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Malaysian Professional University Soccer Players Performance Strategies Based on Different Positions of Play

Mazlan Ismail[1], Mustaza Ahmad[2]
[1]Universiti Teknologi MARA, Seremban Malaysia
[2]Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam Malaysia

Abstract: The aim of the study is to examine possible differences in the use of performance strategies of Malaysian professional university soccer players and type of positions during play. The participants consists of 24 players from UiTM FC aged 20 to 27 years (M=23.04, SD= 1.88), with different positions (8 forwards; strikers and midfielders, 16 backs; defenders and goal keepers). The Test of Performance Strategies (TOPS-Thomas, Murphy, and Hardy, 1999) was used in this study. The participants completed the TOPS questionnaire during the competition season of 2013-14 sessions. The results showed that there were significant differences in performance strategies used by players in the forwards and backs positions during competitions. The present study shows that backs positions were better compared to forwards positions in goal setting, whereas forwards positions used emotional strategies more than backs positions. In order to help athletes improve their athletic performance, coaches and sports psychologists need to consider the different positions on the pitch as well as differences between player's performance strategies.

Keywords: performance strategies, professional soccer players, positions.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian professional university soccer players performance strategies based on different positions of play In sports, there is no athlete who has never felt anxious during his/her career. Even professional athletes admit that they feel nervous especially when performing in front of thousand audiences. Individual psychological factors such as motivation, confidence, attention, psychometric skills & visualization were the focus in previous studies to determine the influence on athletes' performance (Gucciardi, Gordon, & Dimmock, 2009). It is sometimes difficult for coaches and sports psychologist to build effective mental training programs for individual athletes'' and teams. However, they also believe that mental training such as goal setting, imagery, relaxation and self-talk had helped them before, during and after competition and practice to improve performance, energy management, stress management, attention, self-confidence and motivation (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). Athletes' do need to work with mental training and there are evidence to support that. For example, in order to provide a sense of direction and purpose in their workouts, athletes can use goal setting training during their off-season training to maintain motivation. When they are not performing to a desirable ability level in competition, using imagery is most effective as it helps them to focus on desired image and thus develop attention skill. Atheletes' self-confidence level is also affected by negative self-talk (Caruso, 2005).

Soccer is a sport with an intense training and competitive structure, meaning psychological work must adapt to the particular circumstances of each team or club (Dosil, 2006). For example, imagery, self-talk, goal setting & relaxation themes were found to be the most needed psychological mental skills in recreational universities soccer players (Sadeghi, Sofian, Fauzee, Jamalis, Ab-Latif, & Cheric, 2010). The findings show that they believe imagery could be useful before and during competition. Most athletes' strongly agree with the use of imagery & believed that it increase self-confidence and motivation. Guillot et al. (2009) also found that imagery after practice of competition can be useful for recalling and monitoring the past skill. A conclusion was made by the participants that imagery after competition could help athletes' analyze past performance. Goal setting is also crucial for soccer players to adapt. They believed using goal setting before competition may have an effect on increasing motivation, attention, self-confidence, and focusing on championship (Sadeghi et al., 2010). Previous studies also argued that goal setting not only increases playing skill, techniques, performance, but also increases focus and concentration that can be necessary for winning the competition (Burton & Radeke, 2008; Vealey, 2007). Additionally, higher level of training can be achieved when soccer players use self-talk while relaxation helps soccer players to manage their physical energy levels for performing well as supported by Vealey (2007).

Coaches play a major role in psychological training of their soccer teams, whose collaboration in this process is fundamental for establishing team's psychological objectives (Dosil, 2006). For example, when competing in competitive sports, players are put under intense physical and psychological demands. Thus, in order for them to cope, athletes' not only use automated technical and tactical skills but also develop and employ an arsenal of cognitive and behavioural coping skills to achieve performance success and satisfaction (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Gould et al.1993).

Successful and unsuccessful athletes' can be differentiated by their psychological skills. For example, professional athletes have higher self-confidence, good concentration, can regulate arousal effectively. Therefore, systematic goal setting and imagery is deemed useful to enhance their motivation and self- confidence during performance (Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffett, 2002). In fact, Thomas, Murphy and Hardy (1999) have also found that elite athletes use more goal setting, imagery and activation skills compared to non-elite athletes Once they become professional players, they have to adapt their interventions as their work becomes highly specific and they must meet the demands of each team. According to Dosil (2006), the study needs to be explored on professional soccer players with various positions on the pitch allowing them to a better guide and improve the performance of each individual player .In fact, experience in preparing various soccer teams has confirmed that the psychological aspect is the least-developed area of performance (Dosil, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore possible differences in the use of psychological performance strategies by Malaysian professional university soccer players on the different type of positions on the pitch.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants:

Data for the study was collected from 24 Malaysian professional university soccer players, aged 20 to 27 years (M=23.04, SD= 1.88). Participants were sampled from different positions on the pitch (8 forwards; strikers and midfielders, 16 backs; defenders and goal keepers) from Universiti Teknologi MARA Football Club known as UiTM FC. All players were in competition or training for 2013 / 2014 Malaysia Premier League at the time of data collection.

Test of Performance Strategies

The participants completed the Test of Performance Strategies (TOPS) questionnaire during the competition season of 2013-14 sessions. It consists of two scales, practice and competition with 64-item self-report instrument designed by Thomas, Murphy, and Hardy (1999). The questionnaire is to measure the psychological skills and strategies used by athletes during practice and in competitions. The practice subscales are self-talk (maintaining a positive internal dialogue), emotional control (controlling emotions under pressure), automaticity (performing with little conscious effort, automatically), goal-setting (setting personal, specific goals), imagery (visualizing sport performance), activation (maintaining an optimal level of arousal), relaxation (practicing to remain calm under pressure), and attentional control (focusing attention effectively). Meanwhile, the competition subscales are the same except negative thinking (thoughts of failure) which is replaced by attention control. In the present study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .89 and TOPS has been used in numerous studies in order to evaluate the psychological skills used by athletes from various sports (Dachen, 2009). Finally, descriptive statistic and independent sample t-test was performed to compare different positions for performance strategies.

RESULTS

An independent t-test result in Table 1 shows that there was no significant difference in the performance strategies used by forwards (strikers and midfielders) and backs (defenders and goal keepers) among Malaysian professional university soccer players during practice condition. However, an independent t-test result in Table 2 shows that there is significant differences in scores goal setting for forwards and backs (M=14.25, SD=1.17) and backs (M=16.56, SD=2.50; t (22) = -2.46, p=.02, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (means difference = -2.31, 95% CI: -4.26 to -.37) is very moderate (eta squared = .11). Additionally, there is significant differences in emotional control for forwards and backs (M=13.00, SD=1.77) and backs (M=10.88, SD=2.39; t (22) = 2.22, p=.03, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (means difference = 2.13, 95% CI: .14 to 4.11) is very moderate (eta squared = .10).

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study is to examine possible differences in the use of performance strategies by Malaysian professional university soccer players known as UiTM FC for differences in positions on the pitch. Independent sample t-test was conducted to determine if any significant differences existed between forwards (strikers and midfielders) and backs (defenders and goal keepers) for the performance strategies used during practice and competition conditions. The

present study revealed that there are some position on the pitch which showed differences in the performance strategies used by forwards (strikers and midfielders) and backs (defenders and goal keepers) only during the competition condition. Defenders and goal keepers were found to be better than strikers and midfielders in goal setting strategies. Meanwhile, strikers and midfielders used emotional control strategies compared to defenders and goal keepers. According to Dachen (2012), problem - focused coping refers to strategies used to deal with stress through behaviours such as goal setting and problem solving.

The present study than found that forwards position (defender and goal keepers) were using goal setting as strategies during competition compared to forwards (strikers and midfielders) who were involved more on emotional strategies. As Mark Lain and Marc (2011) stated that athletes who have extravert personality were more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies whereas athletes with low levels of openness, or high levels of neuroticism were more likely to demonstrate the use of emotion-focused coping strategies and avoidance coping behaviour. It is probable that in Malaysian professional university soccer, defenders and goal keepers were more extravert personality than strikers and midfielders. Further research should encompass strategies in more than one investigation and comparisons between other professional teams, i.e., matches during the whole season should be conducted too. The findings of the present study, hopefully, could help coaches and sports psychologist design more effective cognitive coping strategies such as self-talk, relaxation, and thought control to deal with stress and anxiety rather than only focus on technical and tactical of the game individually. It is fundamental for sport psychologists to plan their interventions correctly, with realistic objectives that cover the basic requirements of the club in which they are working.

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Table1. Independent t-test for differences position on the pitch between forwards (strikers and midfielders) and backs (defenders and goal keepers) among Malaysian professional university soccer players for performance strategies during practice condition

Variable	Position	N	Mean	S.D	t	df	p-value	Mean difference	Std. error difference
Goal setting	Forwards	8	12.00	1.69	-2.06	22	.051	-1.50	.73
	Backs	16	13.50	1.67					
Emotional control	Forwards	8	13.13	2.59	.51	22	.620	.56	1.12
	Backs	16	12.56	2.58					
Automaticity	Forwards	8	12.50	1.41	.78	22	.444	.44	.56
	Backs	16	12.06	1.24					
Relaxation	Forwards	8	11.13	1.64	-1.37	22	.186	-1.38	1.01
	Backs	16	12.50	2.58					
Self-talk	Forwards	8	14.88	1.46	-1.04	22	.308	-1.06	1.02
	Backs	16	15.94	2.67					
Imagery	Forwards	8	14.00	1.77	.544	22	.592	.44	.80
	Backs	16	13.56	1.90					
Attention control	Forwards	8	12.25	1.49	-.97	22	.345	-.63	.65
	Backs	16	12.88	1.50					
Activation	Forwards	8	13.25	2.25	-.55	22	.591	-.50	.92
	Backs	16	13.75	2.05					

Table 2. Independent t-test for different position on the pitch between forwards (strikers and midfielders) and backs (defenders and goal keepers) among Malaysian professional university soccer players for performance strategies during competition condition

Variable	Position	N	Mean	S.D	t	df	p-value	Mean difference	Std. error difference
Goal setting	Forwards	8	14.25	1.17	-2.46	22	**.022**	-2.31	.94
	Backs	16	16.56	2.50					
Emotional control	Forwards	8	13.00	1.77	2.22	22	**.037**	2.13	.96
	Backs	16	10.88	2.39					
Automaticity	Forwards	8	9.00	1.60	-1.28	22	.214	-.94	.73
	Backs	16	9.94	1.73					
Relaxation	Forwards	8	13.25	1.49	-.67	22	.508	-.56	.84
	Backs	16	13.81	2.11					
Self-talk	Forwards	8	9.75	2.12	-.32	22	.755	-.31	.99
	Backs	16	10.06	2.35					
Imagery	Forwards	8	14.38	1.77	.78	22	.444	.69	.88
	Backs	16	13.69	2.15					
Negative thinking	Forwards	8	10.25	2.12	-.62	22	.540	-.56	.90
	Backs	16	10.81	2.07					
Activation	Forwards	8	13.88	1.13	-1.51	21.83	.146	-1.00	.66
	Backs	16	14.88	2.13					

(*significant at p=0.05)