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Stress, coping, and emotions on the world stage:

The experience of participating in a major soccer tournament penalty shootout

Abstract

This study was designed to capture the first-hand experiences of stressors, coping, and emotions that elite professional soccer players have during a major soccer penalty shootout. Eight players who each took part in an important European Championships penalty shootout were interviewed. The results showed that the experience of stressors, coping, and emotions changed extensively throughout the event. Moreover, the participants experienced a series of different stressors, some of which were specific to the penalty shootout, and they employed a variety of coping strategies. Anxiety was the most common emotion. Practitioners can use these results to help design valid simulation protocols.

Key words: hope; control; social support; choking; football.

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All you need to do is walk 50 yards, take a penalty and score. That's the worst part of it, that bloody walk from the halfway line. Why do they make you stand there, so far away? God only knows which masochist decided that. It is clearly someone who has never been in this nerve-jangling position because it heightens the tension to an unbelievable degree. (Stuart Pearce, 2000, p. 3)

The rules of soccer state that when a winner has to be declared and two teams are tied after extra time in a tournament, the "penalty shootout" (or kicks from the penalty mark) is used to decide the winner (FIFA, 2011). Five players from each team perform one kick each. If the score still is equal after 10 kicks, one player from each team takes a kick, until one team has scored a goal more than the other from the same number of kicks. The penalty shootout has been used to decide almost 1/4 of games in the knockout stages of major tournaments (Jordet, Hartman, Visscher, & Lemmink, 2007), including several finals (e.g., the 2006 World Cup final). Thus, the event has become a normal feature of top level international soccer. The general purpose of the present study was to shed more light on some of the qualitative aspects related to performing in an event that is so important for the outcome of major tournaments in the global game of soccer. Specifically, the study sought to understand how players experience the stress, coping, and emotions that would seem to be central when taking part this specific event.

In the sport psychology literature, the majority of the research on stress has been based on the transactional model of stress, coping, and emotion (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1999), which holds that people constantly appraise the transactions with

their environment (for a review, see Nicholls & Polman, 2007). When encountering a stressor, people use primary appraisal to evaluate its personal significance as threatening, harmful, challenging or beneficial. Secondary appraisal is an evaluation of the extent to which the person has the resources to cope with the stressor. Coping is often defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Among the typical categories of coping are problem-focused coping (i.e., strategies used to manage or alter a stressful situation), emotion-focused coping (strategies to regulate the emotional distress in a situation) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and avoidance coping (attempts to mentally or behaviorally disengage from the situation, Roth & Cohen, 1986). With respect to coping effectiveness, one model is the goodness-of-fit approach, where effective coping is a function of the fit between a person’s appraisal of the stressor and the type of coping engaged in (Folkman, 1992). For example, when one encounters a stressor perceived as controllable, problem-focused coping will be most effective; while encountering a stressor perceived as uncontrollable, emotion-focused coping will be better. Finally, it seems that people are likely to experience several different emotions as they go through a specific stressful competitive situation (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Effective coping strategies may buffer stress and lead to positive emotions, while ineffective coping may lead to negative emotions (Lazarus, 1999).

Several recent studies have examined these processes in elite level athletes performing under similar contextual conditions as professional soccer players, or performing skills of similar nature to those found in the soccer penalty shootout. For

example, in a diary-based study of professional rugby union players (Nicholls, Jones, Polman, & Borkoles, 2009), many of the stressors reported for match days were related to other people (opponents, referee, or crowd). With respect to match day coping strategies, blocking (an avoidance strategy) was most frequently cited. Further, anxiety was the most frequently reported emotion during training, while anger was most cited for matches.

Although several other studies have been conducted with athletes at a high international level of performance (e.g., participants in the Olympics, Pensgaard & Duda, 2003), there seems to be few published studies of stress and coping in elite athletes playing professionally in major teams sports.

However, given the focus of the current paper on performing in the soccer penalty shootout, it is also relevant to consider a series of studies that has been done on international level adolescent golf players, who perform skills very similar to that found in the soccer penalty shootout. Many of the golfers in these studies refer to opponents as a stressor, but they refer even more to other aspects of performance (such as the score, mistakes, outcome, and errors) (Nicholls, 2007; Nicholls & Polman, 2008; Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & James, 2005). Moreover, the elite golf players seem to employ a wide variety of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, and similarly to the rugby players, they report particularly often using the avoidance strategy blocking (e.g., Nicholls, 2007; Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005; Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & James, 2005). Interestingly though, it has been found that blocking and some other strategies can be rated as both effective and ineffective, even for the same stressor (Nicholls, 2007). It also appears that golfers experience a series of emotions in relation to competitive events and anxiety is the most frequently cited emotion (Nicholls, Hemings, & Clough, 2010).

Finally, in a study that may be particularly relevant for a penalty shootout, Nicholls and Polman (2008) used a think aloud protocol to examine stress and coping over six holes of golf. Interestingly, they found that stressors and coping changed throughout the six holes, which suggests that stress and coping take place as a dynamic process.

Given the importance of scoring on each of the shots in a penalty shootout for the outcome of the entire game, the pressure on players to perform well will arguably be very high. A study of 409 kicks from the World Cup, European Championships and Copa America demonstrated that kick importance (indicative of high levels of performance pressure) was negatively related to the outcomes of these kicks and more strongly related to outcome than both goal-scoring skill and fatigue (Jordet et al., 2007). It was concluded that the experience of (and coping with) stress may be influential for success or failure at the penalty mark. Further, based on Baumeister's (1997) model of self-defeating behavior, several studies have been conducted on elite soccer players' behaviors in major tournament penalty shootouts. This process may start when an athlete's self-image is threatened and he/she experiences intense emotional distress. This in turn may cause self-regulation and coping efforts to fail (e.g., Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993). In essence, when experiencing intense distress, people seem to think about immediate issues and less on long-term implications from what they are doing. Thus, emotional distress may be so dominant that it is given top priority to end the distress, and less to more adaptive patterns of self-regulation or coping (Baumeister, 1997). These mechanisms have been demonstrated in major soccer penalty shootouts using video observation methods. Under high levels of ego threat, players exhibited more avoidance based coping than under lower levels of threat (Jordet & Hartman, 2008; Jordet, 2009a; Jordet, 2009b).

This was exhibited by players who turned away from the goalkeeper (seemingly attempting to not looking at the stressful information) and in players who rushed their shots (seemingly attempting to quickly get the shot over with). The latter of these behaviors – short preparation time – is associated with inferior performance (Jordet, Hartman, & Sigmundstad, 2009), suggesting that this way of coping with the situation may be misguided. It should be noted that these studies are based on mean values and probabilities and that just because a penalty is missed does not mean that a player has not coped well. The same logic suggests that just because a player has scored does not mean that he has coped well. Many other factors (including an element of chance) may play a role for the outcome.

Although autobiographies (e.g., Owen, 2004; Pearce, 2000) have richly articulated some of the players' experiences of participating in a penalty shootout, systematic phenomenological descriptions of stressors, coping, and emotions in these events are completely absent in the research literature. These types of experiences are important to capture if one wishes to meet calls by leading stress and coping researchers to provide full and detailed observation and description of phenomenal, natural wholes (e.g., Lazarus, 2000b) and to provide practical knowledge that, it has been argued, should be tailored to specific contexts and situations (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000). Thus, the present study was designed to provide first-hand descriptions of the experiences professional soccer players have during the different phases of a series of kicks from the penalty mark, with specific attention to stressors, coping strategies, and emotions. The way that this study potentially may add to the knowledge we already have on stress, coping, and emotions, is primarily that it addresses elite professional athletes'

experiences of one specific stressful situation. Moreover, given that athletes' specific behaviors in this particular situation has recently been the object of a series of video observation studies (e.g., Jordet, 2009a; 2009b; Jordet & Hartman, 2008; Jordet et al., 2009), it may be possible to compare the phenomenological experiences captured in the present study with the typical behaviors captured in these other studies. By isolating one narrow contextual feature in this way, one might get a reasonably clear image of the processes of interest related to elite athletes' stress, coping, and emotions when they compete at the highest possible level in their sport.

Methods

Participants

The 8 male participants all took a kick in the quarterfinal between Sweden and the Netherlands in the 2004 European Championships soccer tournament. Because some of the results of this study are potentially sensitive and all participants are well known in the soccer community, no information that could potentially reveal the participants' identities is disclosed. However, some basic demographic information can be provided about the total population from which these participants were drawn. In total, 12 players took a kick after this game, ranging in age between 20 and 33 years ($M = 26.3$, $SD = 4.8$) having played between 5 and 79 national team games for their country ($M = 35.6$, $SD = 26.2$). In addition, at the time of this event, all of them played for major professional European clubs: Ajax (2 players), Anderlecht, Arsenal, Aston Villa, Barcelona (2 players), Bayern Munich, Manchester United, PSV (2 players), and Rennes. In the penalty shootout, nine players scored and 3 players missed their shot.

Interview protocol

Following guidelines for phenomenological interviews (Dale, 1996; Kvale, 1996), the interviewer tried to, without biases, ask each participant to provide accurate personal descriptions of his experiences. Every attempt was made not to lead the participants, but to let them express their experiences as freely as possible. One open-ended question was asked: what did you think, feel and do here? Follow-up questions were then asked in relation to the initial answers of the participants.

The interview question was asked to each of the four functionally different phases of the event. These phases, and their duration in this game, were: (I) Break after extra time – from the end of the game to when the players are gathered in the mid circle (about 2 min, 30 s); (II) The mid circle – from entering the mid circle to leaving the mid circle (between 40 s and 8 min and 30 s, depending on when the player took his shot); (III) The walk – from leaving the mid circle to arrival at the penalty mark (about 20 to 30 s); and (IV) The penalty mark – from arriving at the penalty mark to when the shot has been taken (about 10 to 35 s).

Because all interviews were held between 8 and 12 months after the game, the participants were, during the interview, shown video images of themselves from this particular event. This technique may facilitate memory of emotions and coping (Eubank & Collins, 2000). Each interview included other questions and questionnaires (see overview in Jordet, Elferink-Gemser et al., 2006). However, the phenomenological aspect of the data collection presented here was conducted first, after a few initial demographic questions were asked. This prevented the participants' responses from being affected by preceding interview topics.

Procedures

The participants' contact information was obtained from personal acquaintances to key people in the two teams and all players who were asked to participate agreed to do so. The participants played and lived in various countries across Europe, so the interviewers traveled to their clubs and interviews were carried out at facilities close to the training ground. Ethical institutional approval was obtained prior to the data collection, in line with the policy of our university and antisocial desirability guidelines were given to the participants before each interview. The players' informed consent was then obtained.

The interviews were conducted by the first and the second author in two different languages. To facilitate reliable collection of bilingual data, we attempted to homogenize the two interviewers' interview guide and interviewing style. Thus, three pilot interviews were conducted with both interviewers present. Both interviewers had previously been trained in the use of qualitative methodology and interview techniques. Also, they both have had personal experiences in high level sport, which helped to facilitate rapport with the participants.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, to produce about 60 single-spaced pages of responses to the open ended questions. The analyses were both deductive and inductive. First, the two researchers read through and familiarized themselves with the interviews, discussing initial findings and general trends. Second, all interview responses were split into independent statements that expressed one specific point or thought, for each of the four phases of the series. This procedure was also repeated by a third researcher. Third, raw data themes were inductively generated from the statements. The

authors and two additional researchers discussed the themes at length until consensus was reached on all themes and dimensions. Fourth, the raw data themes that could be identified as stressors, coping (problem-focused, emotion-focused, or avoidance coping), or emotion were labeled as such. An additional deductive analysis of the independent statements was done, to make sure that all statements related to these dimensions were detected. At this point, some operational definitions of key terms were agreed upon. For example, the term “anxiety” was used to represent all negatively connoted expressions of emotional responses to competitive stressors (based on Mellalieu et al., 2006), such as negative thoughts, tension and statements about “being stressed”. Fifth, individual participant profiles were created, which gave an idiographic basis for discussion and material for member checking. Finally, the most representative interview quotes were translated from the original language into English for inclusion in this manuscript. Translations and back-translations were discussed until consensus was reached about all quotes. To protect the anonymity of the participants, some statements were rewritten without obscuring the conceptual message.

Validity

Kvale (1996) explicitly operates with several kinds of validity, all of which we aimed for. First, craftsmanship validity was pursued using method triangulation and member checking. The former made it possible to check whether the results from the open ended interview questions concurred with results from standardized questionnaires filled in later in the interview and with video images of the participants performing in this event, obtained from media coverage of the event. With a few minor exceptions, the results from the different data sources were in agreement. The statements about which the

sources showed some disagreement were removed from further processing. Member checking was used by having each participant look through and provide comments on a detailed 10-page personal participant profile (summary of the most important individual results). All participants agreed with the most important findings. Second, communicative validity was pursued by ongoing conversations about the findings of the study with the participants themselves, additional researchers, and other elite coaches and players. Third, pragmatic validity (i.e., whether the interview results lead to action) seemed relatively high, given that the research team, on multiple occasions, was invited, and invited back, to present the results to soccer teams prior to major international tournaments.

Results

In total, 283 statements were split into 130 raw data themes that could be grouped into 48 higher order themes coded under stressors, coping, and emotions. The results are structured in relation to the four phases.

Phase I. Break after extra time

Concerning the period from when the referee whistled for full time after the second half of extra time and until the players went into the mid circle, the participants expressed statements that easily could be related to stressors, coping, and emotions (for an overview of themes and dimensions, see Table 1).

One prominent group of stressors seemed to be the upcoming penalty shootout itself. For example, three players expressed a general dissatisfaction with penalties (e.g., “I was very disappointed that it went to penalties.”), others talked about their team’s poor penalty shootout record in previous tournaments (e.g., “I cannot remember that the

Netherlands has ever before won a penalty shootout. What everybody thinks then is naturally ‘oh no, not again.’”). Furthermore, the communication with the coaches also presented itself as a stressor. All 8 participants received information from the coaches in this phase, as confirmed by the video images. Most importantly, it was now decided who would take a shot and the order of the shooters. Although 6 participants said that they immediately, as the referee blew his whistle for full time, knew that they would take a shot (e.g., “I knew, when he blew his whistle, that it would be a penalty for me.”), 2 participants expressed in the interview that they did not know at this stage that they would be asked to take a shot, and they were also both reluctant to do this (e.g., “In advance, I had personally said that I did not want to take one.”). Also, apparently, other players were asked to take a shot, but declined (e.g., “Some players had said no. That is why there was confusion about the order. Both Player X, Y and Z [the participant identifies three players on his team]. Perhaps you should have talked to them too?”). Although this was expressed about other players that were not interviewed, these players’ total disengagement from the situation presents a clear example of avoidance coping. Moreover, 4 participants stated that they now, for the first time, were told what shot (number 1 to 5) they would take (e.g., “I heard that I was the x one to take a shot.”), which served as a stressor because they could not prepare in advance for this particular shot number. Another stressor related to teammates was the absence of them, in the sense that three players expressed how they were left to themselves (e.g., “He pointed at me and said ‘you take penalty number x’. It then felt as if I went out of the discussion a little bit, that I wasn’t part of it anymore, I already knew what to do.”). At this point, these

players also reported concentrating on their upcoming shot, so being left alone may have been a way to get time and space to focus on their own upcoming performance.

With respect to coping, in Phase I the players seemed to mostly engage in problem-focused coping. Almost all participants reported starting to think about their shot in this phase. Five of them thought about the shot process, which involved deliberately planning and/or concentrating on the shot (e.g., “I started to prepare, talking to myself and decide, clearly, what I would do. Above all, I thought about how to take it.”). In addition, several players experienced thoughts related to the shot outcome, of which most were positively toned, such as thoughts about the goal of scoring (e.g., “You just have a goal. And the goal is: the ball must go in.”). Three participants expressed how they, in this phase, were feeling fatigued from the game they had just played (e.g., “At that moment you are just totally exhausted. The 120 minutes are up and thus, you are completely fatigued.”). Related to this, 4 participants said that they engaged in some type of physiological recovery (i.e., massage and water), whereas 2 said that they were just substituted into the game and that they therefore needed no help (e.g., “I hadn’t played the whole game, so my legs were ok.”).

There was some emotion focused coping as well. One participant provided statements about searching for the good feeling (“How do I feel? Do I feel good? What should I do to feel good in the end?’ That is the first.”). Moreover, in contrast to physiological support, nothing was said about receiving psychological support from the coaching staff.

Although emotions were more frequent and elaborate in later phases, 5 participants expressed how they felt some type of anxiety (e.g., “The tension is very big

at that moment. So then, you sometimes feel small trembles through your body.”).

However, 4 participants stated that they were calm and/or relaxed (e.g., “I was not that nervous when we were with the coaches, minutes before it all started.”).

Phase II. The mid circle

Phase II stretches from when the participants step into the mid circle before the kicks and until they, individually, step out of the mid circle to take their shot. The responses from the players in this phase generated relatively speaking more statements and raw data themes than the other phases (see Table 2).

With respect to stressors, four participants talked about the experience of simply waiting and watching (“Watch. Watch. And hope. All you can do is hope, because you don’t have control over the situation.”). This was also expressed in relationship to anxiety, where some participants talked about anxiety as an integral part of the waiting. Several participants also expressed how important it was that they would score on their upcoming shot (e.g., “I knew that I had to score.” and “It was all on my shoulders.”). Thoughts about the outcomes of other players’ shots were also common (e.g., “Does he score, does he not score?”), while others reported outcome thoughts in relation to their own shot (e.g., “Player X misses, then you simply know that you have to score.”).

The two teams exhibited different communication patterns, clearly visible from the television images and this has been coded as a stressor for one team and a coping strategy for the other team. The players in the team that ended up winning the penalty shootout stood together throughout the entire event, holding around each other’s shoulders. In this team, 4 participants reported giving and/or receiving emotional support (e.g., “By psyching each other up. Shout things to each other. Maybe say some

supporting words to the one whose turn it is or when he comes back.”). Several participants rated this as positive because it enhanced the team feeling (e.g., “We show that we are a unit and a group.”). We have coded this as an emotion-focused coping strategy. With respect to the team that ended up losing the penalty shootout, the video images showed that the players in this team were spread around for most of the series. In this team, 2 participants explicitly indicated less verbal communication (e.g., “We hardly talked anything during the shootout. Nothing. I didn’t say anything and nobody said anything to me either.”). Based on the way that this was expressed by the players, we have coded the statements from players in this team as a stressor.

There were less problem focused coping statements in this phase compared to the other phases. Only 3 participants said that they concentrated on the shot process in this phase (e.g., “At that moment you only concentrate on your penalty, also not at what he [the opponent shooting before him] is doing. Whether he misses or scores, that doesn’t matter to me.”). Moreover, 1 participant explicitly said that he did not concentrate on the shot in the beginning of the series, but began to focus when there were about two to three shots left before him. On the other hand, more emotion focused coping strategies could be identified in this phase than in some of the other phases. In addition to the statements referred to above about social support, the participants referred to strategies such as positive affirmations (e.g., “We all stood next to each other and said, we will make it, we will win it.”) and trying to calm down (“I tried to calm down, but that made me even more nervous.”)

Many statements in this phase were made about emotions. In total, seven emotions were identified: anxiety, hope, disappointed, happy, confidence, energetic, and

fatigued. Anxiety was most common. In total, 6 participants said that they felt nervous or tense in this phase (e.g., “When we were in the mid circle I became incredibly nervous. I thought it showed on television that my legs were shaking, that is how nervous I was.”). Although some anxiety was expressed as a result of the players’ own upcoming shots, 4 participants also attributed anxiety to waiting and watching other shots, without being able to influence the outcome (e.g., “When one of them or one of us shoots, then the tension is, according to me, a lot higher than for that person who is going to take the penalty. Because it is not in your hands [to control].”). Moreover, 1 participant noted that anxiety was lower because the other team had missed a shot (“The tension is really high, but on the other side, I have to say that we were a goal up. I think that if you are behind, the stress would have been even higher.”). Interestingly, another participant described how anxiety was most intense early (“I was the most nervous here, between the first and the second shot. Yes. Most nervous. Absolutely. Absolutely. No doubt.”), but that it disappeared as soon as one of his teammates missed (“First, I felt bitter and angry, but then the nervousness went away. I became much calmer.”). Also common was hope (e.g., “Hoping, hoping that it goes well. You can only hope, because it’s not in your hands.”).

Confidence was expressed by 3 participants in this phase. This was not so much related to one’s own shot, but more to those of teammates (e.g., “That shot was of course a very important one, but it was a sure goal.”) or to the outcome of the whole series (e.g., “When we were standing there, I just felt that we would win.”). In addition, not surprisingly, happiness was expressed following successful shots by teammates and

unsuccessful shots by opponents (e.g., "That was a great feeling"), while disappointment followed misses by teammates (e.g., "That stinks. You are fed up.").

Phase III. The walk

Despite the short time it takes to walk from the mid circle to the ball, the participants described a variety of thoughts and emotions in elaborate and vivid detail (see Table 3).

The stressors that appeared from the statements elicited about this phase were related to the solitude of the walk (e.g., "You have to walk from the mid circle to the penalty spot and that is very long. You walk really all by yourself on that field."). For some, this was experienced together with many thoughts (e.g., "At that particular point, there are a lot of thoughts running through my head.").

With respect to coping, many of the participants expressed that they engaged in problem-focused coping, with many thoughts about the upcoming shot. Many of these thoughts were confident (e.g., "I was convinced that I would score.") and others were related to the process, such as where to shoot (e.g., "At the moment when I begin to walk, you think: 'I will shoot it in that corner'."). In addition, 3 participants said that they were not aware of anything but the ball, goalkeeper and the goal, thus experiencing that everything else disappeared (e.g., "In a way, I was walking through a tunnel. You don't see anything around you. You walk from the mid circle and only see the goal.").

The participants also referred to strategies that can be categorized as emotion-focused coping. Some of these strategies referred to behaviors, such as breathing (e.g., "The body regulates it itself and you feel that you're becoming more calm. Your breathing becomes calmer."), taking time ("Calm. Everything in my time."), and holding

or fondling the ball ("I was holding the ball. Is it not so that things get less stressful as you have something in your hands? I swirled it around a little bit. I think the ball was very important."). In addition, some participants reported positive affirmations (e.g., "I shoot that ball in! I tried to convince myself.") and others referred to social support (e.g., "At the moment that I started walking to the penalty spot, all the guys said 'come on'."). Some participants also referred to strategies that can be labeled avoidance coping (e.g., "You are thinking, 'don't make it more difficult than it is'").

Several emotions were experienced in this phase. Five participants said that they were calm (e.g., "I felt very relaxed, so fun this is."), whereas 4 participants said they were anxious (e.g., "Of course it is tense."). Also, 3 participants noted a progressive decrease in anxiety from the first two phases to this third phase (e.g., "When it [the series] started I was indeed stressed. I had some of those small shivers then. When I walked to the ball, it was over.>").

Phase IV. At the penalty mark

The participants' experiences at the penalty mark were also categorized into raw data themes, higher order themes and general dimensions (see Table 4).

Surprisingly few stressors were listed. Among the ones that were mentioned were that you do not want to fail (e.g., "You don't want to fail, so you have a special feeling in your body.") and the thought of David Beckham's miss ("At the penalty mark, I was just thinking 'Beckham'"). It should be noted that David Beckham missed his shot in a penalty shootout two days prior to this game, in the same tournament. However, it could also be that the participant's thought about Beckham not necessarily was a stressor so much as it was a reminder to examine the grass at the penalty spot, which seemed very

loose when Beckham made his shot. Hence, this statement could also be coded as problem-focused coping.

The majority of the statements that could be classified as coping were of problem-focused nature. A popular strategy was a pre-shot routine (e.g., “This is like a ritual for me. I put the ball down, go back, watch, stand, all in a certain way. Then, I take my time; focus on what I’m going to do. These things give a confident feeling.”). Interestingly, several of the participants indicated that they were fully absorbed in the kick when they were at the penalty mark (e.g., “So focused. The last part, when everything gets quiet, I did not even consider that the goalkeeper was standing in the goal. I was completely gone. Completely gone.”). More specifically, the participants referred to many detailed thoughts about their upcoming shots – divided between the goalkeeper, the corner in which they planned to shoot and the outcome of the shot. Not everything went according to plan. One participant, who originally had decided on one corner, changed this as he shot (“There was a camera high up in one of the corners so I thought: ‘I will shoot it there!’ Then I ran to the ball and shot it in the other corner. I can honestly not explain why I did that.”).

There were only a few statements that indicated emotion-focused coping. Two of them expressed that they needed to have the right feeling before they could take their shot (e.g., “I would only take it when I was ready to. (...) You have to take the time to do that. (...) It was very important for me to have that feeling.”)

Some avoidance coping also seemed to take place. One participant reacted (by looking away) when observing the goalkeeper’s actions (took time stepping into the goal, threw the drinking bottle away and then verbally addressed the shooter’s placement of the

ball) (“Usually I don’t turn when walking back from the ball. But it felt good to have a second where I did not have to look at him.”). Another participant pretended that his shot was a regular practice shot (e.g., “Nobody can see what I am thinking now so I will pretend that this is practice. The chance will be bigger that I score than if I think about how important the shot is and what is at stake.”).

There were somewhat fewer statements about emotions in this phase than in the previous three phases. Four participants expressed being calm at the penalty mark (e.g., “I was calm, very calm, just shoot it in, very relaxed.”), whereas 2 experienced anxiety (e.g., “When you are walking towards the ball things are going fine, but at that moment when you put the ball down, you get a special feeling in your body.” and “Maximum physical tension.”). Two other participants, who both described extensive use of both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, indicated that their anxiety progressively decreased towards the penalty mark (e.g., “At a certain moment, I put the ball down and everything was just gone. Before that moment, I was really very nervous and tense.”). One of the participants reported feeling very confident (e.g., “I was confident that I would shoot it in. If I were to miss, I would not even know how to react.”).

Comparison across phases

When we compare the participants’ answers across phases, some patterns can be seen. There seemed to be more stressors in the first two phases than in the last two phases. In particular, the participants did not express many stressors in Phase III – the walk. With respect to coping strategies, the participants reported engaging in problem focused coping in Phase I – after extra time, but very little in Phase II – the mid circle.

Then, there was increasingly more problem focused coping in Phase III – the walk and even more in Phase IV – at the penalty mark. The most emotion focused coping was found in Phase II – the mid circle and Phase III – the walk and the least in Phase IV – the penalty mark. Finally, the participants seemed to report the most emotions in Phase II – the mid circle and the least in Phase IV – the penalty mark.

Discussion

Interviews were conducted with 8 professional soccer players about their participation in a penalty shootout during a major soccer tournament. It was believed that qualitative interviews of these players would add to our knowledge about the ways in which elite athletes experience stressors, coping, and emotions during a high-pressure competitive event – the major tournament soccer penalty shootout. This could also supplement existing video based knowledge about performing under the severe pressure that this event can trigger (e.g., Jordet, 2009a; 2009b; Jordet & Hartman, 2008; Jordet et al., 2009).

Above all, the results support Lazarus' (1999) transactional theory about stress by demonstrating that stress in the soccer penalty shootout appears as a dynamic process. Even within the relatively short time frame of this particular event, the experience of stressors, coping, and emotions seems to change considerably from phase to phase. For example, many of the stressors in each phase were very specific to that phase, with the least number of stressors in Phase III – the walk and the most in the two initial phases – the break after extra time and the mid circle. Further, the participants engaged in far more problem-focused coping at the penalty mark than in the mid circle, and experiencing much less anxiety at the penalty mark than in the mid circle. This observation of stress as

a dynamic process is consistent with recent evidence on the stress process of elite adolescent golf players, which showed how stressors and coping changed throughout six holes of golf (Nicholls & Polman, 2008).

With respect to stressors, our results replicate many of the findings from other studies. Just like the studies of the stress process in elite golf players (Nicholls, 2005; 2007; Nicholls & Polman, 2008; Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & James, 2005), our results show that stressors related to the outcome (including the score and the prospect of failing) constitute major environmental sources of stress. Furthermore, opponents was identified as a major stressor in a couple of phases (most notably at the penalty mark – the goalkeeper), although not as much as in some of the previous studies (e.g., Nicholls et al., 2009). This slight inconsistency with previous research may be because the entire penalty shootout event is less interactive than full game events. In addition, several stressors were reported that seem specific to each of the phases in the penalty shootout. In the first phase, the break after extra time, the participants referred to stressors such as the general dissatisfaction with the penalty shootout itself, the coaches' instructions, and the teammates. In the mid circle, they talked about the passive waiting and observing, without any chance to influence the outcome, as a major stressor. For one team, this phase seemed to be even more stressful because they did not engage in any type of communication. Thereafter, during the walk to the penalty mark, the solitude of walking and the many thoughts that could pop up were the only stressors that could be identified. And finally, at the penalty mark, there were fewer stressors, but the encounter with the goalkeeper stood out as specific for this phase. Thus, these results show that although several major sources of stress are similar to those experienced by athletes in comparable

populations (professional rugby players) and athletes performing similar tasks (golf), there are also important stressors that are specific to each narrow phase within this specific event. This suggests that researchers interested in the stress process in sport should not only address separate sports, but also make sure they capture the nuances and details of stressors encountered within specific events in that sport. Similarly, practitioners working to assist athletes to cope with specific stressful events may want to familiarize themselves with the specific plethora of stressors that may be encountered in each event, and not simply prepare for general stressors that have been identified in generic studies of stressors in sport.

Several interesting results emerged related to coping. Similarly to what has been found in other studies on elite athletes (e.g., Nicholls & Polman, 2008), these soccer players reported using a wide variety of coping strategies and the types of coping strategies changed as the event unfolded. In general, the distinction between problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-based coping strategies was meaningful and allowed the researchers to code all of the responses given about coping. However, as opposed to in Nicholls and colleagues' studies of rugby and golf players (e.g., Nicholls, 2007; Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005; Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & James, 2005; Nicholls et al., 2009), the avoidance strategy blocking was less frequently reported by the participants in our study. This relative lack of explicit references to avoidance coping is also interesting in the light that avoidance based strategies have been identified in observation studies on performers in penalty shootouts as a common response to particularly high pressure (Jordet & Hartman, 2008; Jordet, 2009a; 2009b) and as a negative correlate to performance at the penalty mark (Jordet et al., 2009). Having said

this, there was still evidence of avoidance coping in this study. Particularly interesting were the remarks made about the break after extra time where several players were observed by the participants to have answered ‘no’ when the coaches asked them if they could take a shot. Several of our participants also clearly expressed that they did not want a penalty shootout, and that they also did not want to take a shot, yet they ended up with both a penalty shootout and having to take a shot. Concerning the avoidance behaviors that have been studied in the observation studies by Jordet and colleagues, one of the players in our study reported deliberately looking away from the goalkeeper in an attempt to reduce his level of distress (corresponding to avoidance gaze). In addition, one remark was made about preparation time, by a player who referred to taking time as a helpful way to cope with the pressure. However, no remarks were made about quick preparation. On this note, it could be that lowering one’s preparation time is a strategy that is engaged in at a subconscious level, and that this is the reason that none of the players referred to it. If indeed this is the case, then quick preparation could also not be classified as coping, in so far as coping only can be used to describe strategies that are consciously engaged in (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

This study did not seek to directly measure coping effectiveness, but with respect to the goodness-of-fit model (Folkman, 1992), where effective coping denotes a fit between the appraisal of a stressor and the type of coping employed, we could identify a general pattern that would be consistent with this. Specifically, many participants reported anxiety in the mid circle and that this was a function of experiencing little control over the outcome, making the players having to resort to “waiting and watching” behavior. This corresponds well with the other result that the players engaged relatively

much in emotion-focused coping while in the mid circle. On the other hand, the players did more problem-focused coping in phase III and IV, and particularly in Phase IV – at the penalty mark. At these latter points in time, they had more control over the situation, as this is when they needed to start executing their shots.

Given the ethical obligation to not reveal the identities our participants, we cannot further report on the experiences by players who either scored or missed, but we can say something about how the participants experienced the strategies that they used, although some might have led to a goal, others to a miss. For example, there were problem-focused strategies that were praised by the participants as effective throughout the penalty shootout, such as having a favorite corner to place the ball, a pre-shot routine, and planning for and concentrating on details of the kick. And there were emotion-focused strategies that were presented as effective, such as communication and social support in the mid circle, finding the right feeling and rhythm, and holding the ball. In addition, the avoidance strategies of pretending to be at practice and looking away from the goalkeeper were also experienced by the players who used them as effective. This may be consistent with other studies that have shown that avoidance-based strategies potentially are effective when used in the short-term (e.g., Nicholls, 2007), but that they may be maladaptive when used extensively over time (Kim & Duda, 2003).

Finally, about coping, it is interesting and regretful that although the participants reported that physiological support was given by the coaching staff in the period right after extra time, no mentionable psychological support was offered. Given the importance of this event for the outcome of major tournaments in soccer, the results of this and other

studies that shed light on the psychology of the penalty shootout should be communicated to coaches in order to help them deal with this situation.

Consistent with what we expected, the participants described experiencing a wide array of emotions during these kicks, with anxiety referred to the most. This is consistent with elite golfers, who report anxiety to be the most frequently experienced emotion in relation to competitive events (Nicholls, Hemings, & Clough, 2010). More unexpectedly, Phase II, the mid circle, hosted more descriptions of anxiety and less descriptions of calmness than any of the other phases. Thus, although a few participants expressed many thoughts and some unease associated with walking from the mid circle (Phase III), the results do not support or even suggest that this is the most stressful phase (which one might have had the impression that it would be from accounts given by players in media and in autobiographies, e.g., the quote by Stuart Pearce introducing this paper). A couple of explanations can be forwarded for this observation. First, although the performance itself is the actual kick, the players may perceive the walk (Phase III) and the initial time at the penalty mark (Phase IV) as constituting the first steps of the actual performance. That is, the performance starts as the players step out of the mid circle. This is consistent with predictions from multidimensional anxiety theory (Martens, Burton, Vealey, Bump, & Smith, 1990), suggesting that anxiety is highest immediately prior to the onset of competition (here equivalent to the mid circle) and then dissipates once the competition has begun (equivalent to the walk and at the penalty mark). Second, as discussed above, some participants indicated that passively waiting and observing in the mid circle was difficult because they did not have any power to affect the outcome of the kicks they observed. This is indicative of low perceived control, which has been shown to be

associated with more debilitating anxiety (e.g., Hanton, O'Brien, & Mellalieu, 2003; Jordet, Elferink-Gemser et al., 2006). In addition, "hope" was most frequently reported in the mid circle. This emotion can sometimes reflect yearning and believing in a good outcome through factors that can be uncontrollable, which almost always have some relation to anxiety (Lazarus, 2000a, 2000b). Interestingly, this is consistent with results from medical archive studies, demonstrating how merely observing games that are decided from the penalty mark produces sufficient levels of stress to trigger serious cardiovascular strain (e.g., Carroll, Ebrahim, Tilling, Macleod, & Smith, 2002).

The frequent expressions of anxiety in the mid circle may provide an alternative explanation for the general archival data finding that players who shoot late in a penalty shootout event score fewer goals than players who shoot earlier (Jordet, Hartman et al., 2007; McGarry & Franks, 2000). Rather than the original explanation, that later shots are progressively perceived as more important to the final outcome of the event, thus increasing anxiety, it could be that more time spent in the mid circle, with cumulative exposure to high levels of stress, in itself increases pre-shot anxiety levels, and that this negatively affects shot performance. In general, given these emotions and the long time spent in the mid circle, it can be argued that coping and emotions in the mid circle provide a key to the upcoming performance from the penalty mark. Specifically, research should be conducted to more precisely estimate the manner in which anxiety fluctuates before, in and after the mid circle and practitioners should equip players with coping strategies for use in the mid circle.

Knowledge about stress and coping that is tailored to specific contexts and problems has the potential to be directly useful to the context in which it was derived

from (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000). Thus, based on the information provided in this study, some implications can be suggested to players and coaches preparing for soccer penalty shootouts. First, the current descriptions of experiences from these events may be used to educate players and coaches about typical stressors that tend to be experienced during penalty shootouts. Awareness of typical experiences can demystify the event, which in itself may serve to decrease anxiety, and it can be used as a basis for realistic practice regimens. Second, based on the finding that no psychological support was offered to the players immediately after extra time (Phase I), we suggest that attention should be given to how the coaches can influence players positively and negatively in this phase. Specifically, based on some of the recommendations that emerged from the participants themselves, coaches should avoid confusion by selecting a line-up of players in advance of the game, with all players in prioritized order 1 – 11; and assist players to develop appropriate and personalized coping strategies. Third, given that the mid circle seems to be perceived to trigger particularly high levels of emotional distress, players should particularly be encouraged to use coping strategies at this point.

One major limitation of the study should be noted. The retrospective interviews took place up to a full year after the event, which may seriously compromise the reliability of the results. There is evidence that people can reliably remember emotions for a considerable time after an event (Tenenbaum, Lloyd, Petty, & Hanin, 2002), but the evidence is less convincing for the memory of coping (e.g., Ptacek, Smith, Espe, & Raffety, 1994). Thus, although this particular incident probably represented a milestone in these players' careers (as few of them before had reached this far in a major tournament, and even fewer had ever taken a kick in such an important penalty shootout),

which could make the experience easier to remember, the coping data in particular needs to be interpreted with some caution.

In conclusion, this interview study provided detailed descriptions of the experience of stressors, coping, and emotions related to participating in a series of kicks from the penalty mark at the highest level of international soccer. Practitioners can use the results to help elite athletes simulate similar stressful competitive events and cope with the stressors that naturally occur during these events. Moreover, the first hand descriptions of how players experience taking part in this event provide an important basis for future research, both explanatory, experimental and applied, on the psychology of the soccer penalty shootout. For examples, researchers should design experiments that aim to validate the findings in this study that the anxiety tends to reach a peak in the mid circle, and then progressively decrease as the shooter starts walking towards the penalty mark. It would also be useful to see intervention studies, where the effect of providing knowledge from the current study about stressors and coping strategies to coaches and players is examined.

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Table 1

The break after extra time (Phase I)

General dimensions	Higher order themes	Raw data themes	
Stressors	The penalty shootout	Knew I could take one ($n = 6$)	
		That the game went to penalties ($n = 3$)	
		Aware of the team's bad history ($n = 3$)	
		Did not want to take a shot ($n = 2$)	
		Others did not want to take a shot ($n = 2$)	
		Preferred another shot number ($n = 1$)	
		Convinced this is a lottery ($n = 1$)	
	Coaches	Was told the order ($n = 4$)	
	The regular game	Was asked to take one ($n = 2$)	
	Alone	Importance	Tired from 120 minutes of play ($n = 3$)
Aware of previous game events ($n = 2$)			
Coping	Problem-focused coping	Left to oneself, alone ($n = 3$)	
		Aware of the big opportunity ($n = 2$)	
		Aware of spectators' reactions ($n = 1$)	
		Planned/concentrated on shot ($n = 5$)	
		Physiological recovery ($n = 4$)	
		Knew where/how to shoot ($n = 3$)	
		Wanted to take one ($n = 2$)	
	Emotion-focused coping	Avoidance coping	Legs were fresh, no need for physiological support ($n = 2$)
			Goal of scoring ($n = 2$)
			Took responsibility ($n = 1$)
Emotions	Anxiety	Self-talk ($n = 1$)	
		We can do this ($n = 3$)	
	Relaxed	Hope/pray ($n = 2$)	
		Receiving emotional support ($n = 1$)	
	Fatigued	Accepted the pressure ($n = 1$)	
		Searching for the good feeling ($n = 1$)	
Dissatisfied	-		
Charged	Confidence	Anxiety ($n = 5$)	
		Relaxed ($n = 4$)	
		Fatigued ($n = 3$)	
		Dissatisfied that the game went to penalties ($n = 3$)	
Confidence	Confidence	Charged ($n = 1$)	
		Confidence ($n = 1$)	

Note. The n indicates the number of participants with statements categorized into the raw data theme.

Table 2

The mid circle (Phase II)

General dimensions	Higher order themes	Raw data themes
Stressors	Waiting	Just looking at shots and waiting ($n = 4$) It is hard to wait ($n = 1$)
	One's shot	Had to score, it was all up to me ($n = 3$) I am up next ($n = 2$) Shot number 5 is most difficult ($n = 1$) Knew late that I would shoot ($n = 1$)
	Little communication	Little talking ($n = 2$) Not good that we were spread ($n = 1$)
	Opponents	Not good that other team starts ($n = 2$)
	Outcome	Know you are near a semi-final ($n = 1$) Knew the exact order and score ($n = 1$)
Coping	Problem-focused coping	Concentrated about my shot ($n = 3$) Looked at where keeper went ($n = 3$) Take penalty as I always do ($n = 1$)
	Emotion-focused coping	Gave/received support ($n = 4$) Radiating team unity together ($n = 4$) Convinced that I will score ($n = 2$) Stood with players I knew well ($n = 1$) Try to calm down ($n = 1$) Cheering ($n = 1$)
	Avoidance coping	Other team was more tired ($n = 1$) Shut out what player before does ($n = 1$) Could not stand together ($n = 1$) Did not want to look at goalie ($n = 1$)
Emotions	Anxiety	Anxiety $n = 6$) Anxiety was high because of waiting/watching ($n = 4$) Anxiety down when team missed ($n = 2$) Less anxiety as time passed ($n = 1$)
	Hope	Hopeful ($n = 5$)
	Disappointed	Disappointed ($n = 4$)
	Happy	Happy because opponent misses ($n = 3$) Happy because your team scores ($n = 2$)
	Confidence	Confident about teammate ($n = 3$) We will win ($n = 2$)
	Energetic	Energetic ($n = 2$)
	Fatigued	Fatigued ($n = 1$)

Note. The n indicates the number of participants with statements categorized as the given raw data theme.

Table 3

The walk (Phase III)

General dimensions	Higher order themes	Raw data themes
Stressors	Solitude	Long and lonesome walk ($n = 3$) Many thoughts ($n = 1$)
Coping	Problem-focused coping	I will shoot it in ($n = 4$) Decided where to shoot ($n = 3$) Concentrated ($n = 3$) Did not see spectators ($n = 3$) The ball must go in ($n = 2$) Body language to trick goalie ($n = 1$) Aimed for camera behind goal ($n = 1$) Did not see any cameras behind the goal ($n = 1$)
	Emotion-focused coping	Positive affirmations ($n = 2$) Breathe ($n = 2$) Try to show calmness ($n = 1$) Take my time ($n = 1$) Kick in ground ($n = 1$) Hold/fondle the ball ($n = 1$) Receive social support ($n = 1$) Appreciating the opportunity ($n = 1$)
	Avoidance coping	Try not to think "what if I miss" ($n = 1$) Try not to make it too difficult ($n = 1$)
Emotions	Calm	Calm ($n = 5$)
	Anxiety	Nervous ($n = 4$) Decrease in anxiety ($n = 3$)
	Fatigued	Fatigued ($n = 3$)
	Energetic	Energetic ($n = 2$)
	Happy/satisfied	Happy with my shot number ($n = 2$) Easier to walk because the team is in the lead ($n = 1$)

Note. The n indicates the number of participants with statements categorized as the given raw data theme.

Table 4

At the penalty mark (Phase IV)

General dimensions	Higher order themes	Raw data themes
Stressors	Failing	Did not want to fail ($n = 2$)
	Shot decision	Changed corner ($n = 1$)
	Others' misses	Thought about Beckham's miss ($n = 1$)
	The goalkeeper	Seeing his gamesmanship ($n = 1$) He did not move ($n = 1$) Playing a game with him ($n = 1$)
Coping	Problem-focused coping	Shoot in favorite corner ($n = 4$)
		Task routine ($n = 4$)
		Only aware of shot ($n = 4$)
		See keeper move before kick ($n = 4$)
		Let body take over ($n = 3$)
		I will shoot it in/score ($n = 3$)
		Knew what corner ($n = 2$)
		Knew where keeper went before ($n = 1$)
		Not aware of goalkeeper ($n = 1$)
		Decided corner at penalty mark ($n = 1$)
		Hard and low in corner ($n = 1$)
		Try to put it in corner ($n = 1$)
Emotion-focused coping	Emotion-focused coping	Knew ball went in, before hit ($n = 1$)
		Knew ball went in, during hit ($n = 1$)
		Not aware of possibility to miss ($n = 1$)
Avoidance coping	Avoidance coping	Find the rhythm ($n = 1$)
		Imagery of shot ($n = 1$)
		Finding the right feeling ($n = 2$)
Emotions	Calm Self-confident Anxiety Excited	Laughs at what the goalkeeper is doing ($n = 1$)
		Felt good to turn the back towards the goalkeeper ($n = 1$)
		Tried to not think about missing ($n = 1$)
		Pretended it is practice ($n = 1$)
		Calm ($n = 4$)
		Confident ($n = 1$)
		Nervous ($n = 2$)
		Increase in anxiety ($n = 2$)
		Decrease in anxiety ($n = 2$)
		Got a kick ($n = 1$)

Note. The n indicates the number of participants with statements categorized as the given raw data theme.