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Why English players fail in major soccer penalty shootouts?

A study of team status, self-regulation and choking under pressure

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Abstract

We examine why players from some nations seem to always choke in major international soccer penalty shootouts. Based on a model on choking under pressure as a type of self-defeating behaviour (Baumeister, 1997), we hypothesised that highly favourable public appraisals of a team would be linked to displays of escapist self-regulation strategies and inferior performance. We selected the 8 most merited European teams, obtained videos from penalty shootouts in two major international tournaments (World Cup and European Championships) and analyzed all 200 shots taken by players representing these teams. The results gave significant relationships between team status, self-regulation strategies and performance. Players from teams that, at the time of the penalty shootout, either had many international club titles or featured many internationally decorated players, spent less time preparing their shots and were less successful from the penalty mark than players on teams with lower public status. England and Spain are used to illustrate these effects, as the data suggests that players from both these countries may have underperformed in previous international soccer tournaments because of high public status and misguided self-regulation strategies.

Introduction

Since 1970, the rules of soccer have stated that tied games in the elimination stage of tournaments should be decided using kicks from the penalty mark. In major international tournaments, such as the World Cup and the European Championships, it seems that certain countries always win and other countries always lose these penalty shootouts. For example, since 1982, Germany has won all five major shootouts they have participated in (in 1982, 1986, 1990, 1996, and 2006). In comparison, with one exception (in 1996 against Spain), England has lost all penalty shootouts they have taken part in (in 1990, 1996 against Germany, 1998, 2004, and 2006). Recent match archive research on the penalty shootout suggests that high performance pressure is consistently linked to low individual penalty shot performance (Jordet, Hartman, Visscher, & Lemmink, 2007). The question addressed in the current paper is whether national differences in variables associated with pressure can help explain national differences in penalty shot performance by players from teams at approximately the same skill level. Specifically, we wanted to use historical analyses (Simonton, 2003) to examine why players from some countries seem to consistently choke under pressure.

Choking under pressure can be defined as performing worse than expected in situations with a high degree of perceived importance (Baumeister, 1984; Beilock & Gray, 2007). Following a theoretical approach used by Baumeister (1997) to explain a wide range of maladaptive behaviours (such as procrastination, violence and suicide), choking under pressure can be described as a case of self-regulatory breakdown under ego threat. In this perspective, having highly favourable views about oneself (i.e., egotism) can sometimes produce higher levels of pressure. This can be because people

with favourable views about oneself have "more to lose" when faced with a threat of receiving an unfavourable evaluation (such as during a performance attempt where failure is possible or likely) than people with less favourable views. It is more humiliating to fail when your standards are high and/or other people expect a lot from you. A number of researchers have shown that when exposed to considerable threat, people with high self-esteem, or certain types of high self-esteem (i.e., defensive self-esteem, Lampird & Mann, 2006) respond less adaptively than people with lower self-esteem (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Baumeister, Boden, & Smart, 1996). Other researchers have shown that being favoured in competition can lead to higher perceived levels of performance pressure (Gibson, Sachau, Doll, & Shumate, 2002) and reduced performance (Baumeister, Hamilton, & Tice, 1985). Although sport psychology researchers have largely left this area unaddressed, two related studies are worth mentioning. First, Taylor and Cuave (1994) found equivocal support in Major league baseball hitters for the so called "sophomore slump", which they defined as a significant decline in performance during the 2nd year of competition following an outstanding 1st season. Second, Kreiner-Phillips and Orlick (1993) conducted in-depth interviews with 17 champion athletes who had won a major international competition about what followed from this win, and found that success created additional pressure for these high level athletes.

Generally, people react with anger or anxiety to all events that seriously challenge their mental image of themselves (Leary, 2004). When experiencing these emotions, systems for self-regulation sometimes break down and people search immediate escape from the emotional distress (Baumeister, 1997). Although this type of self-regulation may

provide a break from unpleasant emotions, it may also harm performance, thus ultimately becoming self-defeating. This exact pattern was documented in two recent studies of choking under pressure in international penalty shootouts. Jordet and Hartman (2008) found that participants in very high pressure situations (taking shots where a miss instantly would lead to a loss) displayed significantly faster preparation times (thought to reflect a desire to get the shot "over with"), more avoidance looking behaviours and fewer scored shots compared to players faced with lower pressure shots (no direct match-deciding implication or a goal would instantly lead to a win). In another recent study, the most internationally esteemed players (defined as those who took a shot after they had received one or more prestigious international awards, such as "FIFA player of the year") performed worse, and engaged more in certain escapist self-regulatory behaviours (lower response time) than players with lower levels of public status (Jordet, in press). In both these studies, it was demonstrated that low preparation times were linked to poor performance, suggesting that this type of self-regulation strategy is potentially self-defeating at the penalty mark.

In the current paper, we extend these recent investigations to explain more about why players from certain countries have performed the way they have. First, we wanted to examine country differences in status, self-regulation strategies and performance, to check if players from any of the large soccer nations have higher status and/or engage in more certain self-regulation strategies than others, and if players from these nations underperformed in penalty shootouts. Second, we wanted to examine the general relationships between team status, self-regulation and shot performance. Team status was deduced from previous tournament outcomes as well as from the aggregated status of the

individuals performing for each team. The more historical tournament wins that could be associated with a country at the time of the penalty shootout, the higher the performance pressure was assumed to be. Similarly, more high-status individuals representing a country were thought to reflect higher overall team status. Self-regulation was assessed from the players' response times and avoidance looking behaviour, where faster times and more avoidance looking were hypothesized to reflect escapist self-regulation.

Methods

Data

To get an objectively selected sample of leading soccer nations, we selected only European countries who had won one or more World Cup or European Championship titles. Limiting the sample to European nations made it possible to compare titles in intra-continental tournaments. Limiting it to the leading nations also made it more likely that the players from each team would be at the same high level of skill (reducing the impact of skill as a confounding variable) as well as getting nations with records of more than one penalty shootout (preventing the inclusion of nations with only 3 or 4 penalty shots). In total, 9 countries satisfied these criteria. From these, 8 countries had participated in penalty shootouts in the World Cup or European Championships (M = 4.5 shootouts, SD = 1.60, range 2 to 6) taking a total of 200 kicks (M = 25.0 kicks, SD = 7.6, range 10 to 33). Only Greece, the 2004 European Champions, had never participated in a major penalty shootout. Thus, the final sample consisted of: Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic (penalty shootouts in 1976, 1980 and 1996), Denmark (1984 and 1992), England (1990, 1996, 1996, 1998, 2004 and 2006), France (1982, 1986, 1996, 1996, 1998 and 2006), Germany (1976, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1996 and 2006), Italy (1980, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2000

and 2006), Netherlands (1992, 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2004), and Spain (1984, 1986, 1996, 2002 and 2002). Video images were obtained from all the penalty shootouts that each of these teams have participated in, from the World Cup (1982 to 2006) and the European Championships (1976 to 2004).

Variables

   Performance was assessed from shot outcomes (goal or miss). To provide some control for the actions of the keeper when assessing the country performances, we also measured whether the keepers directed their saving attempts to the correct side of the goal (where the ball was shot) or to the wrong side (based on Jordet & Hartman, 2008). After having assessed the link to the primary performance variable (goal or miss), we again registered goals and misses on only those shots where the keeper directed his saving attempt to the correct side. In this additional analysis, it was possible to exclude poorly placed shots (shots that were aimed towards the inside of the post, but ended up closer to the middle of the goal) that were scored simply because the keeper moved in the wrong direction.

   Status was assessed using three variables. First, previous team outcomes in the World Cup (WC) and the European Championships (EC) were derived from the number of titles that the country had won at the time of each penalty shootout. In total, 18 WC titles have been handed out (since 1930) and 12 EC titles (since 1960). Titles were chosen rather than a more fine-grained conception of outcome (e.g., matches won) because people are assumed to remember titles, which then potentially is associated with pressure (reflecting Kreiner-Phillips & Orlick, 1993). As an addition to this variable, we also assessed the Time since last won WC/EC title, as this could express the cumulative

dissatisfaction with a team not performing up to the previously demonstrated title-standard. Second, because WC and EC titles are only decided every fourth year each and because the number of these titles may be confounded by past penalty shootout performances (where countries may have more or less titles based on how they have done in penalty shootouts), we also assessed the number of major titles won by club teams from each nation. We only used the most prestigious European club tournament, UEFA European Cup for League winners/Champions league (from now called Champions league, CL). This tournament is held every year (with a total of 52 winning teams since 1956), possibly making it a more reliable measure of historical performances than WC and EC. One could argue against this variable that because a club team can feature players from different countries, their performances would not reflect much status on behalf of each country. However, an analysis of the team line-ups shows that the large majority of the winning teams' 11 starting players in the 52 CL finals came from the country of their club team ($M = 8.3$ players, $SD = 2.16$), suggesting that these clubs have been dominated by national players, which carries with it a possible impact on national status. Third, a potentially more direct measure of team status in the penalty shootout can be derived from the summative status of the individual players who represented each country. Following criteria from Jordet (in press), we counted the numbers of players on each team who took a shot after having received one or several major international soccer awards: FIFA World Player of the Year (1-3 place), World Cup Golden ball/Silver ball/Bronze ball, Ballon d'Or (1-3 place), and UEFA Club Footballer of the Year (including specific awards for each positional role). We used the percentage of players with an award featured in the penalty shootout as the measure of status.

Self-regulation was assessed with two variables (from Jordet, in press; Jordet & Hartman, 2008). Response time was defined as the time standing still from the moment the referee has signalled for the player to start to begin his run-up (first step towards the ball). This was measured by counting the video frames between the start and end points, using the video processing utility *VirtualDub*. Looking behaviour was assessed from the direction of the players' faces as they walked back to prepare their run-up, after having placed the ball on the penalty mark. At this point, players either walk backwards while facing the goalkeeper (approach looking) or turn around, actively directing their faces away from the goalkeeper and then walk back (avoidance looking). Some players would engage in both types of looking, but if a player at any point showed behaviour consistent with the criteria for avoidance looking, it was coded as such. Inadequate television images prevented 36 shots from being reliably classified with respect to response time and 14 shots could not be classified with respect to looking behaviour. These shots were excluded from the analysis. The inter-observer reliability of both variables are documented in recent papers, where an absolute agreement of 92.5% was obtained for looking behavior (Jordet & Hartman, 2008) and an adequate correlation was found for response time ($r = .86$, $p < .001$) (Jordet, in press). In both cases, two independent observers coded all shots. When a major discrepancy was detected, the observers discussed and re-analysed the shot in question until consensus was reached.

Data analysis

To examine the links between country/public status and binary variables (i.e., performance, keeper direction, and looking behaviour), we used a series of logistic regression analyses, giving Odds Ratios (OR). The public status variables were split into

three groups from low to high status (and short to long time since last WC/EC title), where each group had an as equal number of players as possible. The relationship between country and response time was assessed using non-parametric measures, Kruskall-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests, and we used Mann Whitney and Chi-square tests to test the relationships between country and public status.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Country and performance

There were significant differences in overall shot performance between players from different countries. Specifically, players from the Netherlands scored significantly fewer goals than players from Germany and presumably (given that the statistics could not be computed with one country scoring 100%) fewer goals than players from Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic (see statistics in Figure 1a). Players from England also scored fewer goals than players from Germany ($OR = 6.19$, $p = .028$), while there were trends that Italian and Spanish players scored less than German players ($OR = 4.88$, $p = .057$ and $OR = 4.59$, $p = .081$, respectively). When we control for the movements of the keeper, by only including those shots where the goalkeeper moved in the correct direction to save, we get approximately the same results (see Figure 1b). However, from this analysis the English players performed worse than players from all other countries and the goal percentages for the French players were hardly reduced at all (only 2 percent points decrease), contrary to the other teams (> 8 percent points decrease).

Furthermore, when comparing the n for each country in Figure 1a and Figure 1b, it is apparent that the goalkeepers, in total, moved to the correct side on about half of the shots (47.7%), which was also the case for players from half of the countries: France

(45.2%), Italy (45.5%), Germany (46.4%) and Denmark (50.0%). Interestingly,

goalkeepers seemed to move more to the correct side when faced with shots from

England (58.1%) and the Netherlands (62.5%) and less to the correct side on shots from

Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia (36.8%) and Spain (34.8%). Although none of these

country differences were significant, there were some trends, for example between Spain

(reference category) and both England ($OR = 2.60$, $p = .094$) and the Netherlands ($OR =$

3.13, $p = .061$), suggesting that goalkeepers facing Dutch and English players picked the

correct side for their saving attempt more than those facing Spanish players.

Country and public team status

Germany, Italy and France had significantly more WC/EC titles than the other 5

nations ($U = 1579.50$, $p < .001$) (see Table 1), with England (*Mdn* = 32 years), Spain

(*Mdn* = 32 years) and Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia (*Mdn* = 20 years) enduring the

longest time since their last won title, significantly longer than Italy (*Mdn* = 12 years),

France (*Mdn* = 12 years), Netherlands (*Mdn* = 10 years) and Germany (*Mdn* = 6 years)

($U = 223.00$, $p < .001$). Other countries were more successful with respect to CL.

Specifically, Italy, Spain, England and the Netherlands had more CL titles than Germany

at the point of each penalty shootout ($U = 177.00$, $p < .001$), with England and Italy

having most titles ($U = 986.50$, $p < .001$) (see Table 1). In terms of aggregated individual

status, the Netherlands featured the highest percentage of decorated players in their

penalty shootouts, closely followed by England and Italy (see Table 1). These three

countries seemed to use more decorated players in their penalty shootouts than the other

countries ($\chi^2 = 3.73$, $p = .053$).

Country and self-regulation strategies

There were differences between the countries on self-regulation strategies, with English players exhibiting both the fastest response times and the most avoidance looking. Country was statistically linked to response time (Kruskall-Wallis test, $\chi^2 =$ 42.37, $p < .001$), with English and Spanish players being fastest, followed by Dutch and Italian players (see Figure 2a). Post-hoc Mann-Whitney tests showed that players from England were significantly quicker than players from Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia ($U = 36.50$, $p < .001$), France ($U = 64.00$, $p < .001$), Germany ($U = 102.00$, $p < .001$), Italy ($U = 159.50$, $p < .001$), and the Netherlands ($U = 155.50$, $p = .007$). Furthermore, players from Spain were quicker than players from France ($U = 134.50$, $p = .004$) and Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia ($U = 71.50$, $p = .013$); players from the Netherlands quicker than players from France ($U = 120.50$, $p = .002$) and Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia ($U = 71.50$, $p = .013$); and players from Italy quicker than players from France ($U = 196.00$, $p = .010$). Country was also linked to avoidance looking, with the English players engaging considerably more in avoidance looking than players from other countries, and significantly more than players from Spain, Italy, Netherlands, and Germany, with a trend for France (see Figure 2b).

It should be noted that players from Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia may have scored high on avoidance looking because 25% (5/20) of their total shots were negative valence shots (where a miss instantly leads to a loss, Jordet & Hartman, 2008). Of the 5 players taking these shots, 4 of them (80%) engaged in avoidance looking, as compared to 21.4% of the players in positive or neutral valence conditions (a statistically significant difference, $OR = 14.70$, $p = .038$, with positive/neutral shots as reference category). This reflects the previously found results that more players with negative valence shots display

avoidance looking than players with neutral shots or positive valence shots (Jordet &

Hartman, 2008). There was only one other country with an equally large number of

negative valence shots, the Netherlands (6 shots, 25%; with Italy as third, 9.1%). It could

have been argued that this could explain the short response times exhibited by the Dutch

players (as negative valence shots also have been shown to be related to short response

time, Jordet & Hartman, 2008). However, the response times for the Dutch negative

valence shots (M = .48, SD = .35, Mdn = .40, n = 5) were not much lower than the other

Dutch shots (M = .50, SD = .23, Mdn = .48, n = 17) (Mann Whitney U = 36.00, p = .610),

suggesting that other reasons may exist for the short Dutch response times.

Public team status and performance

Public team status was linked to performance. Players on countries with many CL

titles at the time of the penalty shootout (8-10 titles) scored fewer goals (67.8%, OR = 1,

reference category) than countries with 4-7 titles (80.0%, OR = 1.90, p = .116) and

players on countries with few titles (0-3 titles, 87.3%, OR = 3.27, p = .009). Similarly,

players on teams with many decorated players (20-50% of the players with awards)

scored fewer goals (66.7% goals, OR = 1, reference category) than players on teams with

no decorated players (0 awards, 88.5%, OR = 3.83, p = .002), with a non-significant

difference in the same direction for players on countries with some decorated players (1 –

20% of the players had awards, 70.8% goals, OR = 1.21, p = .660). The difference

between players on teams with many decorated players and no decorated players was still

significant after we removed the decorated players themselves from the analysis (71.9%

and 88.5%, respectively; OR = 3.00, p = .028). There were no significant differences in

number of goals scored based on WC/EC titles. However, when we assessed the time

since last won WC/EC title, we found a weak trend that players on a team who won a

WC/EC title less than 10 years ago scored more (82.6% goals, *OR* = 1.97, *p* = .114) than

players on teams who won their last title 21 or more years ago (70.7%, *OR* = 1, reference

category).

Public team status and self-regulation strategies

    The number of CL titles was related to response times (Kruskall-Wallis test, χ^2 =

28.38, *p* < .001). Post-hoc Mann-Whitney tests showed that players from countries with

many CL titles (8-10 titles) displayed shorter response times (*M* = .43 s, *SD* = .38, *Mdn* =

.32) than players from countries with a moderate number of titles (4-7 titles, *M* = .59 s,

SD = .42, *Mdn* = .51, *U* = 1106.50, *p* = .003) and players on teams with few titles (0-3

titles, *M* = 1.07 s, *SD* = .89, *Mdn* = .80, *U* = 539.50, *p* < .001). There was also a link

between number of CL titles and avoidance looking. Players from countries with many

titles engaged in more avoidance looking (35.2% avoidance looking, *OR* = 1, reference

category) than players from countries with a moderate number of titles (14.7% avoidance

looking, *OR* = .31, *p* = .010), but equally as much as players from countries with few

titles (37.5% avoidance looking, *OR* = 1.11, *p* = .795).

    The number of World Cup or European Championship titles had an association

with response time (Kruskall-Wallis test, χ^2 = 6.66, *p* = .036), but the post hoc tests

showed only a significant difference between players from countries with no WC/EC

titles (*M* = 1.00 s, *SD* = .77, *Mdn* = .80) and players from countries with some titles (1-3

titles, *M* = .65 s, *SD* = .69, *Mdn* = .44) (*U* = 533.00, *p* = .024), with a weak tendency for

players from teams with many titles (4-6) to be slower than players on teams with some

titles (*M* = .65 s, *SD* = .38, *Mdn* = .64, *U* = 1766.50, *p* = .135). For the time since last won

WC/EC title, there was a difference (Kruskall-Wallis test, $\chi^2 = 27.14$, $p < .001$), with post-hoc tests showing significant differences between players on teams who won a title 21 or more years ago ($M = .36$, $SD = .29$, $Mdn = .28$) and players on teams who won less than 10 years ago ($M = .66$, $SD = .54$, $Mdn = .60$, $U = 694.00$, $p < .001$) and $11 - 20$ years ago ($M = .82$, $SD = .67$, $Mdn = .68$, $U = 695.50$, $p < .001$). There was no relationship between WC/EC titles and avoidance looking (all $p > .22$) or between time since last won WC/EC title and avoidance looking (all $p > .17$).

Finally, the number of decorated players on a team was related to response time (Kruskall-Wallis test, $\chi^2 = 8.65$, $p = .013$). Specifically, players on teams with many decorated players (20-50% of the players had awards) exhibited shorter response times ($M = .46$ s, $SD = .33$, $Mdn = .40$) than players on teams with no decorated players ($M = .80$ s, $SD = .71$, $Mdn = .60$, $U = 1231.00$, $p = .005$), with no significant difference to players on teams with some decorated players ($M = .64$ s, $SD = .70$, $Mdn = .48$, $U = 645.00$, $p = .342$). These relationships persisted when the decorated players themselves were removed from the analysis (Kruskall-Wallis test, $\chi^2 = 7.02$, $p = .030$). There were no significant differences in looking behaviour based on the number of decorated players in a team (all p > .21)

Discussion

The results show that players from countries with the highest public team status (i.e., many CL titles and awards) display more escapist self-regulation strategies (i.e., low response time) and perform worse than players from countries with lower public status. This provides indirect evidence that players may underachieve in penalty shootouts because they have to cope with high expectations and pressure coming from being on a

certain team; and players from other teams may excel in these situations because there are less expectations and pressure associated with their teams. The results are consistent with a view on choking under pressure as related to favourable views of self under threat. The soccer penalty shootout present a threat, as shooters are expected to score, but players often report not experiencing much control over the outcome (i.e., the outcome is heavily influenced by luck, Jordet, Elferink-Gemser, Lemmink, & Vischer, 2006), making failure looming. Furthermore, following theorizing from Baumeister (1997), if playing on a team with the public image of a soccer superpower, it seems logical that the possibility of letting people down with a penalty miss can be more intimidating than that experienced by players from countries with a less superior image to live up to. Players from high-status countries may have an extra intense desire to avoid "losing face" and when this threat is imminent, the result may be high levels of emotional distress. Faced with such uncomfortable states, it has been shown that people tend to search the most immediate escape from the threat (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1993) and in our study we found that players on the high-status teams tended to display shorter response times than players on other teams, possibly indicating a desire to get the situation "over and done with". The same may be the case for teams who have won a major title (i.e., WC/EC) in the past, but then go through many years with no titles, possibly accompanied by accumulated frustration with not living up to this previously demonstrated high standard, which was shown to be related to low response times with a weak trend towards low performance. This reflects research finding that people, when given a choice, want to experience unpleasant situations right away, rather than postponing them to later (Berns, Chappelow, Cekic, Zink, Pagnoni, & Martin-Skurski, 2006). Because low response times have been

shown in previous studies to be associated with low penalty shot performance (Jordet, in press), one could argue that the behaviours that these players use to respond to the high public team status are self-defeating.

The results provide some basis for explaining why certain countries consistently lose in penalty shootouts. The country illustrating this best is England. England has been eliminated from international tournaments with penalties five times since 1990 (with only one win in the same period) and the individual shot results show that English players (together with the Dutch) perform the worst of all players in our sample. Interestingly, England was the country with the highest average CL wins at the time of the penalty shootout, the longest time since their last won title as well as one of the countries (marginally second to the Netherlands) with the most internationally merited players in the shootout. This suggests that English players, in these contexts, may experience extraordinarily high levels of expectations and pressure. Similar views have been stated by writers analyzing the culture in which English internationals perform (e.g., Corbett, 2006; Winner, 2005). How do English players respond to this pressure? Our results show that English players engage in the most escapist self-regulation strategies of all teams, both with the lowest response times ($Mdn = 0.28$ s) and the highest percentage of avoidance looking (56.7% of the English players turn their back to the goalkeeper as they back up to prepare their shots). Thus, English players fit our model of choking under pressure well, with high egotism, escapist and misguided self-regulation, and poor performance.

Another interesting case is Spain. This country has, much like England, a reputation for consistently underachieving in tournaments, leading to disappointingly

early exits (Ball, 2003). The long time since the last Spanish international title (equally long as England) and their fine CL-records (third most titles in our sample), may imply that Spanish players experience high levels of expectations and their low response times (*Mdn* = 0.32 s, second only to England) suggest that they respond to this pressure with escapist self-regulation strategies. That Spain still has won 2 penalty shootouts may surprisingly be attributed to the behaviours of the opposing goalkeepers. Although it is possible that Spanish players are better at misleading or reading the goalkeeper than players from other nations (for details on this strategy, see Morya, Ranvaud, & Pinheiro, 2003), it could also be that Spanish players have been a bit lucky, as the goalkeepers moved to the wrong side on 65.2% of the Spanish shots. This could have made it easier for the Spanish players to succeed with poorly placed shots. Another interesting finding related to the Spanish players is that they engaged the least in avoidance looking of all the countries' players (only 4.5% turn their back to the goalkeeper while preparing their shots). Italian players are second with 13.8% avoidance, suggesting that little avoidance looking may characterize Latin, Southern European players. It has been demonstrated experimentally that masculinity ratings of a face looking down are lower than for the same faces looking straight ahead (Campbell, Wallace, & Benson, 1996) and that goalkeepers in penalty situations rate shooters looking away as less confident and less likely to score (Greenlees, Leyland, Thelwell, & Filby, 2008). Thus, it is possible that Spanish and Italian players explicitly or implicitly adjust their actions according to such beliefs more than players from Northern European countries. Researchers should test these assertions under more controlled laboratory settings, using participants from different countries.

In sum, in this study we report that high national soccer egotism is linked to both escape behaviours and low performance for players performing in major penalty shootouts. If escape behaviours precede low performance (as has been suggested for response time, Jordet, in press), these results offer one type of explanation for why certain countries seem to choke at the penalty mark in major tournaments. However, a few limitations are important to consider when interpreting the conclusions. First, we have only focused on the historically most successful European nations. It is unknown how these variables affect, or can be generalized to, nations from other continents or nations with lower status. This should be examined in future studies, by including a larger sample, controlling more directly for skill (e.g., derived from the club level each player is at) and then testing who wins the most penalty shootouts, the high status or the low status teams. Another limitation is that we have focused on the shooters, rather than the goalkeepers. It could be that goalkeeper differences are responsible for differences between the teams, and this should also be addressed in future studies. Finally, although we think that the conclusions that are drawn from these data are logical, the indirect correlational measures that characterize all historical data (Simonton, 2003) make some speculation necessary when interpreting our findings. Thus, it is imperative that researchers collect data that can more directly illuminate the mechanisms at play in these situations, by for example interviewing players from different countries or experimentally manipulating these variables in more controlled laboratory settings. On the other hand, the large advantage of historical data is that they have intrinsic meaning and high external validity making the results relatively easy to communicate outside of the academia and potentially, easier to apply back to the real world (Simonton, 2003).

Some suggestions for practice can be offered. First, coaches and/or sport psychology consultants should be aware of the possible negative effect that high status may have in these situations and address this in their interventions. For example, it would be desirable to reduce the perception of having a high public image or the feeling that one has much "to lose". This is obviously not easy, but it could be accomplished through sandbagging (artificially creating and/or communicating low expectations, that may have an effect in a short time span, Gibson et al., 2002) or cognitive restructuring techniques, where one works with awareness of what it means to be a "favourite" and the processes accompanying this label (for a discussion of such an approach, see Haberl, 2007). Second, given that players on high-status teams seem to respond more with escapist self-regulation strategies than players on other teams, one would think awareness of the possible self-defeating effects of these behaviours followed by replacing them with more approach-based behaviours could be beneficial. These players could be educated to resist the urge to rush their preparation and rather take a few extra seconds at the penalty mark. This procedure may assist players to feel more in control, which then is likely to impact performance positively.

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Table 1

Country and public status. The number of World Cup (WC)/European Championships (EC) titles at the time of the penalty shootout; the number of UEFA Champions league club (CL) titles at the time of the penalty shootout; and the total number of players in the penalty shootout with one or more international awards.

Country	WC/EC titles			CL titles			Awards	
	M	SD	Median	M	SD	Median	N	%
Czech	0.7	0.5	1	0	0	0	0	0
Denmark	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
England	1	0	1	8.5	0.8	8	6	19.4
France	1.2	0.9	1	0.7	0.5	1	3	9.7
Germany	4.3	0.9	4	4	1	4	4	14.3
Italy	3.8	0.4	4	7.8	2	8.5	5	15.2
Netherlands	1	0	1	5.8	0.4	6	5	20.8
Spain	1	0	1	7.8	1.8	7	3	13.0

Figure captions

Figure 1. Country and shot performance. (a) Country and % scored goals, with Odds

ratios; and (b) countries and % scored goals on shots where the keeper moves in correct

direction, with Odds ratios. ([a] could not be computed). The countries were:

Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic (CZE), Denmark (DEN), England (ENG), France

(FRA), Germany (GER), Italy (ITA), Netherlands (NED), and Spain (SPA).
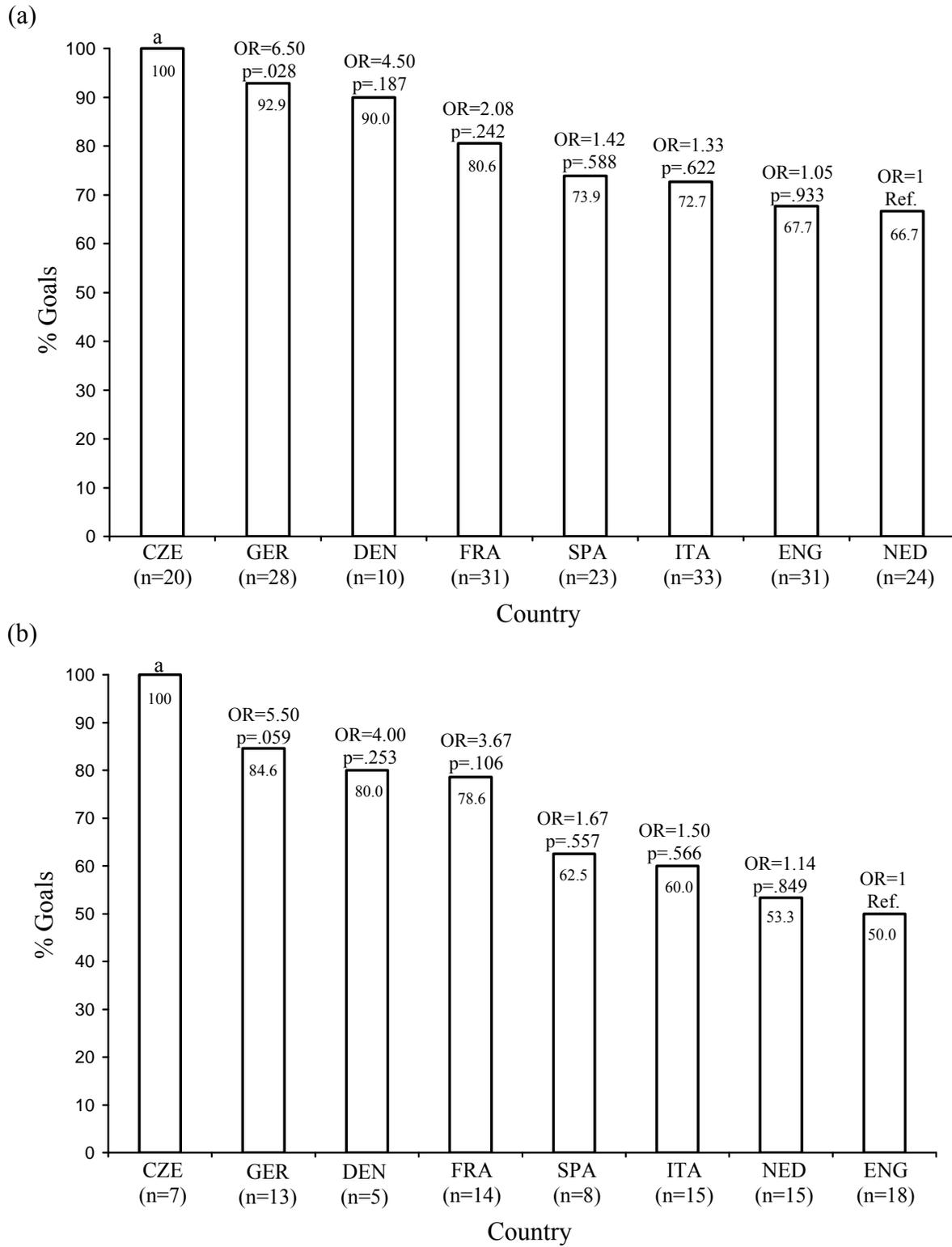

Figure 2. Country and self-regulation strategies. (a) Country and median response time;

and (b) countries and % avoidance looking, with Odds ratios. The countries were:

Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic (CZE), Denmark (DEN), England (ENG), France

(FRA), Germany (GER), Italy (ITA), Netherlands (NED), and Spain (SPA).
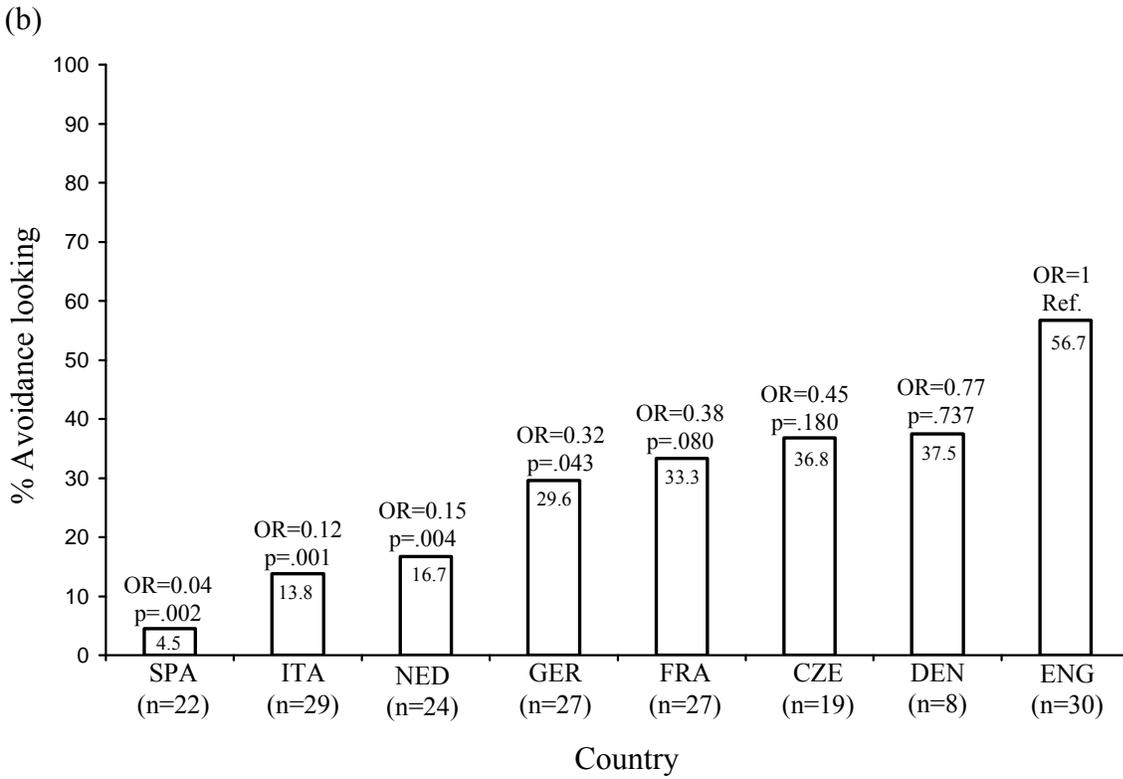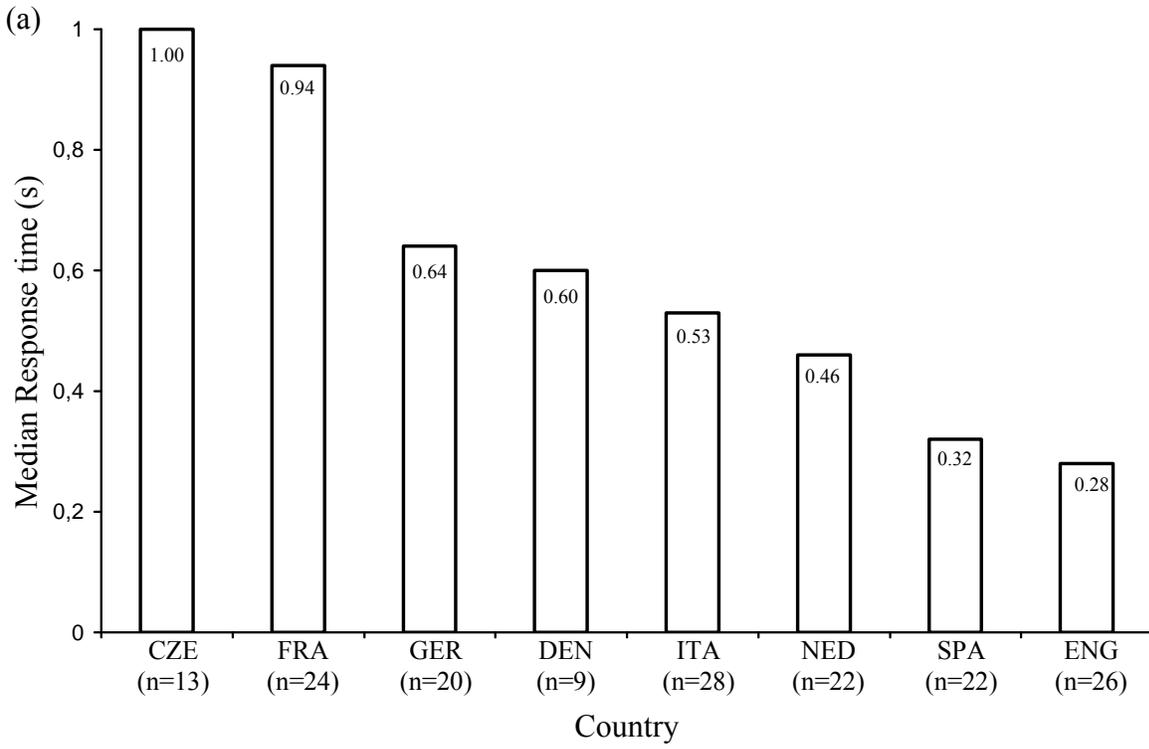
Figure 1.

(a)

(b)

Figure 2.