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Pre-competitive anxiety and associated factors in young female soccer players in school sports

Ansiedad precompetitiva y factores asociados en jóvenes futbolistas femeninas en el deporte escolar

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Abstract

Pre-competitive anxiety in young female soccer players refers to feelings of tension or worry that arise in these female athletes before a match or competition. This form of anxiety may present itself through cognitive, behavioral, and physiological responses, potentially exerting a detrimental effect on both athletic performance and overall well-being. Our current research aims to study the factors associated with pre-competitive anxiety in young female soccer players. A total of 122 female youth soccer players from various clubs completed the Spielberger State Anxiety Inventory (STAI) just before competitive matches. Other data related to the practice of this sport were collected from our study group. The results obtained from the STAI scale indicate that 35% of the participants in our study have scores reflecting high levels of pre-competitive anxiety. Family support, length of club experience, and psychological intervention by coaches were factors associated with lower levels of pre-competitive anxiety in young female soccer players. Psychological interventions can also help reduce pre-competitive anxiety in these young athletes. Coaches and parents need to consider these factors when working with young female soccer players. Training and competition environments should be inclusive and gender-sensitive, and female players should be encouraged to set realistic goals and work on techniques for managing competition anxiety.

Key words: anxiety; soccer; youth sport; school sport; STAI

Resumen

La ansiedad precompetitiva en jóvenes futbolistas se refiere a los sentimientos de tensión o preocupación que surgen en estas atletas antes de un partido o competición. Esta forma de ansiedad puede manifestarse de diversas maneras, como respuestas cognitivas, conductuales y fisiológicas, y puede afectar al rendimiento y al bienestar general de la atleta. Nuestra investigación actual tiene como objetivo estudiar los factores asociados con la ansiedad precompetitiva en las jóvenes futbolistas. Un total de 122 jugadoras de fútbol juvenil de varios clubes completaron el inventario de Ansiedad Estatal de Spielberger (STAI) justo antes de los partidos competitivos. Se recopilaron otros datos relacionados con la práctica de este deporte de nuestro grupo de estudio. Los resultados derivados de la aplicación de la escala STAI muestran que el 35 % de los participantes en nuestro estudio presentan puntuaciones indicativas de niveles significativamente elevados de ansiedad precompetitiva. El apoyo familiar, la antigüedad en el club y la intervención psicológica de los entrenadores fueron factores asociados con niveles más bajos de ansiedad precompetitiva en las jóvenes futbolistas. Las intervenciones psicológicas también pueden ayudar a reducir la ansiedad precompetitiva en estas jóvenes atletas. Los entrenadores y los padres deben tener en cuenta estos factores cuando trabajen con jóvenes futbolistas. Los entornos de entrenamiento y competición deben ser inclusivos y sensibles al género, y se debe animar a las jugadoras a fijarse objetivos realistas y a trabajar en técnicas para gestionar la ansiedad competitiva.

Palabras clave: ansiedad; fútbol; deporte juvenil; deporte escolar; STAI

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Introduction

Pre-competitive anxiety in young female soccer players refers to the psychological distress these young athletes experience before a game or competition. This form of anxiety may present itself through cognitive, behavioral, and physiological responses, potentially exerting a detrimental effect on both athletic performance and overall well-being (Hussain, Shah, & Ali, 2021). State anxiety in competitive contexts is defined as a transient emotional reaction elicited by acute situational pressures or demands (Duică, Balazsi, Ciulei, & Bivolaru, 2014). In such situations, he may show characteristic physiological signs such as clammy hands, short breathing, accelerated heart rate and negative self-talk (Thander, 2023). In sports settings, anxiety may arise from specific circumstances or reflect a stable tendency to respond with heightened emotional intensity (Alasheev & Bykov, 2002; Lobo, Masagca, Serrano, Reyes, & Sevilla, 2025). Its development results from complex interactions among genetic, environmental, and neurochemical factors (Al-Biltagi, 2016). According to a study by Ayuso-Moreno, Fuentes-García, Collado-Mateo & Villafaina (2020), physiological arousal is a common sign of pre-competitive anxiety. Some training routines are designed to simulate stress-inducing scenarios that can elicit competitive anxiety in athletes (Endo, Sekiya, & Raima, 2023). This type of anxiety is often influenced by personal factors, such as self-esteem or specific personality traits. Furthermore, good physical fitness, particularly agility, resilience, and cardiovascular endurance is associated with lower levels of anxiety among children, adolescents, and university students (Costigan et al., 2024; Li et al., 2020; Yin, Kong, & Cui, 2022). Low self-esteem is frequently associated with increased levels of perceived anxiety, as individuals with low self-worth tend to experience greater self-doubt and a heightened fear of negative evaluation or failure (Sanader et al., 2021). Young female soccer players might also worry about their performance, their ability to handle pressure, and the expectations from coaches, parents, and teammates (Fry, 2019). This excessive concern can interfere with their focus and ability to perform well. Due to pre-competitive anxiety, young female football players may struggle to concentrate on their game or their coach's instructions, as their anxiety distracts them through intrusive thoughts or physical sensations (Perkos, Theodorakis, & Chroni, 2002). The anxious

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environment before games may prompt these young athletes to steer clear of high-pressure situations, such as important competitions or decisive matches. They may avoid taking risks or standing out to avoid failure or negative evaluation (DeFreese & Smith, 2013). Among this category of young athletes, pre-competition anxiety may trigger intense self-criticism, leading them to blame themselves for their mistakes or weaknesses. This process may weaken their self-confidence and negatively impact their performance (Wilson Wilson, Smith & Holmes, 2009). Thus, self-criticism appears to be a key predictor of pre-competitive anxiety in young female soccer players (Wilson, Smith & Holmes, 2009).

Examining the levels and sources of pre-competitive anxiety in 168 female youth soccer players aged 12 to 16 years, the researchers found that the athletes reported moderate levels of pre-competitive anxiety, with the highest levels related to performance expectations and fear of failure (Ruiz et al. 2021). The study also found that pre-competitive anxiety was negatively connected to sports performance (Ruiz et al. 2021). Another study by Wylleman, Vanden Auweele, De Knop, and Feys (2019) investigated the relationship between pre-competitive anxiety and psychological resilience in 222 female youth soccer players aged 12-18 years. The researchers found that pre-competitive anxiety was negatively linked to psychological resilience, indicating that athletes with higher resilience levels might be better at handling pre-competitive anxiety. Previous research has established a link between state anxiety and sports performance in young female soccer players. These studies suggest that state anxiety can negatively affect sports performance in these athletes and that managing anxiety levels is crucial for success in sports (Beedie, Terry & Lane, 2000; Woodman & Hardy, 2003). Given the negative impact of state anxiety on sports performance, especially among young athletes, the present research aims to explore the factors associated with pre-competitive anxiety in young female soccer players. Our plan includes measuring the anxiety levels of young girls practicing in soccer clubs just before competitions. We will then analyze the relationships between anxiety scores and various sociocultural variables.

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Material & Methods

Population

The population recruited in this study is made up of 122 players playing in different soccer clubs and studying in different schools in the Beni Mellal-Khenifra region in central Morocco.

Tools

To measure precompetitive anxiety in young athletes, the Spielberger State Anxiety Inventory (STAI) was used (Spielberger, 1983). It is a widely used self-report questionnaire designed to measure anxiety as a transient emotional state. The questionnaire consists of 20 items that assess how respondents feel "right now" on a 4-point scale, ranging from "not at all" to "very much so." Items assess feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry. Scores range from 20 to 80, with higher scores indicating higher levels of state anxiety. The STAI has been widely used in both clinical and research settings, and has demonstrated good reliability and validity. It has been used to measure anxiety in a variety of populations, including adults, children, and individuals with various medical conditions, such as cancer and chronic pain. A form focusing on the main variables to be analyzed, such as length of time in athletic clubs, family support and others, was completed by the participants.

Statistical analyses

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 25 software. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were calculated to characterize the sample. Normality of distributions was verified by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The correlations between the state anxiety score associated with the competition and the various variables studied were evaluated by Pearson's correlation coefficient. The comparison of means between the different groups was carried out using the Student's t-test for independent samples. The significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$ for all analyses.

Ethical considerations

Written approval was obtained from Sultan Moulay Slimane University under the number of FST/LGB/2018/15; JAN.2023-SEPT.2023. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were by the ethical standards of the institutional

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research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants and their parents. They were notified that they could remove themselves from the study at anytime during the study without any consequence or problems. All data were confidential and protected at all stages of the study. Participation in this research was voluntary and no financial compensation was paid

Results

Population characteristics

The age of the players participating in our study varies from 15 years to 18 years with an average of 16.36 years (standard deviation=0.78 years). Among our study population, 13 girls (59% of our sample) play in football athletic clubs.

Level of pre-competitive anxiety in the young athlete population

This section focuses specifically on the incidence rate of abnormal levels of pre-competitive anxiety, using the diagnostic threshold established by the STAI scale, set at an average score of 42. Descriptive analysis revealed that 35% of the sample, representing 43 players, scored equal to or above this threshold (Figure 1). This score is recognized as indicative of a level of pre-competitive anxiety that may significantly impair athletic performance. These findings suggest that the competitive context triggered a substantial level of anxiety in a considerable portion of the young female football players. It is also important to note that a higher score on the STAI scale reflects a more anxiety-inducing perception of the competitive situation. Furthermore, our observations indicate that the majority of players exhibiting high levels of competition-related anxiety belong predominantly to the youngest age group, between 15 and 16 years old. A more in-depth analysis of pre-competitive anxiety in relation to age will be presented in the section dedicated to correlation analysis.

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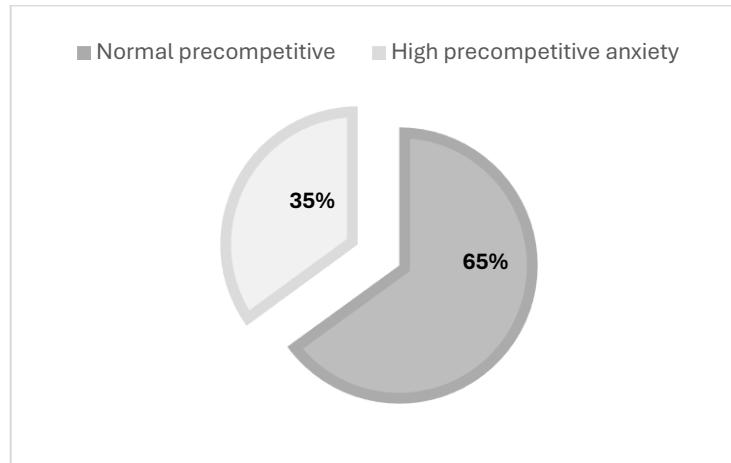


Figure 1: Incidence rates of pre-competitive anxiety, both normative and pathological, among female soccer players.

Factors associated with precompetitive anxiety in young female soccer players

In order to identify the factors involved in the anxious situation that precedes competitive matches in female soccer players, we analyzed the correlations between the variable reflecting the presence or not of pre-competitive anxiety and several other data collected around the coaches, age, duration of practice in athletic clubs and family support.

Table 1: Correlation between factors associated with precompetitive anxiety

Pre-competitive Anxiety	Age	Family support	coaches' interventions	seniority of playing	School sports association	Establishment's representation
Pearson Correlation	0.08	0.341	0.154	0,32	0.09	0,02
Sig.	0.47	0.002	0,01	0.003	0,42	0.5
N	122	122	122	122	122	122

*r = Pearson correlation coefficient *p < .05 considered significant

Statistical analyses revealed that the total STAI score varied significantly with family support ($t=2,78$ $p = 0,01$). This finding indicates that young athletes who receive encouragement and support from their families to play soccer had significantly lower anxiety scores ($r= 0,34$ $p= 0,002$) (Table 1). The results also showed that coaches' interventions in the area of psychological preparation had a positive impact on reducing the levels of anxiety and competition-related state in female soccer players. In this regard, the young sportswomen who declared that they had received psychological preparation

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from their coaches had a significantly lower total anxiety score than those who did not receive such preparation before the sports competition ($r= 0,154$; $p= 0,01$).

Regarding the age variable, no relevant correlation was found between this variable and the score reflecting the level of state anxiety in female soccer players (Table 1). The seniority of soccer practice in the Atlantic clubs was one of the factors associated with a low intensity of state anxiety related to the competition in the subjects participating in our study ($r= 0,23$; $p= 0,001$). The experience acquired through participation in sports activities organized within the framework of the school sports association within the schools did not have any positive impact on the psychological preparation for sports competitions in the young soccer athletes ($r =0,09$; $p = 0,42$). Similarly, the fact of representing the school in previous sports events did not guarantee a good management of the anxiety situation linked to the competition ($r = 0,02$; $p =0,5$).

Table 2: Comparison of mean scores for precompetitive anxiety in female soccer players according to various factors.

Pre-competitive anxiety score	Levene's test for equality of variance		t-test for equality of means		
	F	Sig.	t	ddl	Sig.
Family support	1,509	0.233	2,246	20	0.03
Age categories	2.59	0.123	2,156	19	0.04
School sports activities	1,454	0.242	0.687	20	500
Athletic Club registration	0.15	0,70	0,497	17	0.62

*STAI = State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. Levene's test for equality of variances is reported. *Sig. = p-value

When we compare STAI scores according to the factors examined, we find that girls who are encouraged by their families to play soccer have significantly lower scores than those who said they receive no family support to play this sport, the average scores were 32.7 vs 46.5 respectively (Table 2). In terms of age categories, Student's t tests revealed a statistically significant difference in favor of female soccer players grouped in the 15 and 16 age bracket, versus those aged 17 and 18 ($t=2.44$, $p=0.02$). Although levels of competitive anxiety did not vary significantly according to whether or not girls actively participated in sessions organized as part of a school sports association, it should be noted that the scores of those who did benefit from these activities were slightly lower (31

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versus 37.6 respectively). Similarly, girl athletes who had not represented their school in school sports competitions had relatively higher mean STAI scores, reflecting higher anxiety levels, compared with their peers who had (37 versus 33 respectively).

Discussion

This study aims to assess the psychological preparation of young female soccer players by analyzing their pre-competitive anxiety and its determinants. It pursues a dual objective: optimizing athletic performance by integrating the psychological dimension, and promoting female participation in soccer in contexts where the sport is still perceived as predominantly male. The findings of the present study indicate that approximately one-third of the participants (35%) exhibited scores reflecting levels of anxiety that may negatively impact their athletic performance, thereby highlighting a significant vulnerability within the studied population. The protective role of familial support, prolonged involvement in club activities, and psychological guidance from coaches were identified as critical findings. Conversely, there was no clear link between anxiety levels and age or participation in school sports. This finding appears particularly significant for educational policy. Indeed, current teacher training programs do not include modules specifically devoted to the psychological and mental preparation of students, especially those engaged in sports activities within athletic clubs. Yet, addressing this dimension is essential to better support young athletes in managing stress, pre-competitive anxiety, and performance-related pressures. Integrating such content into both initial and continuing teacher education could therefore strengthen their capacity to foster the well-being and holistic development of student-athletes. Several factors may therefore contribute to pre-competitive anxiety among young athletes, particularly female soccer players.

Sociocultural factors

Anxiety is also a common problem among young female soccer players, who may feel great pressure to perform at their best. Studies have shown that girls can experience higher levels of anxiety than boys in competitive sports (Arroyo del Bosque, Cook Vaquero, Moral García, & Amatria Jiménez, 2025). Factors that may explain these

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anxiety levels include specific social and cultural expectations of female performance in sport (Holt & Dunn, 2004). In addition, girls may also face issues of stigma and discrimination in sports traditionally associated with males, such as soccer. Research has shown that gender stereotypes can influence how girls perceive their ability to succeed in sports, which can impact their confidence and anxiety levels (Hoffman & Kessler, 2017). In a study, published in 2019, examining factors associated with precompetitive anxiety in young female soccer players in Ireland, researchers recruited 222 young female players aged 13 to 16 years to participate in the study (Curran & Hill, 2019). Participants completed a precompetitive anxiety questionnaire and were assessed on their skill level, sport experience, social support, and level of engagement in soccer. The results of the study revealed that young female soccer players with higher skill levels and more athletic experience tend to have less pre-competitive anxiety (Curran & Hill, 2019). The researchers also found that social support, particularly from parents and coaches, can reduce pre-competitive anxiety in young female players. Finally, the study found that young female players who are more involved in soccer tend to have more pre-competitive anxiety (Curran & Hill, 2019).

Psychological factors

The study of the effectiveness of psychological interventions in regulating pre-competitive anxiety represents a major challenge in supporting young athletes. The findings of our study are consistent with those of research conducted in Spain, which assessed the efficacy of a psychological program combining relaxation and visualization techniques to manage pre-competitive anxiety (González-García & Contreras, 2020). In that study, the researchers recruited 60 participants and randomly assigned them to two groups. The experimental group received a structured psychological intervention program that included relaxation techniques, such as controlled breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, combined with visualization exercises aimed at enhancing self-confidence and mental preparation. In contrast, the control group continued with their usual training sessions without receiving any specific psychological support (González-García & Contreras, 2020). The results demonstrated a statistically significant reduction in pre-competitive anxiety levels among the players who participated in the intervention

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compared to those in the control group. Notably, athletes who initially exhibited the highest levels of anxiety were the ones who benefited the most from the intervention. This suggests that such psychological strategies are particularly relevant for athletes who are more emotionally vulnerable. These findings highlight the need to adopt a holistic approach to sports preparation, in which physical and technical development is systematically accompanied by psychological training that addresses the demands of performance. The regular integration of such interventions into training programs may not only enhance psychological well-being but also improve the competitive effectiveness of young athletes. Coaches, sport psychologists, and educational institutions are therefore encouraged to place psychological dimensions at the core of their practice in order to foster the balanced and sustainable development of athletes.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the intensity of competitive anxiety among athletes differs according to the nature of the sport practiced. In individual sports, the autonomy and full responsibility for performance tend to increase anxiety, which can disrupt motor and cognitive functions (Bukhari, Fahd, Tahira, & Yaseen, 2021; Lobo, Masagca, Serrano, Reyes, & Esteban, 2024; Pokharel & Zhu, 2018; Preja, 2019). In contrast, in team sports such as basketball or football, the distribution of responsibilities among players helps reduce anxiety, with athletes generally exhibiting lower levels (Moroianu & Popescu, 2023). However, in ball sports, this form of anxiety predicts a decrease in muscular strength, motor coordination, cardiorespiratory capacity and total physical condition (Cruz, 2025).

This study has certain limitations. These should be recognized when interpreting its results. The focus exclusively on female participants meant that comparisons with male athletes of the same age could not be made. Additionally, the study was limited to one region and a specific socio-cultural context, which limits the applicability of the findings. Other factors, such as academic stress or intrinsic motivation, were not examined but may also influence pre-competitive anxiety. The cross-sectional design offers only a snapshot and does not show how anxiety changes over time. In future research, these limitations should be addressed by including samples of both genders, using a longitudinal approach to monitor changes in anxiety across different stages of athletic development, and applying intervention-based designs to evaluate the

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effectiveness of psychological preparation programs. In conclusion, this study identified key factors related to pre-competitive anxiety in young female footballers, such as athletic experience, social support, and coaching practices. Psychological interventions seem promising in lowering anxiety and should be incorporated into training programs. Coaches and parents play a crucial role in creating supportive, inclusive, and gender-sensitive environments, and in encouraging players to set realistic goals and develop effective strategies for managing competitive stress.

Conclusion

This study adds to what is known about the competition anxiety of young female athletes in socio-cultural environments where soccer predominates as a male preserve. Results also indicated that participation in school sports associations does not significantly reduce precompetitive anxiety. This has important policy implications. School-based programs may be seen as building resilience, but they do not address the psychological demands of competition; thus, structured psychological training in the form of stress management and goal-setting expertise should be integrated into teacher education for physical education teachers and sports coaches. Future research should continue to explore the apparent ineffectiveness of school sports associations and how program design and teacher expertise can more optimally intervene on behalf of young female athletes who are at risk of high precompetitive anxiety.

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