To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jennifer Pledger entitled "High Trait-Anxiety Athletes' Perception of Competitive Stress in Sport: A Phenomenological Study." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Human Performance Sport Studies.

Craig A. Wrisberg, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

High Trait-Anxious Athletes' Perceptions of Competitive Stress in Sport: A Phenomenological Study

A Thesis

Presented for the Master of Science Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jennifer Pledger

August 1999

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people that I would like to thank for their support and encouragement. First I would like to thank my committee members for all the time they put in to help make my thesis better. I would also like to thank Dr. Wrisberg for the second chance he gave me. Next I would like to thank all of the doctorate students in the sport psychology research group because without them I would have been clueless most of the time. Thank you Steven for everything. Many thanks to my parents because without their love and constant support I would not be here today. Thanks again to everyone for making this possible.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of competitive stress of six Division I Southeastern Conference collegiate female athletes identified as high trait-anxious. To obtain an accurate description of these experiences a qualitative phenomenological interview approach was used. One interview was conducted with each athlete and lasted between 20-30 minutes. Qualitative analysis of the transcribed responses revealed five major themes. These themes were (1) Sport Specific Types of Stress (2) Sources of Stress (3) Symptoms of Stress (4) Experience with Stress, and (5) Coping Strategies. These athletes experienced two types of sport-specific stress during their athletic event: continuous and situational. Participants also described their sources of stress. Sub-themes for sources of stress were external stress and internal stress. The internal stress stemmed from a fear of failure, a feeling of a lack of control, and an overwhelming feeling. Once these athletes were aware of their source(s) of stress they began to describe the symptoms of stress. Sub-themes in this category included cognitive anxiety and somatic anxiety. After the athletes described the symptoms they then described their experience of the stress. Sub-themes include positive experiences and negative experiences. The coping strategies these athletes used to deal with stress include mental rehearsal and relaxation techniques. Taken together, the results, suggest a range of responses of these high trait-anxious athletes to competitive stress. Implications of these results for sport practitioners and sport psychology researchers were discussed.

Table of Contents

Chapter		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
	Purpose of the study	2
	Significance of the study	3
	Limitations of the study	3
II.	REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	4
	The Anxiety-Performance Relationship	8
	Qualitative Research Methodologies	11
	Phenomenological Interview	13
III.	METHODOLOGY	16
	Pilot Testing	16
	Bias Exploration & Bracketing	16
	Participants	18
	Instrument of Choice	18
	Procedure	19
	Interview Method	20
	Data Analysis	20
	Issues of Validity	21
IV.	RESULTS	22
	Thematic Structure	22
	Theme I. Sport Specific Types of Stress	24
	Theme II. Source(s) of Stress	26
	Theme III. Symptoms of Stress	30
	Theme IV. Experience with Stress	32
	Theme V. Coping Strategies	35
V.	DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, & RECOMMENDATIOS	37
	Discussion	37
	Conclusion	43
	Recommendations	43
	REFERENCES	45
	APPENDIXES	49
	Appendix A. Coach Information Sheet	49
	Appendix B. Informed Consent Form	50
	Appendix C. The SCAT	51
	VITA	52

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

> You get yourself ready and into the starting block as the starter shouts, "take your mark." The finals of the Olympic trials for the 100-yard dash are about to begin. As you set yourself you feel that your heart is pounding hard, your muscles feel a little tight, and your mouth feels a little dry. In a few short seconds you will know if the four years of hard work, dedication, and practice was all worthwhile. This is your big moment and you are physiologically and psychologically ready but you feel a little anxious and scared. Will this anxiety you feel help or hinder your performance? (Weinberg, 1989, p.95)

The solution to this seemingly simple question has stimulated and perplexed sport psychology researchers (Weinberg, 1989). Anecdotally and intuitively it seems that these "pressure" situations bring out the best in sport performers while sometimes it causes them to "choke" (perform poorly under pressure) (Weinberg, 1989). Many athletes at some point in their career have suffered from inappropriate levels of anxiety. The following observation illustrates this phenomenon:

> An U.S. Olympic weight lifter in international competition surprisingly deviates from his customary preparatory routine before a lift and totally forgets to chalk his hands. As might be expected, the lift is missed. A gymnast preparing for a high flyaway dismount from the still rings suddenly focuses on self-doubts concerning his ability to perform the stunt without the presence of a spotter. These doubts, coupled by a long routine, cause him to freeze and release the rings prematurely (Landers and Boutcher, 1993, p.170).

Sport competition can generate much anxiety and worry, which in turn can affect physiological and mental processes so dramatically that performance often deteriorates (Landers & Boutcher, 1993).

Researchers in the field of sport psychology have examined numerous factors that might prevent athletes from achieving their best performance. One of these factors is competitive stress. If the athlete is experiencing competitive stress, it is likely that he or she is not performing at his or her best. Most athletes who play competitive sports have, at one point in their career, experienced competitive stress of moderate to excessive levels. The theory of competitive stress is based on how the individual perceives a threatening situation. The degree of perceived threat in a competitive setting is predicted to be a function of the uncertainty of the outcome.

While sport psychology researchers know that competitive stress is a natural part of sports and that high trait- anxious athletes are more susceptible to competitive stress than low trait- anxious athletes (Landers & Boutcher, 1993), they know considerably less about the experiences of competitive stress for high trait- anxious athletes.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of competitive stress of female collegiate athletes identified as high trait-anxious. To obtain an accurate description of these experiences a qualitative phenomenological approach was used.

The phenomenological interview enables investigators to gain a rigorous and significant description of the world of everyday human experience as it is lived and described by significant individuals in specific circumstances (Pollio et al., 1997).

Significance of the study

Allowing athletes the opportunity to describe their experiences of competitive stress by way of phenomenological interviewing should provide important information to coaches, athletes, and sport psychology consultants. This information can add to the current knowledge base and assist practitioners in recognizing the signs and symptoms of competitive stress and in assisting athletes who experience it.

Limitations of the study

There are several potential limitations to this study. First, only female athletes were interviewed. Originally I had hoped to include male as well as female athletes in the study. However, I was unable to obtain any male participants. Second, several athletes had not experienced competitive stress recently and had to rely on their memory of stress from as far back as several years. Third, the identification of themes emerging from participants' was limited to my own perceptions along with those of members of the research group that assisted me.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

For some time sport psychology researchers have studied the relationship between anxiety and performance (Landers & Boutcher, 1993). In the initial section of this chapter, several perspectives on the anxiety-sport performance relationship are discussed. In subsequent sections, the qualitative approach to research in sport psychology is briefly explained with an emphasis on the different styles of interviewing that are utilized in qualitative research.

Stress is a complex psychological process that consists of three major elements: the stressor, the individual's perception or appraisal of danger (threat), and the resulting emotional reactions (Hackfort & Spielberger, 1989). The stress process is generally initiated by situations or circumstances (stressors) that are perceived or interpreted (appraisals) as dangerous, potentially harmful or frustrating. If a stressor is perceived as threatening or dangerous, irrespective of the presence of an objective danger, an emotional reaction (anxiety) is evoked (Hackfort & Spielberger, 1989).

Competitive stress has received a considerable amount of research attention in the sport psychology literature (See Jones & Hanton, 1996; James & Collins, 1997). There have also been a considerable number of qualitative studies that explored the causes of competitive anxiety and stress (see Feltz, Lirgg, & Albrecht, 1992; Gould, Horn, & Spreemann, 1983). Competitive stress is postulated to be a process that occurs when competitive situations are perceived as threatening to an individual performer's self-

esteem (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1988). Stress is triggered when an imbalance is perceived between competitive demands and personal resources to meet those demands, particularly in situations where negative consequences are anticipated (Martens, 1977). Two components of competitive stress proposed by Martens, Burton, Vealey, Bump, & Smith (1990) are somatic anxiety and cognitive anxiety. Somatic anxiety consists of one's perception of physical manifestations of arousal such as racing heart, sweaty palms, and a queasy feeling in the stomach (Krane et al., 1994; Kroll, 1979). Martens et al (1990) predict that the relationship between somatic anxiety and performance is curvilinear; that is, increases in somatic anxiety are accompanied by increases in performance up to a point, but beyond that point performance is diminished. Cognitive anxiety consists of an individual's worries and concerns about performance and manifested as an inability to concentrate. Kroll (1979) found that cognitive anxiety was due in part to fear of failure (e.g., making a foolish mistake, mind going blank, and making crucial mistakes). Martens et al (1990) predict that a negative inner relationship exists between cognitive anxiety and performance (e.g., increases in cognitive anxiety are associated with decrease in performance).

While there have been a number of attempts to quantify the stress response of athletes' (see Gould & Krane, 1992 for a review), perceptions of competitive stress have not been examined to any great extent. An exception is a study by Kroll (1979) in which athletes were asked to describe the feelings they had in competitive situations. Kroll asked a large number of athletes to imagine themselves in a pre-competitive situation and then to write an essay describing what they were experiencing. Analysis of these data revealed five major themes: somatic complaints, fear of failure, feelings of inadequacy,

loss of control, and guilt. Table I includes a list of the factors that Kroll found to be associated with each of the five themes. Kroll concluded his article by suggesting that it would be helpful if sport psychology researchers knew more about the causes of competitive stress rather than to simply demonstrate the existence of such stress.

There have been several anecdotal accounts of athlete anxiety in the sport psychology literature. Martens (1977) speaks of a wrestler who became incredibly uptight prior to every bout regardless of how easy or difficult his opponent was. This wrestler said that he was not enjoying wrestling because of the enormous competitive stress he felt and indicated his desire to quit the sport about midway through the season.

In an attempt to more systematically quantify competitive stress, Martens (1977) developed the Sport Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT). This test is designed to measure competitive situations as threatening and to describe the anxiety responses of individuals to specific competitive situations (i.e., state anxiety). Numerous researchers have used the SCAT to measure competitive trait-anxiety and to identify high and low trait-anxious participants. Poteet and Weinberg (1980) conducted one study in which they administered the SCAT to 90 participants in order to identify 10 high-anxious, 10 moderately-anxious, and 10 low-anxious individuals for further study. The results indicated that the high- anxious group responded with significantly higher state-anxiety than did the lower- anxious group to the flexed-arm-hang task. In another study, Gerson and DeShaies (1978) used the SCAT to determine high-trait and low-trait anxious athletes and then administered the SCAT again to players 30 minutes prior to a tournament softball game. The results indicated that the SCAT was not a predictor of competitive state anxiety. Passer (1983) also used the SCAT to select participants for a

study examining competitive stress. The results revealed that high trait-anxious participants (upper quartile SCAT scores) experienced sources of competitive stress to a greater extent than the low trait-anxious (lower quartile) participants.

In developing the SCAT, Martens (1977) suggested that to fully understand anxiety in sport it is necessary to understand the competitive process. The competitive process consists of four components that are related to shifts in competitive anxiety. The four components are objective competitive situations, subjective competitive situations, response, and consequences. The objective competitive situation specifies the objective or environmental demands of the sport. In the competitive process, the environmental demand is objective the person must achieve to obtain a favorable outcome in comparison to a standard (Martens, 1977). Martens suggested that the objective competitive situation may or may not contain sources of threat (perceived danger) for a person. Two prevalent sources of anxiety in competitive sports are fear of physical harm and fear of failure. Kroll (1979) found that fear of failure was a causative factor of competitive stress for athletes. Fear of failure consists of components such as letting the team down, not performing up to one's level of ability, losing, and not living up to coach's expectations. Within competitive sports, some of the specific elements of the objective competitive situation that may affect anxiety include the nature of the competitive task, the relative capability of the person and the opponent(s), the available rewards, and the presence of significant others (Martens, 1977).

According to Martens (1977) the subjective competitive situation is determined by a person's acceptance, perception, and appraisal of the objective competitive situation. The subjective competitive situation is mediated by such factors as personality

disposition, attitude and abilities, as well as other interpersonal factors. One factor that has been hypothesized to affect the subjective competitive situation is competitive A-trait. Competitive A-trait is an indicator of a person's tendency to perceive objective competitive situations as threatening or non-threatening (Martens, 1977).

The third phase of the competitive process is the response phase. According to Martens there are three types of responses. Physiological (such as increased palmar sweating), behavioral (such as performing well at a task), and psychological (such as increased anxiety as measured by a psychological scale). Kroll (1979) found five major categories of physiological responses associated with athletes' experience of competition. These included somatic complaints; sweaty hands, upset stomach, trembling, and awareness of heartbeat.

The last phase of the competitive process is the consequences. Martens (1977) suggests that, in competition, consequences are frequently viewed in terms of success and failure, with success being perceived as positive and failure being perceived as negative. Understanding the history of competitive consequences from the participants' perspective allows others to determine whether participants in the future will avoid such consequences or approach them.

The Anxiety-Performance Relationship

People in sport get anxious, some people more so than others. The following comment illustrates this phenomenon: "So now, here we go again. It has been a wonderful time off, and I should be so carefree, but I'm scared when I play tennis, I fear failure at every corner, and until I rid myself of that attitude, I know I will never attain

my goals, winning an Wimbledon, or U.S Open" (Shriver, 1985, p. 48). This quotation from Pam Shriver, a woman who has been ranked among her peers and the tennis federation as one of the top ten tennis players during the 1980's, illustrates the relationship between anxiety and sport performance. Shriver's admission suggests that anxiety is experienced by even the most skilled athletic performers, and that it is in all likelihood an almost universal athletic experience (Hackfort & Spielberger, 1989). With respect to the concept of anxiety, the major concern of coaches and sport participants is its affect on performance (Hackfort & Spielberger, 1989). Martens (1977), was among the first sport psychologists to point out that the influence of anxiety-related cognitive processes on performance in sport competition is both complex and individualized. Martens posed questions like, "What causes some athletes to become uptight? Why do some athletes 'rise to the occasion' in intense competition while others 'buckle under the pressure'"? In the motor behavior literature two hypotheses have been advanced to explain the relationship between arousal and performance (Landers & Boutcher, 1993, p.174). The two hypotheses are the drive theory and the inverted U-hypothesis. Drive theory explains drive as the intensity of the behavior. Intensity towards a specific skill or situation causes a surge of epinephrine that enhances strength in an uncontrolled manner, but this may actually be detrimental to actual sport performance. The inverted U-hypothesis predicts that as arousal increases from drowsiness to alertness, there is a progressive increase in performance efficiency. However, once arousal continues to increase beyond alertness to a state of high excitement, there is a progressive decrease in task performance (Landers & Boutcher, 1993, p.176). For this study high trait-anxious athletes were chosen so that coaches and sport psychology consultants can see how high

levels of competitive stress and high levels of arousal affect performance from the experiences of high trait-anxious female athletes in sport. Landers and Boutcher (1993) show that high levels of arousal beyond the level of alertness can decrease performance. High trait-anxious athletes were chosen because their level of alertness has gone past to the point of high competitive stress.

Of particular concern, is the athlete whose performance is impaired by anxiety. As this athlete performs, the body enters into a state of agitation. This agitation alters the arousal condition of the body (Gerson & DeShaies, 1978). Sometimes this shift in arousal is accompanied by increases in anxiety. Anxiety is an emotional state that consists of subjective, consciously experienced feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, worry, and heightened arousal or activation of the autonomic nervous system. Since perceived threat mediates the relationship between the stressor and the intensity of an anxiety reaction (Hackfort & Spielberger, 1989), anxiety states vary in intensity and fluctuate over time as a function of the amount of perceived threat. The physiological changes associated with increased anxiety include elevated heart rate and blood pressure; faster, shallower, more intense breathing; dryness of mouth; dilation of the pupils; erection of the hair; and increased perspiration.

Moderate increases in anxiety may serve to prepare the athlete for competition. However, too much anxiety is thought by some experts to be debilitating to performance. As one athlete has said, "Good performance is dependent upon being 'psyched up' for the contest, but not being 'psyched out'" (Martens, 1977, p.19).

Since the late 1960's there have only been a few researchers who have employed qualitative methodology to examine the arousal-performance relationship. An excellent

example of the depth, detail, and richness that can be gained by studying athletes in a qualitative manner is provided in several studies by Scanlan and her colleagues (Scanlan, Ravizza, & Stein, 1989; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1989, 1991). In these investigations, a variety of very specific sources of enjoyment and of former elite figure skaters stress were identified. Similarly, Orlick and Partington (1988) conducted interviews with a large number of elite Canadian Olympic athletes in an attempt to determine the mental links to excellence. In so doing, these authors identified a number of previously undetected mental factors associated with exceptional athletic achievement.

Qualitative Research Methodologies

Wilson (1993) notes that the purposes of qualitative research are as diverse and wide-ranging as the types of qualitative research. As Patton (1980,p. 252) so nicely states, participant observation allows researchers to "walk a mile in my shoes" and the qualitative interview allows the researcher to "walk a mile in my head". Qualitative interviewing is open-ended in nature. The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind but to access the perspectives of the person being interviewed (Patton, 1990). Qualitative researchers interview people to find out from them things they cannot directly observe such as thoughts, feelings, and intentions.

While there are a variety of qualitative research approaches, I will discuss only two of these in the remainder of this chapter. The first is the standardized open-ended format (Patton, 1980) which is often characterized by the general interview guide. The second is the non-standardized open-ended format approach, which includes the phenomenological interview style.

The standardized open-ended interview allows the investigator to minimize the scope by asking the same question of each respondent. In many cases, when conducting a program evaluation, it is only possible to interview participants for a limited period of time (Patton, 1990). Because of this limited time, the standardized open-ended format is often used and each person is asked more or less the same interview question. Gordon (1980) stressed that in this type of controlled interview, the researcher controls the topic of discussion and does not allow the interviewee or respondent to deviate much from the set protocol of questions.

A sub-category of the standardized open-ended interview is the general interview guide approach (Patton, 1987). This type of interview allows the interviewer to be more flexible during the interview process. An interview guide is a list of questions or issues that the researcher wishes to explore during the course of an interview (Patton, 1990). The interviewer prepares this guide so that the same type of information is obtained from a number of people. Patton (1990) points out that with this method the interviewer is free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style- but with the focus on a particular predetermined subject.

The strength of the standardized open-ended approach is that it reduces the bias that can occur from conducting different interviews with different people. A possible weakness of this type of interviewing is that it restricts respondents to address only those aspects of their experience that is of interest to the interviewer (Patton, 1990). Mishler (1986) suggests that this type of approach is sometimes too "sterile". Another weakness of this approach is that it prevents the interviewer from pursuing topics or issues that

were not anticipated when the questions were written (Patton, 1987). In-order for the interviewer to stay on track, he or she must ignore any thoughts that "pop up" or any comments by the respondent that stray or differ from the predetermined objective.

A second major interview category is the non-standardized interview format. This type of interview may be either spontaneous or scheduled, but its identifying characteristic is that respondents are encouraged to talk about whatever they wish as long as it is relevant to the researcher's interest (Patton, 1990). Mishler (1986) points out that this approach shifts attention away from the investigator's "problems," such as technical issues of reliability and validity, to the respondent's problems; specifically to the respondent's efforts to construct coherent and reasonable worlds of meaning and to make sense of his or her own experience. The intent of the non-standardized interview is to get to the participant's perception of the meaning of his or her world without introducing the investigator's conception of what it might be (Wilson, 1993). Also, this type of interview allows the interviewer a great deal of freedom in exploring whatever seems important to the respondent and promoting the likelihood that responses will be spontaneous, self-relevant, and personal.

Phenomenological Interview

A common form of non-standardized, open-ended interviewing is the phenomenological interview. The goal of phenomenological research is to describe the phenomena as they are lived rather than to give an abstract explanatory account of phenomena (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). The goal of a phenomenological interview is to obtain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience

(Thompson et al., 1989). The task of the researcher in a phenomenological interview is to encourage the participant to reflect on his or her experience and to convey it in as much detail as possible (Dale, 1994). In actuality the person being interviewed is not referred to as the interviewer; rather, he or she is referred to as a participant or co-researcher in the study (Giorgi, 1970).

The great advantage to a non-standardized open-ended interview, such as the phenomenological interview, is its flexibility. This allows the researcher to grasp more fully the participant's experiences than would be possible in a more rigidly-defined methodological technique such as one employing oral questionnaires or the interview guide approach (Markson & Gognalons-Caillard, 1971). Another advantage of the phenomenological interview is that the respondent controls the interview and the investigator obtains what is on the respondent's mind at the time (Dale, 1994). Dale (1994) comments that the interviewer is free to word questions spontaneously and to establish a conversational style, with the focus of the interview being on the interviewee's experience.

The phenomenological interview is not without potential weaknesses. One is that a participant might talk endlessly about a particular area of the experience and not touch on other areas. Another weakness is that the phenomenological interview may be very time consuming. Nevertheless, researchers in the field of sport psychology can learn a great deal about the experiences of athletes if they allow them the opportunity to freely describe their experiences (Dale, 1996).

Summary

In this chapter I have sought to describe the theoretical explanations of the possible influence of stress and anxiety on sport performers. In addition, I have offered arguments for the use of a qualitative research methodology to examine athletes' experience of anxiety in competitive situations. Finally, I discussed two formats for conducting open-ended interviews and outlined the advantages and limitations of each. In this study, a phenomenological interview approach was employed to examine the perspectives of anxiety of female collegiate athletes.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I describe the process I followed in examining athletes' perception of competitive stress in sport. Separate sections include: a) a discussion of the pilot testing interview that I conducted, b) a description of the bracketing interview, c) a description of the participants, d) a description of the methodology used during the interviews and, e) an explanation of the data analysis process.

Pilot Testing

I conducted one pilot interview so that I could better learn the proper techniques of conducting interviews with collegiate athletes. For the pilot interview, I interviewed one SEC Division I female collegiate athlete on the subject of her perception of competitive stress in sport.

The pilot study was extremely useful in helping me learn how to correctly conduct an interview. The pilot study also helped me see what not to do when conducting an interview and what I could do better to help the athlete more vividly describe her experience.

Bias Exploration and Bracketing

According to Pollio, Henley, & Thompson (1997) bracketing involves a suspension of one's theoretical beliefs, preconceptions, and presumptions. Also, within

this definition, bracketing is presented as a (subjective) process of removing conceptual biases that may serve to distort one's interpretive vision (Husserl, 1960). The person who originally gave light to the conception of bracketing was Edmund Husserl. Husserl conceded that the "natural attitude" (i.e., preconceptions of what is real or not real) could not be completely suspended at any single point (Pollio et al., 1997). In a similar view, Merleau-Ponty (1962) stressed, that it is impossible to achieve total reduction as eventheless, to avoid conceptual inadequacy, a positive application of bracketing is needed, one that does not assume or require neutrality as an ideal or even attainable perspective (Pollio et al., 1997). One way this may be achieved is by having the researcher participate in a bracketing interview that is given by an interviewer that isn't affiliated with the study. In the process of a bracketing interview, the researcher is asked questions about the topic. Transcripts of the bracketing interview are then analyzed to discover any preconceived assumptions of the researcher (Dale, 1994).

As the researcher in this study I participated in a bracketing interview conducted by a doctoral student who is highly skilled in qualitative research. We then analyzed the interview several times to confirm my biases. I recorded my presumptions about athletes' perceptions of competitive stress in sport in a journal and referred to them before each interview. The bracketing interview confirmed my own thought that these athletes' perceptions of competitive stress would be about a specific time in a specific situation such as, right before the athlete bats or right before the game is to begin. It also confirmed my bias that these athletes would talk more about their somatic anxieties towards sport than their cognitive anxieties. By participating in the bracketing interview,

I feel that I was able to refrain from leading the participants in a particular direction during the interviews I conducted.

Description of the Participants

Participants in phenomenological research are chosen because of their experience with a particular phenomena and for their potential to provide a rich description of this experience (Dale, 1994). The participants in the current study were six female athletes from an NCAA Southeaster conference Division I university. The interviewees were participants in the sports of softball (n=1), volleyball (n=2), and soccer (n=3). (See Table I)

Table 1 Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Collegiate Sport	SCAT Score
Zulu	Female	Caucasian	Volleyball	21
Blondie	Female	Caucasian	Volleyball	26
Suzanne	Female	Caucasian	Softball	21
Lola	Female	Caucasian	Soccer	21
Kathy	Female	Caucasian	Soccer	25
Rainey	Female	Caucasian	Soccer	20

Anxiety Instrument

The Sport Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) (Martens, 1977) was used to identify high trait-anxious athletes. This test is designed to measure competitive trait-anxiety (i.e., the perception of competitive situations as threatening) and describe the anxiety responses of individuals to specific competitive situations (state anxiety).

Questions 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, and 15 were used to determine respondents' levels of trait anxiety. (See Appendix C)

Procedure

After obtaining approval to conduct the study from the University of Tennessee's Office of Institutional Research, I requested the permission of coaches to explain the study to their team members. Once permission was obtained, I presented the proposed study at a team meeting where the athletes were informed that their participation would be completely voluntary. Once the athletes on a particular team indicated their willingness to participate, I set up a time to administer the Sport Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) to those athletes in a group setting. Prior to administering the SCAT, I reminded the athletes of the expectations of the study and asked them to sign informed consent papers (see Appendix B). When all of the athletes completed the SCAT, I calculated the scores to determine which ones meet the criterion score for a high trait-anxious person. Possible scores on the SCAT range from 10 (low trait-anxious) to 30 (high trait-anxious) points. For this study, those athletes who scored 20 points or higher were considered high trait-anxious. The score 20 was chosen because it is between 10 and 30 and those athletes who answered five out of the ten questions negatively scored 20 points or higher. Once I identified the high trait-anxious athletes I contacted each to arrange an interview. Once a time and place had been selected for the interview, I met the athlete and began the interview process by asking the following question: "Think of a time when you experienced competitive stress. Now tell me as much as you can remember about this experience".

All interviews were audiotaped and the tapes were transcribed. Following transcription, I read and reread the interviews for clarity and meaning. I then performed inductive content analysis with the assistance of a qualitative research group. As a result, I was able to determine primary and secondary themes of the participants' experiences of competitive stress.

Interview Method

I began each interview by attempting to build rapport with the participants. Once this was done, I attempted to ask questions that brought out the athlete's experience to the best of her memory. Each interview began with the same open-ended question that gave the direction to the interview. The question for this study was: "Think of a time when you experienced competitive stress. Now tell me as much as you can remember about this experience". I occasionally asked follow-up questions to obtain further clarification of the participants' responses. This way allowed the person being interviewed to be the expert on the subject and in control of the interview (Dale, 1996). During the interview I made every effort to not lead the participant in a direction that he or she might not have gone on his or her own. If the participant made a statement that was unclear, I merely probed with statements like, "Could you say some more about that?"

Data Analysis

Once all interviews were completed, I transcribed the comments and met with the Sport Psychology Research Group at UTK to analyze and interpret the data. There were several steps that I as well as the group followed in order to assure the most accurate

interpretation. First, I read and re-read the transcripts to confirm accuracy. After accuracy was confirmed I began thematization. I took my theme suggestions to the group where we as a group decided which themes were accurate and inaccurate. It was very important that each theme come from the original transcripts and that no themes are derived that did not come directly from the transcripts. Once the themes were determined participants were consulted to verify that the themes were accurate descriptions of their experience.

Issues of Validity

The validity of a study is always an important issue in scientific investigations (Dale, 1996). Giorgi (1970) proposes that the key criterion of validity in qualitative research is whether a reader, who adopts the same viewpoint as the researcher, can see the same things the researcher saw whether he or she agrees with it. Every effort was made throughout the entire interviewing process to ensure a first-person description of the experience of the participant so that the phenomenological interviewing process did not lack validity.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

The object of this investigation was to examine athletes' perceptions of competitive stress in sport. Phenomenological interviews were conducted to arrive at such a description and in this chapter I present the thematic structure that emerged from the data and characterized the participants perceptions or experiences. Throughout this chapter I refer to each athlete by a pseudonym. These pseudonyms were selected to protect the identity of the athlete.

Thematic Structure

Analysis of the transcripts revealed five major themes and sub-themes: Sport Specific Types of Stress (with sub-themes of continuous and situational), Sources of Stress (with sub-themes of external and internal), Symptoms of Stress (with sub-themes of cognitive and somatic), Experience of Stress (with sub-themes of positive and negative), and Coping Strategies.

The first theme relates to the participants' sporting experience. The athletes in this study described stress throughout the entire experience or they described stress in a specific situation. The second theme relates to the person or conditions that caused the competitive stress the athlete experienced. This stress was described as either coming from internal sources or external sources. The third major theme deals with the symptoms the athlete experienced from the stress. These symptoms were either cognitive

or somatic in nature. The fourth major theme centers on the experience of the stress. These athletes depicted their experience as being either positive or negative. The fifth major theme deals with the coping strategy athletes used in order to help alleviate the stress being experienced.

Theme I. **Sport Specific Types of Stress**

A. Continuous

B. Situational

Theme II. **Sources of Stress**

A. External

B. Internal
   1. Fear of Failure
   2. Lack of Control
   3. Overwhelmed

Theme III. **Symptoms of the Stress**

A. Cognitive

B. Somatic

Theme IV. **Experience of Stress**

A. Positive

B. Negative

Theme V. **Coping Strategies**

Theme I. Sport Specific Types of Stress

Continuous

When asked to describe their experience of competitive stress, participants in this study talked about an overall feeling of stress throughout the entire sporting event. For example, Suzanne a softball player talked about the whole state tournament being a continuous stress for her.

> Okay.. (umm).. The state tournament when I was a sophomore in high school. I was 16. I had been playing for a long time but that's still kind-of young but I didn't deal with pressure that well when I was that young.

Another athlete who viewed her stress as a continuous experience was Blondie, the volleyball player, who talked about the stress occurring before every game.

> Okay pretty much before every game. I mean because I am so excited. But this also goes along in my life you know. Anxiety altogether. I mean I don't really have a specific example because every game was like that.

Blondie also referred to her life as being a continuous experience of stress for her.

> Well with me and like with my life and just my personality none of the pressures are so strong from the coaches or from my parents or from my teachers but most of the weight comes from me and I just want to do my best every time.

The other athlete who described her experience with competitive stress as being continuous was Rainy. She talked about her overall volleyball experience in high school as being stressful, primarily, as a result of her coach.

> Okay (umm) this is a time when I played volleyball and my coach he made me confused. Sometimes he would make you laugh but other times it was

> just like you didn't know if he liked you. (Umm) that was a lot of pressure and I just remember going out there and I just felt inadequate.

Situational

The other three athletes described a very specific experience of competitive stress. For example one participant, Lola, described the last two minutes of a very important, close game:

> Okay (umm).... I guess... well I think one time it was really stressful was like when we were playing...(umm)...a conference team last year or last fall and it was 2 to 1. It was like the last 2 minutes and it was... we were just... I mean it was just so stressful. So, I don't know I just remember the last 2 minutes as so stressful.

Another participant, Kathy, described her first time with being the anchor in the long relay in her first high school track meet as a freshman.

> Okay this was in high school. Okay, it was the state track meet, it was my freshman year, it was the first time I had ever been into, like, something that big and then (umm)...I was the anchor in the long relay team and I had never done that before. He just threw me in there and he was like 'your anchoring' and I was like 'what?' and I was so nervous before that race. I have never been so nervous before anything.

Zulu, a volleyball player described her first day back for preseason as being her specific situation of competitive stress.

> I say (umm) at a particular point in time was when I came back in from preseason. And I didn't know if I had to try out or whatever. But the first day just blew me away. Like I did I did so awful. And I guess it was because I was so nervous.

Theme II. Sources of Stress

External

These athletes were extremely aware of their sources of stress. One source of stress that two of the athletes referred to was external in nature. Their stress was brought on by parents, coaches, and even newspaper articles.

Suzanne described her source of stress as being from others. Others included the newspaper writers, parents, and friends. All of these others were expecting Suzanne's team to win because of their undefeated season which in turn causes' Suzanne's competitive stress.

> Lots of people were there... wanted to perform well. All your friends, everyone is expecting you to do well because you have made it so far (umm). We had an undefeated season so everyone expected us to win the state so we had all that added pressure of everyone expecting us to do it. We had newspaper write-ups saying we should win umm. We wanted to play well for our parents.

Suzanne also said that she experienced external stress when she was elected a team captain at such an early age. She described being the team captain as an event that added more pressure, making her have to step up, and making her feel she had to carry the whole team on her shoulders.

> As a sophomore I was one of the team captains and that kind-of put extra pressure on me being so young and having to step up and put... so basically help the team out, pick the team up, be a leader for my team and that just built it up so much. The pressure like you have to step up and you have to be one of the role models and be leader.

Rainy also described her source of competitive stress to be from an external source. Her stress derived from her coach and how he made her feel. She feared her coach and the loss of his confidence in her.

> The coach it was like life or death for him. I didn't feel comfortable with this coach because the environment was you know not relaxing. When you don't feel you add up to the coach and the environment isn't relaxing it adds a lot of pressure. Playing volleyball was the worst I have ever had it probably. I was just really afraid.

Kathy also described experiencing external stress, which for her was the anchor for the long distance relay. She described finding out about being the anchor as making her want "to throw up" and how being the anchor took her out of her "comfort zone".

> I was the anchor in the long relay team and I had never done that before. I thought I was going to throw up, that's how nervous I was, but I don't know.

Internal: Fear of Failure

Another source of stress these athletes described was the stress they placed on themselves. Kathy, the soccer player, whose sport specific stress was due to her being asked to anchor the long relay, mentioned internal stress that came from her fear of failing to meet team goals.

> I was just nervous just cause it was just like we had such high goals for our team you know and ... I don't know...we wanted to make our goal, (umm)...I guess I didn't want to let anybody down especially my team. (umm)...I had pressure on me, but all the girls do, even the seniors had pressure on them, but yeah I felt pressure to perform.

Blondie also experienced fear of failure when she described not wanting to ever mess up, even in life.

> Well I think that I should be the best at everything even though I'm not. You know I go out and play frisbee and then I'm horrible at it and I feel like I'm a looser you know. I just think I should be the best at everything when I know that's not possible but still you know I'm just competitive. I mean I'll look at someone on the steps beside me and want to get up there faster than them.

Another example of Blondie's internal stress from her fear of failure was due to her desire to do well to impress those who were watching and always wanting to be as good as her competitor for the day.

> I really didn't want to mess up. I wanted to go out and impress whoever was looking or play my best every single game. I don't want to fail so I really, really wanted to win and hope I did well but I don't want to fail and like do miserably. Like that's when I get an uneasy feeling like but I hope I can do it. I don't know if I can do it. But I have to do it you know. You know I want to be able to play as well as my competitor.

Zulu is another athlete who described her internal stress as being due to a fear of failure. She describes her worry over wanting to do everything right so that she could remain on the team.

> And I guess it was because I was so nervous. Was so worried about I have to do everything right in-order for me to even be on this team. And that just tore me down.

Lack of control

Several participants described experiencing internal stress that stemmed from the perception of a lack of control over the situation. Lola expresses her lack of control as waiting for and wanting the last two minutes to expire.

> It was like the last 2 minutes and it was we were just I mean it was just so stressful. I was like... it was just... I could not wait until the time was out because it was just like the ball was bouncing around in our area. It was just like... just waiting for the time to run out cause... it was just like such a close game the whole time and we didn't want to loose it right at the end. And then the ball being down at our end was like really stressful.

Zulu also experienced the feeling of not having control. She described the feeling of not knowing if she could even serve the ball over the net because she was so stressed.

> I was so nervous like I was like I didn't even know if I had the strength to serve the ball over the net you know which is every day just the normal thing. Like how long have I been doing it... like six years now.
> So it shouldn't have been a problem but like when I went in I was like I don't know if I can get this ball over the net. I felt so weak you know.

Overwhelmed

As well as fearing failure, some participants experienced more internal stress by feeling overwhelmed at times. This overwhelming feeling made Lola want to cry at times and made her head feel "racked".

> (Umm) with my nervousness like my head was racked as far as thinking about everything I needed to do and then I just got so down when everything wasn't going my way. As far as performing well and just everything he asked me to do went bad. The harder I tried the worse it got. That day it was just you know you just kind-of want to cry sometimes just because you can't do much else you know about it. Some days aren't

> your day and you just keep wanting to do well and it just isn't going to happen it seems like…you know.

Theme III. Symptoms of Stress

Once the athletes were aware of their source(s) of stress and described the source(s), they then described the symptoms that stem from the stress. These symptoms seemed to manifest themselves in the form of cognitive anxiety or somatic anxiety. Cognitive anxiety was experienced as negative concerns about performance, inability to concentrate, and disrupted attention whereas somatic anxiety was experienced by perceptions of bodily symptoms of autonomic reactivity such as butterflies in the stomach, sweating, shakiness, and increased heart rate.

Cognitive

Zulu experienced cognitive anxiety when she had her first day of preseason. This athlete's symptom was worry or negative concerns about her performance.

> I was so worried about having to do everything right in-order for me to even be on this team, And that just tore me down. Well lets see I'm just a walk-on so it is kind-of just to even keep my spot on the team. And when you go in you don't want to mess up you know because if you mess up then for sure next time he is not going to think about putting you in the game you know. And so you just have that much more to worry about.

Another example of Zulu's negative concern about her performance was when she describes not being the talent the coach recruited.

> He knows that I am… that I'm not the talent that he recruited in you know. I'm not going to… I don't have that natural athletic ability like a lot of the

> other girls. And so I will have bad days but you know just keep going and I will be fine.

Rainy also described cognitive symptoms of stress from her experience. She too had negative concerns about her performance. Her main concern was that she was "inadequate". For example:

> I wanted to do well but then there was always that fear of messing up and feeling inadequate. I just didn't feel like I belonged.

Blondie also described having negative concerns about her performance, feeling tense, and not being able to concentrate.

> You know I just felt really tense and that if I were tense I wouldn't be able to play the game. I had so many thought going through my head that I wouldn't be able to, you know, just concentrate on playing the game. So when I breathed I felt it helped me relax more so I could play the game and concentrate and not be so uptight.

Somatic

Some participants experienced somatic anxiety as well. For example, Lola said that in the last two minutes of the soccer games admits she had "constant butterflies".

> (Umm). It was like (umm)...it was kind-of like having constant butterflies in your stomach.

Blondie experienced somatic anxiety as well. She described having butterflies and shakiness.

> I mean because I am so excited. I get the butterflies and stuff. The shakiness and that decreases. It use to more when I knew that I would be playing and that I was an integral part of the team winning and now

> that as you know I'm not playing as much if at all and so a the anxiety has decreased.

Kathy is another athlete who described having somatic anxiety. She felt as though she was going to throw up because of having to run the anchor.

> I have never been so nervous before anything. I thought I was going to throw up, that's how nervous I was, but I don't know, but...(umm)... afterwards I was like 'whoo', I don't know, but that was definitely not a good feeling before a race.

Suzanne is yet another athlete who described somatic anxiety symptoms. She spoke of having a tight stomach, sweaty palms, and feeling lightheaded because of her stress from being involved in the state tournament.

> Your stomach gets all tight and in knots, your palms start sweating (umm)... you get that lightheaded feeling.

Theme IV. Experience of Stress

In addition to being aware of the source(s) and symptoms of their stress, these athletes characterized their experience of stress as either positive or negative. One athlete described a positive experience with stress as "good stress" whereas another athlete described stress as not a good feeling to have before a race (i.e., negative stress).

Positive Experiences

Suzanne described her experience of competitive stress as being a positive one. She felt that when she was nervous she played better.

> I don't know...it's kind-of fun to be nervous. It makes you...I think it makes you (umm)... better because I am actually tuned in and when I am nervous I am more focused because I want to do well. I can actually make myself focus. I never really get that nervous but when I do I feel I play a little bit better.

Lola also explained how her overall experience with competitive stress was positive. This athlete indicated that the whole reason for her playing competitive sports was that she enjoyed the stress.

> Okay stress is like it's not bad stress at all. It's like (umm)... I mean I don't even know if stress is like the right word but if it's stressful like it's not bad stress. Like that's the whole reason I play the game because some of it's like that. Like you know like the whole excitement of the whole like... leading up to that point like that's the whole reason like... that's so amazing to me. You know it's like working through that part overcoming it and then like you know... like that's what makes games like that exciting. It's total good stress it's not bad stress. I love... I mean you can play games and kill... like our schedule we could of...our coach could have scheduled those games where we beat teams like 3 or 4 to nothing and you... and that would have... that would have been nothing. You know meant nothing and like those games that this... that have been very close and you are just like... you know... it's on the line and you are giving everything you can. Very competitive and stressful and whatever. That's like... what that's... the whole reason I'm... like I enjoy athletics so much.

Kathy described her specific situation as being a negative experience but overall she expressed the feeling that some nervousness was fine.

> I think nervous is fine. I think you kind of need to be you know if you just come in the match and your kinda like 'doot ta doo' your like 'just whatever' cause you need some adrenaline pumping around.

Zulu expressed how her experience with stress was positive as long as she was

performing well. For example, she talked about a time in a tourney where she went in for another player.

> It was nervousness but it was good nervousness as long as I did well you know.

Negative Experiences

Kathy experienced negative stress when she was taken out of her "comfort zone" when she was coming out of the blocks. When Kathy was told right before the race that she is running something different than usual she feels like she is about to throw up.

> I thought I was going to throw up, that's how nervous I was, but I don't know, but...(umm)...afterwards I was like 'whoo', I don't know, but that was definitely not a good feeling before a race.

Blondie said she would rather be relaxed before she began to play and throughout her entire interview she described how there was no specific time when she experienced competitive stress because she experienced it before every game. She says:

> You mean when like when my hands are sweaty and my adrenaline was pumping? Okay pretty much before every game. I mean because I am so excited. I get the butterflies and stuff.

Rainy described her competitive stress as being a negative experience. She also explained that because of this negative competitive stress she decided to stop playing volleyball.

> I guess you could say that the whole experience wasn't very good. That's probably why I still don't play volleyball. Playing volleyball was the worst I have ever had it probably. I was just really afraid.

Theme V. Coping Strategies

Throughout two of the interviews the participants made reference to how they cope with their competitive stress. These coping experiences described by the athletes include making oneself relax, going through the motions physically, and mental rehearsal.

Suzanne described her way of coping as making herself relax so she could step up and do her job.

> You don't exactly know what you want to do when you want to go but (uhh) that is just something you have to deal with. Kind-of have to make yourself relax and step up and do your job.

Zulu described her way of coping with her stress in terms of a couple of things she does to help her reduce her competitive stress.

> Before I got to go in I remember how nervous I was and I turned and looked at whoever was there with me and I was like... I am so nervous, and they were like just relax, just think about what you have to do and so I was real nervous since it had been so long but I just started thinking about okay this is really easy like I had to go back and tell myself you just throw the ball up and you know... hit it. And just kind-of mentally went through it in my head. And the girl like rubbed my shoulders and then I went through like on the sidelines just some motions, passing the ball and swinging through and just seeing... you know.

Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to provide a thematic structure of the experiences of a group of high-trait anxious female athletes who experience competitive stress. An outline of the five major themes is provided, which included sport-specific types of stress, sources of stress, symptoms of stress, the experience of stress, and coping strategies. I then provided several examples from the interviews in support of each theme.

While I could have cited other examples, the ones that I selected are meant to provide the reader with a representative sampling of what these female athletes said they experienced during their episodes with competitive stress in sports.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to provide a thorough description of the experience of collegiate female athletes' perception of competitive stress in sport. In the previous chapter, I provided a thematic structure of the experience of these athletes. In the present chapter I discuss the methodology I used in the present investigation. Following this, I discuss the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the dialogues in relation to existing literature on athletes with competitive stress. The chapter ends with several conclusions and recommendations for future research.

Methodology of choice

Participants in this study were chosen because of their high trait-anxious nature. Researchers in the field of sport psychology have been encouraged to consider alternative paradigms that view the subjective experience of the athlete as a viable resource of information (Dewar & Horn, 1992; Fahlberg, Fahlberg, & Gates, 1992; Hanson & Newburg, 1992; Martens, 1979, 1987). Those interested in studying the human phenomena might find the traditional scientific view too restrictive because it essentially asks only "why" something happens, not "what" is it like or "what" is the nature of a certain phenomenal (Valle et al., 1989). In Chapter II the experience of competitive stress by high trait-anxious athletes is important to both practitioners and scientists in the field

of sport psychology. One way the first-person experience of athletes can be examined is through the phenomenological interview. The purpose of the current investigation was to use the phenomenological interview to obtain a first-person description of each athlete's experience with competitive stress in sport. Specifically, each athlete was given the opportunity to freely describe her experience.

Once the interview began I made every effort to be an active listener and allow the athlete to go in the direction she wanted. I tried not to lead any of the participants with questions that may have represented by my own biases. I only asked questions if I was unclear about a certain statement or in order to acquire a better understanding of the athletes' experience.

I analyzed the transcripts with the assistance of a qualitative research group. Each member of the research group had his or her own copy of the transcribed interviews to help with the interpreting process. During the group session one member would read the questions from the dialogue while I would read the participant's part of the dialogue. Throughout the reading of the interview members of the group would stop to describe in their own words their thoughts on the experience of the athlete. The purpose of the frequent stops was to compare certain passages of dialogue from one interview with the next and to relate each interview to another interview so as to determine similar patterns. This process took place for all but two transcripts which I compared and thematized myself.

Major Themes

The five major themes that emerged from the dialogues were sport-specific types of stress (with sub-themes of continuous and situational), the source(s) of stress (with sub-themes of external and internal), the symptoms of stress (with sub-themes of cognitive and somatic anxiety), experience of stress which were either positive or negative, and coping strategies.

Sport Specific Types of Stress

The first major theme in the present investigation was sport specific types of stress with two sub-themes labeled continuous and situational. An example of a continuous type of stress experienced was mentioned by Suzanne who said, "The State Tournament when I was a sophomore in high school. I was 16. I had been playing for a long time but that's still kind of young but I didn't deal with the pressure that well". An example of a situational type of stress came from Lola when she described the last two minutes of a soccer game. Lola said, "It was like the last two minutes and it was just so stressful". Consistent with the present findings James & Collins (1997) reported that athletes, in this study that interviewed 10 males as well as 10 females, described both continuous and situational types of stress. In their study competitive anxiety revolved around athletes' experiences of nervousness and/or worry/anxiety either for the duration of the competition, or at specific points during the competition (e.g., the first few minutes or at a crucial moment).

Source(s) of Stress

The second major theme of the study was the source(s) of stress experienced by the athletes. Within the theme source(s) of stress there were sub-themes which included external stress and internal stress. From the dialogues several athletes described feeling external stress in the form of pressure from parents and coaches. These athletes felt pressure from their parents and coaches because they had the perception that they would be letting them down if they failed. One athlete said she was afraid of letting her parents down if her team lost the state tourney. In their study Scanlan & Lewthwaite (1984) found significant adult influences to be a theme that emerged as a potential stress predictor. Adults are integrally involved in the structure, dynamics, and social milieu of sports (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984). The study conducted by Scanlan & Lewthwaite (1984) included 76 wrestlers between the ages of 9 and 14. They used the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory for children (CSAI-C) as their instrument of choice. Therefore, parents and coaches are often very influential in shaping athletes' sports-related perceptions, including the perception of threat (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984).

James & Collins (1997) also found Significant-Others Stressors to be a major theme of their study. Sub-themes that emerged from this external pressure included coach/manager pressure. The "coach/manager pressure" was classified as stress resulting from the perceived pressure and demands placed on athletes by their coaches and managers. James & Collins (1997) also identified a theme they called Social Evaluation & Self-Presentational Concerns. This theme referred to the athlete's fear of letting others down. In an earlier study, Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza (1991) found that their participants experienced external stress in the form of worrying about letting others down. For

example, one of the athletes they interviewed said, "I felt like I would let a lot of people down if I didn't perform well". In the present study several athletes expressed the worry of letting others down. One said, "We wanted to perform well for our parents. We didn't want to let them down".

In the present study Kathy said she experienced external competitive stress because of her role as anchor on the long relay team. She said, "I was the anchor in the long relay team and I had never done that before. He just threw me in there and was like 'your anchoring'. And I was like 'what?' And I was so nervous before that race". Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza (1991) refer to statements like this as competitive hurdles. One competitive hurdle athlete's experience is the task of performing their weak event. One athlete in the Scanlan et al (1991) study said, "I didn't feel accomplished in that part of skating...Freestyle was a lot more work for me". In conclusion, themes involving the influence of significant others and the nature of competition are explicitly perceived as stressful by athletes because they heighten the self-presentational importance of the competition in the mind of the athlete (James & Collins, 1997).

The athletes in the present study described internal stress in terms of a sub-theme labeled "fear of failure". This sub-theme is evident in the experience of athletes in other studies within the sport psychology literature. For example, Kroll (1979) found fear of failure to be a major source of competitive stress. Athletes' comments obtained by Kroll revealed a fear of making foolish mistakes, mind going blank, and making a critical mistake. In the present investigation Zulu described how she was so worried about having to do everything right in order for her to even be on the team. She was afraid of failing because she thought she would be cut from the team. Blondie also described the feeling

of internal stress. Her internal stress stemmed from always wanting to be the best. Blondie said, "I just think I should be the best at everything when I know that's not possible but still you know I'm just competitive. I mean I'll look at someone on the steps beside me and want to get up there faster than them." Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza (1991) found that the skaters they interviewed also desired to be perfect and the best. One athlete said, "I was just a perfectionist all the time...I would never accept myself not doing it perfectly".

Symptoms of Stress

Another theme from the present was symptoms of stress with sub-themes including cognitive and somatic anxiety. Many of the athletes in the present investigation described their experience of somatic anxiety. For example Kathy described how she felt like she was going to throw up. Blondie said she experienced butterflies and shakiness. Suzanne reported the feelings of a tight stomach, sweaty palms, and being light headed. Such reports are similar to those obtained by Kroll (1979) who found that athletes reported the urge to throw up, having an upset stomach, having general body sweating, and feeling lightheaded.

Experiences with stress

Another theme from the present study was experiences of stress with sub-themes positive and negative. A few of the athletes in the present study described their experience with stress as being positive or good. Eustress, or good stress, is stress that is essential to well being. Certain kinds of stress are good for us. Eustress is good for us to

have. Lola explained how her overall experience with stress was positive. She indicated that her whole reason for playing sports was because she enjoyed the stress. She explained how she loved working through tough situations and overcoming them (winning the game). That feeling of giving it your all and then the feeling of accomplishment. Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza (1989), also found that a source of enjoyment for elite figure skaters was competitive achievement or that feeling of accomplishment after working hard to reach a desired goal.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to examine collegiate female athletes' experience of competitive stress in sport using a phenomenological interview approach.

Based on the results obtained, the following conclusions are offered:

1. There were varied sources of stress for the participants
2. Some high trait-anxious Division I female athletes view their competitive stress as positive instead of negative and
3. The most prominent source of stress from those who experienced stress negatively appears to be external pressures from others and negative internal thoughts perceived from the athlete herself.

Recommendations

After completing the present study I have several recommendations for future researchers. First, I recommend that a larger number of athletes be interviewed in order to determine the severity of athletes' experiences of competitive stress. Second, I

recommend that males as well as females be interviewed. It is possible that males experience stress differently than females. Third, I recommend that the experience of competitive stress among younger athletes be examined so that steps can be taken to assist these individuals in dealing with the stress of sport at an earlier age. Finally, I recommend that researchers compare the competitive stress responses of low trait-anxious athletes and high trait-anxious athletes because patterns and/or severity of responses to competitive stress may be different for those two types of performers. When defining high trait-anxious athletes, researchers might consider a cut off score higher than 20 as well as other forms of criteria (e.g., coaches' perceptions). Only as athletes, coaches, and sport psychology consultants become aware of the signs and symptoms of competitive stress, can steps can be taken to assist sport performers in managing such stress.

REFERENCES

References

Dale, G.A. (1994). The experience of elite decathlon participants during their most memorable performance: Overcoming the distractions. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Dale, G.A. (1996). Existential phenomenology: Emphasizing the experience of the athlete in sport psychology research. The Sport Psychologist, 10, 307-321.

Dewar, A., & Horn, T. (1992). A critical analysis of knowledge construction in sport psychology. In T. Horn (Ed.), Advances in sport psychology (pp.13-22). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Fahlberg, L.L., Fahlberg, L.A., & Gates, W.K. (1992). Exercise and existence: Exercise behavior from an existential phenomenological perspective. The Sport Psychologist, 6, 172-191.

Feltz, D.L., Lirgg, L.D., & Albrecht, R.R. (1992). Psychological implications of competitive running in elite young distance runners: A longitudinal analysis. The Sport Psychologist, 6, 128-138.

Gerson, R., & DeShaies, P. (1978). Competitive trait anxiety and performance as predictors of pre-competitive state anxiety. International Journal of Sport Psychology, 9, 16-26.

Giorgi, A. (1970). Psychology as a human science. New York: Harper & Row.

Gordan, R.L. (1980). Interviewing: Strategy, techniques, and tactics. New York: The Dorsey Press.

Gould, D., Horn, T., & Spreeman, J. (1983). Sources of stress in junior elite wrestlers. Journal of Sport Psychology, 5, 159-171.

Gould, D., & Krane, V. (1992). The arousal-athletic performance relationship. In T.S. Horn (Ed.), Advances in sport psychology (pp.119-141). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Hackfort, D. & Spielberger, D. (1989). Anxiety in sports: An international perspective. New York: Hemisphere.

Hanson, T., & Newburg, D. (1992). Naturalistic inquiry as a paradigm for doing applied performance enhancement research. Contemporary Thought on Performance, 1, 26-48.

Husserl, E. (1960) Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humantias Press.

James, B., & Collins, D. (1997). Self-presentational sources of competitive stress during performance. Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 19, 17-35.

Jones, G.,& Hanton, S. (1996). Interpretation of competitive anxiety symptoms and goal attainment expectancies. Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 18, 144-157.

Krane, V., Joyce, D., & Rafeld, J. (1994). Competitive anxiety, situation criticality, and softball performance. The Sport Psychologist, 8, 58-72.

Kroll, W. (1979). The stress of high performance athletes. In P. Klavora & J.V. Daniel (Eds.), Coach, athlete, and the sport psychologist (pp.211-219). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Landers, D.M. & Boutcher, S.H. (1993). Arousal-performance relationship. In J.M. Williams (Ed.), Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance (pp.170-184). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield .

Markson, E.W. & Gognalons-Caillard, M. (1971). Talks with Father William. Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 1, 193-208.

Martens, R. (1977). Sport competition anxiety test. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Martens, R. (1979). From smocks to jocks. Journal of Sport Psychology, 1, 94-99.

Martens, R. (1987). Science, knowledge, and sport psychology. The Sport Psychologist, 1, 29-55.

Martens, R., Burton, D., Vealey, R., Bump, L., & Smith, D., (1990). The development of the competitive state anxiety inventory-2 (CSAI-2). In R. Martens, R.S. Vealey, & D. Burton (Eds.), Competitive anxiety in sport (pp.127-140). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). The phenomenology of perception (Colin Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Mishler, E.G. (1986). Research interviewing: Context and narrative. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Orlick, T., & Partington, J. (1988). Mental links to excellence. The Sport Psychologist, 2, 105-130.

Passer, M.W. (1983). Fear of failure, fear of evaluation, perceived competence, and self-esteem in competitive trait-anxious children. Journal of Sport Psychology, 5, 172-188.

Patton, M.Q. (1987). How to use qualitative methods in evaluation. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Patton, M.Q. (1980). Qualitative evaluation methods. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Patton, M.Q. (1990). Qualitative evaluation and research methods. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Pollio, H.R., Henley, T.B., & Thompson, C.J. (1997). The phenomenology of everyday life. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Poteet,D. & Weinberg, R. (1980). Competitive trait anxiety, and performance. Perception and Motor Skills, 50, 651-654.

Scanlan, T.K., & Lewthwaite, R. (1984). Social psychological aspects of competition for male youth sport participants: I. Predictors of competitive stress. Journal of Sport Psychology, 6, 208-226.

Scanlan, T.K. & Lewthwaite, R. (1988). From stress to enjoyment: parental and coach influence on young participants. In E.W. Brown & C.F. Branta (Eds.), Competitive sports for children and youth: An overview of research and issues (pp.41-48). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Scanlan, T.K., Ravizza, K., & Stein, G.L. (1989). An in-depth study of former elite figure skaters: I. Introduction to the project. Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 11, 54-64.

Scanlan, T.K., Stein, G.L, & Ravizza, K. (1989). An in-depth study of former elite figure skaters: II. Sources of enjoyment. Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 11, 65-83.

Scanlan, T.K., Stein, G.L., & Ravizza, K. (1991). An in-depth study of former elite figure skaters: III. Sources of stress. Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 13, 103-120.

Shriver, P. (1985). I'll tell you about tennis. Sports Illustrated, 63, 47-60.

Thompson, C.J., Locander, W.B., & Pollio, H.R. (1989). Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: The philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology. Journal of Consumer Research, 16, 133-146.

Valle, R., King, M., & Hallings, S. (1989). An introduction to existential phenomenological thought in psychology. In R.V. Halling & A.S. Halling (Eds.), Existential phenomenological perspectives in psychology (pp. 3-16). New York: Plenum.

Weinberg, R. (1989). Anxiety, arousal, and motor performance: Theory, research, and applications. In D. Hackfort & C.D. Spielberger (Eds.), Anxiety in sport: An international perspective (pp.95-115). New York: Hemisphere.

Wilson, H.S. (1993). Introducing research in nursing. Redford City, CA: Benjamin/Cummings.

APPENDIX A

APPENDIXES

Coach Information Sheet

Dear Coach,

My name is Jennifer Pledger. I am currently a master's degree student candidate in sport psychology working with Dr. Craig Wrisberg. For my master's thesis I would like to examine the experience of competitive anxiety among athletes possessing higher than average levels of trait anxiety. My hope is to uncover some of the factors that contribute to competitive anxiety in order to develop better methods for alleviating athlete's anxiety in pressure situations.

The purpose of this letter is to request your assistance in this study by allowing me to present the idea for my project to the members of your team. The presentation would take no more than 5 or 10 minutes. Those individuals who express an interest in participating would then be contacted at a later time to complete the Sport Competition Anxiety Test. Individuals who score above a certain level on the test would then be invited to participate in an interview to discuss their experiences of anxiety during competition.

All athletes who participate in the study would be protected by informed consent procedures and would be free to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice or penalty. The questionnaire takes approximately 5-10 minutes to complete and the interview lasts approximately one hour. All participants will be given feedback about their competitive anxiety scores and those who are interviewed will receive a brief description of the results. Strict confidentiality will be observed throughout the study and no person's identity will be revealed in either the thesis or in any publication that results from the study.

I realize that your time and that of your athletes is a valuable commodity. I assure you that I will do everything in my power to minimize the time required of each person who chooses to participate in this study.

Thanks for taking the time to read this letter. Please indicate your response by completing the attached form and returning it in the enclosed campus envelope.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Pledger
144 HPER

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

High Trait-Anxious Athletes' Perceptions of Competitive Stress in Sport: A Phenomenological Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of competitive stress in high trait-anxious Division I Southeaster Conference collegiate female athletes using a qualitative phenomenological research approach. You have been invited to participate in an informal interview to share your experience. Only you and I will be present at the interview. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or prejudice to you. Your participation requires no physical or mental risks. A possible benefit of this investigation includes helping athletes and coaches understand the experience of competitive stress for high trait-anxious athletes. This knowledge may help coaches understand why their high trait-anxious athletes are experiencing a decreased performance and determine ways to help the athlete.

A questionnaire will be administered to all athletes who chose to participate. Once I have chose the athletes who have scored 20 or higher on their SCAT questionnaire I will begin calling those athletes to set up an interview. A tape recorder will be used to record the interview and the contents of the tape will be transcribed into written form by me. You will then have the opportunity to make any corrections in the transcripts or delete any information that is not accurate. I may also contact you by phone to request clarification of some of the material. The duration of the interview with each athlete will last approximately one hour and the duration of completing the SCAT will be no more than 5-7 minutes.

Your identity will be kept confidential at all times. No one will know your identity but me. You will be asked to select a pseudonym (i.e., fictional name) that will be used in any published reports. You may ask questions proceeding, during, or following the study.

If you have any other questions you may contact me, Jennifer Pledger, at 974-8768.

I have read the informed consent form and wish to participate in the study.

Participant _____

Date_____

Jennifer Pledger
Cultural Studies Unit
1914 Andy Holt Ave. HPER 144
Knoxville, TN. 37996

Craig Wrisberg, Ph.D.
Cultural Studies Unit
1914 Andy Holt Ave
Knoxville, TN 37996

APPENDIX C

The SCAT

Illinois Competition Questionnaire

Form A

Directions: Below are some statements about how persons feel when they compete in sports and games. Read each statement and decide if you HARDLY EVER, or SOMETIMES, or OFTEN feel this way when you compete in sports and games. If your choice is HARDLY EVER, blacken the square labeled A, if your choice is SOMETIMES, blacken the square labeled B, and if your choice is OFTEN, blacken the square labeled C. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any one statement. *Remember* to choose the word that describes how you *usually* feel when competing in *sports and games*.

	Hardly Ever	Sometimes	Often
1. Competing against others is socially enjoyable.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
2. Before I compete I feel uneasy.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
3. Before I compete I worry about not performing well.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
4. I am a good sport when I compete.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
5. When I compete I worry about making mistakes.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
6. Before I compete I am calm.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
7. Setting a goal is important when competing.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
8. Before I compete I get a queasy feeling in my stomach.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
9. Just before competing I notice my heart beats faster than usual.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
10. I like to compete in games that demand considerable physical energy.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
11. Before I compete I feel relaxed.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
12. Before I compete I am nervous.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
13. Team sports are more exciting than individual sports.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
14. I get nervous wanting to start the game.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐
15. Before I compete I usually get uptight.	A ☐	B ☐	C ☐

VITA

Jennifer Pledger was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee on May 11, 1974. She attended elementary, middle, and high school in Chattanooga. Jennifer graduated from Baylor High School in May of 1992. She received her undergraduate degree in Physical Education from Samford University in May of 1997. In August, Jennifer entered the University of Tennessee, Knoxville as a master student in sport psychology. She received the degree of Master of Science in Human Performance Sport Studies on August 13, 1999.

Starting in September, Jennifer will be employed by The Harpeth Hall School, an all girl prep school, in Nashville, TN. She will be teaching middle school Health and P.E. as well as coaching volleyball and softball.