themes within goals and expectations were "tension because of personal goals within the team" and "own high expectations." The use of goal setting strategies can be a highly effective part of an elite performer's psychological preparation for competitions. However, the quote below emphasizes that personal goals should be congruent with any team goals to avoid feelings of antagonism:

I think that certain players are pulling for themselves. A bit greedy sometimes. I always thought Richard was very much for himself. He'd pass you

the ball when he was finished with it. Once I got two passes in 90 minutes, which is not a lot for an international. I think some players have their own agendas that don't consider what the team should be doing, which is totally wrong.

If performers perceive that team members are not all aiming in the same direction, then this is likely to provoke discord within the squad as this quote illustrates:

Some people are there just to make up the numbers, go on a holiday and have a laugh, like Michael at the Olympic Games last year. Okay, so he wasn't going to win the individual, but he was out partying every night and when it came to the relay he didn't run particularly well. It's just stupid partying and getting drunk every night. Someone should take a few people aside and say, "Look you are out here to do a job, other people have paid money for you to be out here." So I think people take the p***, without a doubt.

Leadership Issues

The full range of leadership issues is displayed in Figure 3. The higher order themes within this dimension were coaches and coaching styles.

A wide range of stressors concerning coaches emerged from the interviews and the most frequently cited themes were "coach-athlete tension" and "difficulty

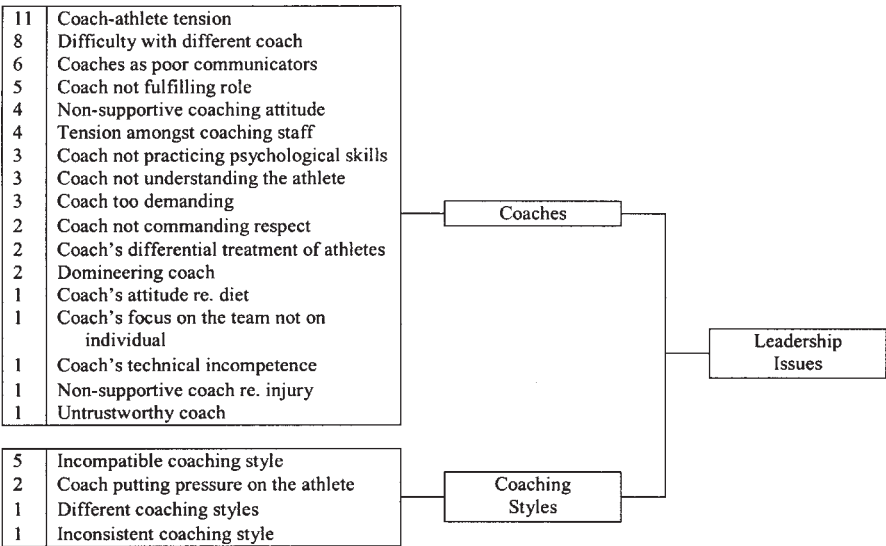


Figure 3 — Sources of organizational stress pertaining to leadership issues (a frequency analysis is provided in the first column to illustrate the number of performers mentioning each raw data theme).

with different coach.” Given the significance of the coach’s role in an elite performer’s career, it is not surprising that any friction or misunderstanding between a coach and performer is likely to be a major source of stress. An example of this is evident in the quote below:

There was a bit of a clash of personalities. I went to do this move and I didn’t do it basically. I sort of kicked out at the last minute and nearly broke my neck. It really freaked me out and I was a bit like “going.” You know, heart beating and things like that and this coach sat and laughed and thought it was hilarious. . . . I wasn’t happy with the way she dealt with it and I took it up with the team manager.

Coaches who fail to maintain certain standards of professionalism run the risk of losing the respect the team as illustrated by this quote:

I just found him very hot and cold and didn’t trust him at all. Certain things, like he would discuss your performance after the match, when he was drunk, and he would come out with all sorts of stuff. He would also tell you a load of lies, again when he was drunk. After a match he would say, “Well you’re this and you’re that.” He would put you under false pretence and next time he’d say something completely contradictory to what he had said, and you didn’t know where you stood with him. . . . A lot of people didn’t like the way he dealt with people.

The most frequently cited themes within coaching styles were “incompatible coaching style” and “coach putting pressure on the athlete.” The following quote exemplifies the potential problems that can arise if coaches are too rigid in their style of coaching:

There are lots of occasions where players don’t respond well to coaches. . . . Maybe a coach shouts at an individual and continually harasses that person. It might work for one player but might completely break another’s confidence and just kill them as a player.

When a coach constantly employs a very authoritarian approach with elite performers, this can quite easily increase the likelihood of bad feelings within the squad as illustrated in this quote:

James [the head coach] was very definite in his views. . . . I felt that his approach was almost based on a number “play by play” system and he had a number of holes to put players in. The problem was he had a number of round holes and players were all different shapes and sizes, and they didn’t necessarily fit. He’d try and hammer them into certain holes, and that just doesn’t get the best out of your team. . . . We ended up with a situation where basically the players rebelled 6 weeks before the Olympic Games and changed the style we played . . . it should have never got that far.

Team Issues

The full range of team issues is displayed in Figure 4. The higher order themes within this dimension were team atmosphere, support network, roles, and communication.

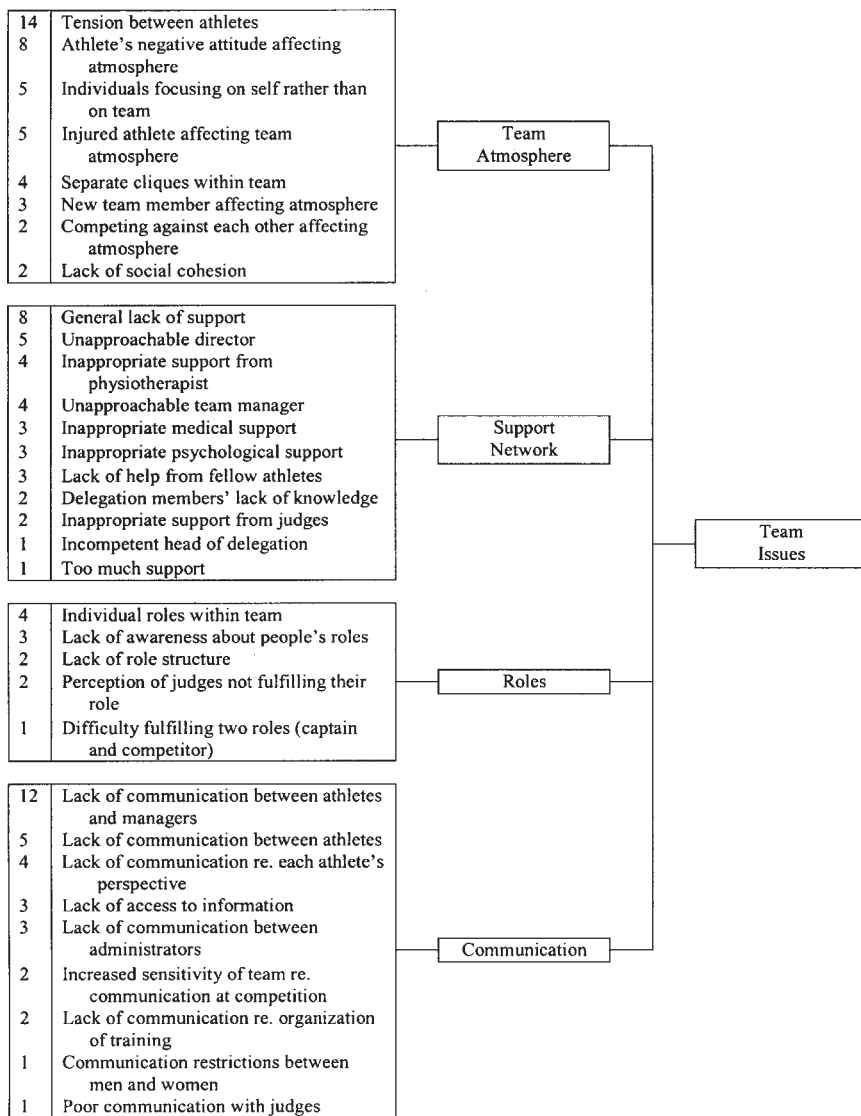


Figure 4 — Sources of organizational stress pertaining to team issues (a frequency analysis is provided in the first column to illustrate the number of performers mentioning each raw data theme).

The most frequently cited themes within team atmosphere were “tension between athletes” and “athlete’s negative attitude affecting atmosphere.” It is quite likely that team members will have minor disagreements during their preparation for competition. However, if such incidents are allowed to feaster, the team atmosphere can rapidly deteriorate as this quote shows:

The team atmosphere got really bad, in fact I wouldn't even say that we were a team to be honest. I'd say that everyone pretended to be a team on the face of it but really we weren't gelling as a team at all. A lot of back stabbing, a lot of bitching, a lot of people talking behind each other's back. But it wasn't all brought to the surface (it was just kept behind closed doors) which wasn't healthy at all. Very nasty atmosphere.

The following quote shows how a negative team atmosphere impacts upon the related issues of support and communication:

Some girls who are in the team, I know that they would stab me in the back to get a position from me. So obviously I wouldn't talk about certain stuff. I wouldn't talk about my preparations, my fears, or my nerves. I wouldn't ever say that in front of them. I wouldn't say 'cause I know that they'd use it to their advantage.

The most frequently cited themes within support network were "general lack of support" and "unapproachable director." The support network for some elite performers can be quite extensive and involve a wide range of people. If support is not forthcoming, or certain people are perceived to be unapproachable, then this can cause problems throughout the rest of the team as this quote illustrates:

I know two guys at the moment who are not happy with the national performance director because, well, he's not a people person and because he's foreign, the language comes across different. In fact there's quite a few people not happy with him. . . . It's his attitude, the way he says things as well. And he's quite sarcastic . . . coming up to the Olympics, you'd feel like you're some school girl. . . . He's not an open friendly kind of guy, not someone you can go and talk to. He falls out with the coaches all the time because the coaches don't like his attitude. And then players and coaches fall out, just because everything gets so tense.

The quote below suggests that inappropriate support is a significant source of frustration for some performers:

Sometimes, when you win games or big competitions, people come in the changing rooms and slap you on the back. You don't know who they are, or normally see them, but they appear when you win. I know it really winds some of the players up. Personally, [I've got] no time for them.

The most frequently cited themes within roles were "individual roles within team" and "lack of awareness about people's roles." The team often comprises many people, and it is important that everyone understands not only their own role but also other people's roles. Unfortunately, this is not always the case as the following quote demonstrates:

I got frustrated by seeing the managers and directors not doing anything. . . . There's one guy who seemed to be doing all the jobs and some people just went on day trips all the time and I did get frustrated by it. They're getting a free trip, as much kit as we do, and they swan about all day not seeming to be doing anything. I just think they need to have specific roles, you know, like, "this is your role, do that job" and then be seen to be doing that job.

The following quote emphasizes that it is not just the immediate team members that need to be seen to fulfil their roles, but also the competition officials and judges:

It can be very frustrating and very stressful and to be quite honest, the reason I'm not sitting here with an Olympic medal is because of the judges and their incompetence. . . . And that's a fact, it's not just my opinion, it's the opinion of athletes and coaches of nations from all over the world who are upset to see an injustice carried out like that.

The most frequently cited themes within communication were a "lack of communication between athletes and managers" and "lack of communication between the athletes." The importance of sound communication was a recurrent theme throughout many of the interviews. If channels of communication are not running effectively within the organizational, performers are likely to feel despondent as this quote illustrates:

The management don't really listen to what we, the athletes, want. It's what they say goes basically. . . . In top level sport, it's the athletes who should come first and the way they're putting it across to us is "put up with it or go." . . . That's not the way it should be.

The following quote shows how rapidly communication can breakdown between a coach and the performers:

We had a guy come in once, in fact it was an Olympic year, he came in and he never had a clue about [sport] and he didn't have a clue about anything else. He didn't know how to relate to other people, he couldn't talk to people, he couldn't get on with people. In the morning, he was the worst man ever alive. He was just a waste of time. So it wasn't long before he got the same cold shoulder as he gave us.

Discussion

This study extends Woodman and Hardy's (2001a) recent research investigating organizational stress in elite sport. To the best of our knowledge, the present inquiry is the first to examine organizational stress across a range of sports. An exploratory approach was adopted to yield detailed information on the potential sources of organizational stress in elite performers. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that since research investigating organizational stress seeks out the negative rather than the positive, it therefore does not represent a *balanced* portrayal of an organization as a whole (Woodman & Hardy, 2001a). Further, although organizational stress is often a sensitive issue, any advances in psychologists' understanding of this area should provide a *positive* stimulus for change and the resolution of what can be highly complex and emotive issues. Indeed, the findings discussed here suggest that sport organizations that are serious about supporting performance at an elite level would do well to pay careful attention to the environment within which their performers are operating.

The main sources of organizational stress identified in this study were selection, finances, training environment, accommodation, travel, competition

environment, nutrition, injury, goals and expectations, coaches, coaching styles, team atmosphere, support network, roles, and communication. Although sport psychology researchers have previously examined many of these issues, it is important to emphasize that they have rarely considered the organizational setting within which they occur. It is apparent from the data presented here that elite performers experience a wide spectrum of stressors that are associated primarily and directly with their appraisal of the structure and functioning of the sport organization within which they are operating. It was also evident that organizations are not always sensitive to these issues nor are they always able to tackle them effectively.

Because this study adopted a focus and procedures similar to that of Woodman and Hardy's (2001a) research, a comparison of the findings between the two investigations is appropriate. It should be noted, however, that there were differences in the sample and time frame used in these studies and thus some disparity between the results was expected. Specifically, the composition of the samples differed in that the participants in this study came from a range of sports, whereas Woodman and Hardy's (2001a) sample was drawn from a single sport. In addition, they included performers who were recently retired (i.e., less than 4 years) in their main study, in contrast to the present investigation which consisted of only current national squad members and restricted recently retired performers to participation in the pilot study. Further, it should also be emphasized that although this investigation drew upon Woodman and Hardy's (2001a) theoretical framework of organizational stress in sport, the authors went to great pains to ensure that an emergent design and inductive procedures remained intact throughout the research process. Hence, the qualitative research paradigm adopted here allowed new themes to emerge from the data to complement, refine, and augment previous conceptual developments in this area of stress research.

With these considerations in mind, the general accordance between the findings reported here and those of Woodman and Hardy (2001a) are indeed noteworthy and enhance the validity of both studies' results. In addition to paralleling Woodman and Hardy's (2001a) general stress categories, this investigation identified three additional higher order themes: accommodation, travel, and competition environment. The significance of these issues, particularly the competition environment, should not be underestimated by sport organizations. For example, accommodation and travel arrangements for a large national team require considerable planning and attention to individuals' specific requirements. Further, a recent study of U.S. Olympic teams (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999) found that the Olympic environment was one of a number of contributory factors that influenced the performance of athletes and coaches. However, while organizational stress can undoubtedly present an unwanted distraction, it would be remiss to assume that such factors are *always* detrimental to sports performance. As Woodman and Hardy (2001a) pointed out, experiencing negative emotions does not inevitably have a detrimental effect upon performance (see, for example, Hardy, 1997, 1998; Hardy et al., 1996; Lazarus, 2000; Woodman & Hardy, 2001b), and it may be that experiencing some organizational stress can quite easily be tolerated or even beneficial to performance (cf. Eysenck, 1982; Eysenck & Calvo, 1992; Jones & Hanton, 2001; Mahoney & Avenier, 1977).

Although some of the present findings might be specific to the organizations sampled, it is not unreasonable to speculate that most sport organizations will have encountered many of the issues that have arisen here. Consequently, it is important

that research in this area is not merely viewed as an indictment of the organizations studied, but rather an opportunity for further development within the sport community as a whole. Sport organizations should not abnegate their responsibility to address problems simply because of the sensitive nature of many of the issues. Inevitably, there are no “quick fix” solutions to organizational stress, and individual differences will always exist between organizations. Nevertheless, some generalizations can be made from the present findings regarding the practical implications and recommendations. For example, many of the participants in this study indicated that selection procedures should be established early on, understood by everyone, and must be transparent. In a similar way, the criteria for funding should also be clearly stated and seen to be impartial and fair. The team management must ensure appropriate nutritional and medical support is available to performers whether they appear to have problems in these areas or not. Also, our findings suggest that individual and team goals should be discussed openly within the team, thus minimizing any feelings of disenchantment at a later stage. If everyone knows his or her role within the team, then it is more likely that the team will run effectively and smoothly.

It is likely that most sport psychology consultants will need to develop and acquire new competencies to be effective in dealing with the *causes* of organizational stress. Such techniques would need to be very different to their more familiar approach of encouraging performers to adopt a variety of psychological skills to the combat symptoms of debilitating anxiety (cf. Fletcher & Hanton, 2001; Hanton & Jones, 1999b). For example, a strategy that can be highly effective is to have team members generate “What if?” scenarios, where ways of dealing with hypothetical situations can be discussed, and contingency plans are put in place. During these sessions, consultants should consider possible individual difference variables that may interact with organizational issues. For example, factors such as the level of elite competitive experience or public recognition may “shield” performers from some of the issues and/or make them more vulnerable to others.

The findings and implications of this study suggest that organizational stress in elite sport is likely to be a fruitful area for future researchers. In view of psychologists’ rather scant knowledge in this area, it is perhaps inevitable that the present investigation has appeared to generate as many questions as it does answers. A major research direction that should be immediately apparent relates to the sources of organizational stress identified here and in Woodman and Hardy’s (2001a) case study. Taken together, these two investigations provide a comprehensive picture of organizational stress in sport from which a psychometric instrument could be developed. Measurement is an important part of the scientific method, and it will be very difficult to make significant advances in psychologists’ understanding without a reliable and valid measurement tool. Further, the precise strategies that elite sports performers employ to cope with organizational stress are not entirely clear, and the processes by which these performers may have acquired such skills are certainly worthy of consideration (cf. Crocker, Kowalski, & Graham, 1998; Hanton & Jones, 1999a; Hardy et al., 1996). Future investigators should attempt to overcome the limitations of retrospective interview designs by conducting longitudinal intervention studies. For example, once elite performers’ coping strategies for organizational stress are identified, then performers who have difficulty in dealing with organizational problems could be taught skills and strategies based on the elite performers’ experiences. Single subject designs would provide an appropriate methodology for the evaluation of such interventions (see Bryan,

1987; Hrycaiko & Martin, 1996) and have been successful in other recent domains of stress research (e.g., Hanton & Jones, 1999b).

In addition to the research questions outlined above, other pertinent issues in this area include the following: What are the affective and emotional responses to organizational stress? In what way do nonelite or subelite performers' experiences of organizational stress differ from that of elite performers? What are the characteristics and qualities of optimally functioning sport organizations? Future studies should also take into account the possibility of different dimensions to the organizational stress process such as the frequency and relevancy of the stressors, their proximity to the competition, and the intensity of the performer's response. For example, an organizational stressor that occurs infrequently, distal to the competition, and is not particularly relevant to the performers' preparations is unlikely to affect performance to the same extent as a stressor that occurs frequently, proximal to the competition, and is highly relevant to the performers' preparations. This may seem like a catalogue of unanswered questions and it is indeed likely that many others could be posed. The reason is that, at the moment, sport psychologists are at the beginning of an interesting and exciting new area of research that embraces a much more encompassing outlook on the relationship between stress and performance.

In conclusion, the intention of this study has been to advance psychologists' understanding of the stress process in sport by examining potential sources of organizational stress across a range of sport organizations. The findings revealed that elite performers experience a wide spectrum of organizational stressors. Consequently, sport organizations and personnel working with elite performers need to be aware of and sensitive to the complex social and organizational environment they are constantly shaping. Indeed, in just the same way that sport organizations would do well to pay careful attention to the environment within which their elite performers are operating, sport psychology researchers should embrace the challenge of examining the social and organizational influences on performers appraisal of stress.

References

- Biddle, S.J.H., Markland, D., Gilbourne, D., Chatzisarantic, N.L.D., & Sparkes, A.C. (2001). Research methods in sport and exercise psychology: Quantitative and qualitative issues. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, **19**, 777-809.
- Bryan, A.J. (1987). Single-subject designs for evaluation of sport psychology interventions. *The Sport Psychologist*, **1**, 283-292.
- Carron, A.V. (1982). Cohesiveness in sport groups: Interpretations and considerations. *Journal of Sport Psychology*, **4**, 123-138.
- Cooper, C.L. (1998). *Theories of organizational stress*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cooper, C.L., Dewe, P.J., & O'Driscoll, M.P. (2001). *Organizational stress: A review and critique of theory, research and applications*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crocker, P.R.E., Kowalski, K.C., & Graham, T.R. (1998). Measurement of coping strategies in sport. In J.L. Duda (Ed.), *Advances in sport and exercise psychology measurement* (pp. 149-161). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.
- Downes, S. (1999, December 5). Death of the dream. *The Sunday Times*, p. 13.
- Eysenck, M.W. (1982). *Attention and arousal: Cognition and performance*. Berlin: Springer.
- Eysenck, M.W., & Calvo, M.G. (1992). Anxiety and performance: The processing efficiency theory. *Cognition and Emotion*, **6**, 409-434.

- Fletcher, D., & Hanton, S. (2001). The relationship between psychological skills usage and competitive anxiety responses. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, **2**, 89-101.
- Gill, D.L. (1994). A sport and exercise psychology perspective on stress. *Quest*, **46**, 20-27.
- Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gould, D., Guinan, D., Greenleaf, C., Medbery, R., & Peterson, K. (1999). Factors affecting Olympic performance: Perceptions of athletes and coaches from more and less successful teams. *The Sport Psychologist*, **13**, 371-394.
- Gould, D., Jackson, S.A., & Finch, L.M. (1993). Sources of stress in national champion figure skaters. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, **15**, 134-159.
- Hanin, Y.L. (1993). Organizational psychology in sport setting. *Revista de Psicologia del Deporte*, **3**, 17-30.
- Hanton, S. (1996). *An examination of debilitating and facilitative competitive anxiety*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Loughborough University, United Kingdom.
- Hanton, S., & Connaughton, D. (2002). Perceived control of anxiety and its relationship to self-confidence and performance: A qualitative inquiry. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, **73**, 87-97.
- Hanton, S., & Jones, G. (1999a). The acquisition and development of cognitive skills and strategies: I. Making the butterflies fly in formation. *The Sport Psychologist*, **13**, 1-21.
- Hanton, S., & Jones, G. (1999b). The effects of a multimodal intervention program on performers: II. Training the butterflies to fly in formation. *The Sport Psychologist*, **13**, 22-41.
- Hanton, S., Jones, G., & Mullen, R. (2000). Intensity and direction of competitive state anxiety as interpreted by rugby players and rifle shooters. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, **90**, 513-521.
- Hardy, L. (1997). Three myths about applied consultancy work. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, **9**, 277-294.
- Hardy, L. (1998). Responses to the reactants on three myths in applied consultancy work. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, **10**, 212-219.
- Hardy, L., & Jones, G. (1994). Current issues and future directions for performance related research in sport psychology. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, **12**, 61-90.
- Hardy, L., Jones, G., & Gould, D. (1996). *Understanding psychological preparation for sport: Theory and practice of elite performers*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Highlen, P.S., & Bennett, B.B. (1983). Elite divers and wrestlers: A comparison between open- and closed-skill athletes. *Journal of Sport Psychology*, **5**, 390-409.
- Hrycaiko, D., & Martin, G.L. (1996). Applied research studies with single-subject designs: Why so few? *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, **8**, 183-199.
- Jones, G. (1995). More than just a game: Research developments and issues in competitive anxiety in sport. *British Journal of Psychology*, **86**, 449-478.
- Jones, G., & Hanton, S. (2001). Pre-competitive feeling states and directional anxiety interpretations. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, **19**, 385-395.
- Jones, G., & Hardy, L. (1990). Stress in sport: Experiences of some elite performers. In G. Jones & L. Hardy (Eds.), *Stress and performance in sport* (pp. 247-277). Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Lazarus, R.S. (1966). *Psychological stress and the coping process*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lazarus, R.S. (2000). How emotions influence performance in competitive sports. *The Sport Psychologist*, **14**, 229-252.
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

- Mahoney, M.J., & Avenier, M. (1977). Psychology of the elite athlete: An exploratory study. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, **1**, 135-141.
- Martens, R., Vealey, R.S., & Burton, D. (1990). *Competitive anxiety in sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Orlick, T., & Partington, J. (1988). Mental links to excellence. *The Sport Psychologist*, **2**, 105-130.
- Patmore, A. (1986). *Sportsmen under stress*. London: Stanley Paul.
- Patton, M.Q. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation methods* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- QSR N5 [Computer software]. (2000). Melbourne, Australia: Qualitative Solutions & Research Pty Ltd (QSR).
- Scanlan, T.K., Stein, G.L., & Ravizza, K. (1991). An in-depth study of former elite figure skaters: III. Sources of stress. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, **13**, 102-120.
- Shirom, A. (1982). What is organizational stress? A facet analytic conceptualization. *Journal of Occupational Behaviour*, **3**, 21-37.
- Sparkes, A.C. (1998). Validity in qualitative inquiry and the problem of criteria: Implications for sport psychology. *The Sport Psychologist*, **12**, 363-386.
- Sport England. (2000). *Sport England annual report 1999-2000*. London: Sport England.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J.M. (1997). *Grounded theory in practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- UK Sport. (2000a). *Delivering success: UK Sport lottery annual report 1999-2000*. London: UK Sport.
- UK Sport. (2000b). *UK Sport annual report 1999-2000*. London: UK Sport.
- Vanden Auweele, Y., De Cuyper, B., Van Mele, V., & Rzewnicki, R. (1993). Elite performance and personality: From description and prediction to diagnosis and intervention. In R.N. Singer, M. Murphey, & L.K. Tennant (Eds.), *Handbook of research on sport psychology* (pp. 257-289). New York: Macmillan.
- Weber, R.P. (1985). *Basic content analysis*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Woodman, T., & Hardy, L. (2001a). A case study of organizational stress in elite sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, **13**, 207-238.
- Woodman, T., & Hardy, L. (2001b). Stress and anxiety. In R.N. Singer, H.A. Hausenblas, & C.M. Janelle (Eds.), *Handbook of sport psychology* (pp. 290-318). New York: Wiley.

Notes

¹In accordance with the procedure adopted by Woodman and Hardy (2001a), the sports and their corresponding organizations will remain anonymous because of the often sensitive nature of organizational stress.

²Copies of the interview guide are available from the corresponding author.

³QSR N5 (2000) is the fifth version of the Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUD*IST) software for qualitative data analysis.

⁴All names have been changed.

This study is part of an ongoing research program currently being undertaken by the authors addressing conceptual and measurement issues within the context of stress and anxiety in sport.

Manuscript submitted: April 23, 2002

Revision received: June 27, 2002