

## A Study of Competitive Stress in Children

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### INTRODUCTION

Sport is a public affair. In contrast to achievement in the classroom where passing or failing a math test can be an unobserved private experience, a hit or a strike is witnessed by teammates, opponents, coaches, parents, and spectators. Clearly visible to all is not just the final product of the movement act (e.g., the hit or the strike), but the entire movement process involved in its execution (e.g., a powerful, coordinated swing or a slow, awkward one). In short, all of the people present have a considerable amount of information on which to base their judgments about the young participant's sport ability. By their cheers, groans, and boos, by their looks of approval, disapproval, and disappointment, and by their direct comments, these people convey their judgments to the competitor. These appraisals, combined with the ability information derived from direct social comparisons with teammates and opponents, make the potential for social evaluation in sport high (Scanlan, 1982, 1984).

### DISCUSSION

#### 1. Social Evaluation Concerning Youth Sports

Formally defined, social evaluation is the information about one's ability that is received from other people. The developmental literature indicates that social evaluation received from significant adults and peers plays an important role in shaping children's perceptions of their own ability (Scanlan, 1982). Further, emerging evidence in the sport psychology literature suggests that children, and even older competitors, are sensitive to the social evaluation potential in their sports (Griffin, 1972; Hanson, 1967; Inukai, 1987; Johnson, 1949). The underlying theme to these studies appears to be that increases in the social evaluation potential are associated with increases in the amount of competitive stress experienced by the participants (Yamamoto, 1986).

In sum, competitive sport is where a child's athletic ability is publicly tested, scrutinized, and evaluated. With social evaluation lying at the heart of the competitive experience, sport is an important achievement arena to many participants. Evidence even exists which reveals that children typically consider success in sport to be more important than success

in the classroom (Passer, 1984).

Accordingly, competitive sport is a stressful endeavor to some children in some circumstances. Reviewed next is a line of research which identifies individual difference and situational factors associated with the stress experienced by children engaged in competitive youth sport.

## 2. Predictors of Competitive Stress

### 1) Overview and Methodology

Summarized below are the major results of several studies (Scanlan, 1977; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984; Scanlan & Passer, 1978, 1979) focused on understanding the generic and stable sources of competitive stress in children. The following methodological strategy has been used to achieve this objective. First, a similar research protocol was employed in all of the studies to facilitate the comparison of the results. Competitive stress, the dependent variable, was measured just prior to (precompetition stress) and immediately following (postcompetition stress) a competitive event. The psychological inventories used to measure stress were either the Spielberger State Anxiety Inventory for Children (Spielberger, 1973) or the children's version of the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory (Martens, Burton, Rivkin, & Simon, 1980). State anxiety is the way in which an acute, transitory stress response is operationally defined and measured. Most individual difference factors thought to be predictive of stress were assessed several weeks (competitive trait anxiety, self-esteem) or hours (characteristic prematch thoughts and worries, perceptions of adults) before the contest. Team and personal performance expectancies were measured just before the event and assessments regarding the amount of fun experienced during the competition were made immediately after the contest.

Second, the initial study (Scanlan, 1977) tested 10- to 12-year-old boys in the controlled setting of the laboratory where the internal validity of the results could best be achieved and causality more clearly established. Third, testing was then conducted in the natural team-sport setting (Scanlan & Passer, 1978) with 11- to 12-year-old male soccer players to assess the ecological validity of the laboratory results (i.e., whether the results would generalize to a real-life setting) and to determine other factors associated with stress. Fourth, a second field study (Scanlan & Passer, 1979) was conducted with female soccer players, participating in the same soccer organization, from the same geographic region, and in the same age division as the previously studied boys. By testing in this manner, not only could the sources of competitive stress in females be examined, but it could also be determined whether the results found with boys generalized to girls as well.

Finally, a third field study (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984) was conducted with 9- to 14-year-old male wrestlers. This study first examined whether the findings generated in the team sport context generalized to the individual sport setting. Then these results and

several new potential predictors of stress were analyzed together to examine the relative strength and importance of the various predictors. By using this approach it could be determined, for example, whether a new variable would preempt a previously identified factor as a significant predictor of stress.

The results of these studies are highlighted in the next section with the variables being separated into predictors of precompetition and postcompetition stress. The directions of the relationships are indicated, necessary terms are defined, and the particular studies in which the various results were tested and demonstrated are cited to help the reader evaluate the findings. In a few instances, some brief interpretations are provided which can be pursued in greater depth in referenced articles.

## 2) Precompetition Stress

To date, all of the factors found to be associated with precompetition stress reflect individual difference variables.

### (1) Competitive Trait Anxiety

High competitive trait anxious girls and boys experience greater precompetition stress than low competitive trait anxious children. Competitive trait anxiety is a relatively stable personality disposition reflecting the tendency to perceive competitive sport situations as threatening (Martens, 1977).

### (2) Self-esteem

Low self-esteem girls and boys experience greater precompetition stress than high self-esteem children. Self-esteem depicts a child's overall opinion of him or herself and indicates how worthy, capable, and successful the child feels (Coopersmith, 1967; Scanlan & Passer, 1978, 1979).

### (3) Team performance expectancies

Girls and boys with lower expectancies for their team to be victorious experience greater precompetition stress than children with higher team expectancies (Scanlan & Passer, 1978, 1979).

### (4) Personal performance expectancies

Boys with lower expectancies to personally play well in a soccer game or to win a wrestling match experience greater precompetition stress than boys with higher personal performance expectancies (Scanlan & Passer, 1978; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984). This result was not found for female soccer players (Scanlan & Passer, 1979) and did not account for much of the stress variance for male soccer players. Overall, the results indicate that team expectancies are more important predictors of stress in team sports than personal performance expectancies. However, in individual sports, personal performance

expectancies are strong predictors of precompetition stress.

(5) Worries about failure

Boys who worry more frequently about failure before they compete experience greater precompetition stress than boys who are less preoccupied with performing poorly and making mistakes (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984).

(6) Worries about adult expectations and social evaluation

Boys who worry more frequently about the performance expectations and evaluations of their parents and coach tend to experience greater precompetition stress than boys who worry less frequently. The following items reflected this factor: "I worry about letting my mom (dad, coach) down" and "I worry about what my mom (dad, coach) will say if I don't wrestle well." (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984).

(7) Parental pressure to participate

Boys who feel greater pressure from their parents to participate in a sport experience greater precompetition stress than boys who perceive less parental pressure. Items reflecting this factor were "I wrestle because I feel that I have to wrestle to please my mom/dad." (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984. Note that this factor also was significantly correlated with [ $r = .56$ ] the previously presented factor pertaining to adult expectations and social evaluation).

3) Postcompetition Stress

The two major predictors of postcompetition stress include (a) the situational factor of victory versus defeat, and its various gradations, and (b) the individual difference variable involving the amount of fun children perceive having during the event.

(1) Victory versus defeat

Girls and boys who lose a competitive contest experience greater postcompetition stress than children who win. Relatedly, children who lose experience a significant increase in pre- to postcompetition stress, while children who win manifest a significant decrease.

1. Boys who lose a contest by a very close margin experience greater postcompetition stress than boys who lose by greater margins (Scanlan & Passer, 1978).

2. Girls who tie a contest experience greater postcompetition stress than those who win, and manifest less stress than those who lose (Scanlan & Passer, 1979).

3. Boys who win 50% of a series of consecutive contests experience greater postcompetition stress than boys who win 80%, and manifest less stress than those who win only 20% of the contests (Scanlan, 1977).

(2) Fun

Girls and boys who perceive that they had less fun during the event experience greater postcompetition stress than children who had more fun. What is important about this finding is that the inverse relationship between fun and stress is independent of victory or defeat. Hence, it is not simply the case that winners have more fun than losers (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984; Scanlan & Passer, 1978, 1979).

CONCLUSION

The findings to date have demonstrated that competitive trait anxiety, performance expectancies pertinent to the particular sport context, victory versus defeat and its varying degrees, and the amount of fun experienced while competing are strong and consistent predictors of competitive stress for both genders across diverse sport contexts. Self-esteem also was found to be a significant, although relatively weak predictor of stress for boys and girls in the soccer studies and was significantly correlated with but not predictive of stress in wrestling (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984)

Finally, the latest study in this series (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984) has identified several new factors associated with stress that focus on children's characteristic prematch thoughts and worries, as well as their perceptions of the significant adults in their lives. The influence that adults have on children's experience of competitive stress is one of the most exploratory aspects of this work. Understanding the adult's role in the stress process, as well as the part played by peers, is critical to achieving a complete picture of the sources of competitive stress.

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