



March, 2003  
Volume 5, Issue 1

## **CASE STUDY:**

### **Coping in Professional Sport: A Case Study of an Experienced Cricket Player**

*Nicholas L. Holt*  
*Leeds Metropolitan University*

#### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this article was to examine the coping responses employed by an athlete to manage the daily hassles he experienced in professional sport. Adopting a phenomenological orientation, data were gathered via four in-depth interviews with an experienced professional cricket player. Findings indicated that stress appraisals were related to endangerment of personal performance goals. Coping strategies deployed to deal with these stressors were evaluation and planning (learning about opponents, reading (new) opponents, and understanding conditions), proactive psychological skills (confidence building and maintaining concentration) and reactive psychological skills (resilience and self-talk). Results are discussed in the context of previous situation-specific research on appraisal and coping. Finally, implications for researchers and applied sport psychologists are outlined.

#### **Introduction**

Coping represents an individual's cognitive, affective, and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands (Crocker, Kowalski, & Graham, 1998; Lazarus, 1999). Athletes must develop a range of cognitive and behavioral coping skills to manage the competitive stressors they face (Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991). Obtaining information about the nature and application of coping strategies used by elite athletes has special appeal for practitioners in sport psychology because it offers a foundation for interventions.

The most widely used coping model in sport psychology is based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transaction process perspective. They view coping as a process that begins with situational appraisal. Primary appraisal refers to how an individual evaluates the personal significance of a

situation with regard to his/her values, personal beliefs, situational intentions, and goal commitments. If the individual appraises that his/her goals are at stake, an emotional response occurs and the outcomes are perceived in terms of harm/loss (i.e., damage has already occurred), threat (i.e., the possibility that damage may occur), or challenge (i.e., where people enthusiastically pit themselves against obstacles). Secondary appraisal refers to a cognitive-evaluative process that focuses on what can be done about a stressful person-environment relationship, especially when there has been a primary appraisal of harm/loss or threat. Secondary appraisal provides the cognitive underpinning for coping.

The transactional perspective assumes there to be coping responses that serve one of two important functions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping refers to strategies used to manage or alter a stressor through behaviours such as information gathering, goal-setting, time management skills, and problem-solving. Emotion-focused coping refers to attempts at regulating emotional responses resulting from a stressor through actions like meditation, relaxation, and cognitive efforts to change the meaning an individual attaches to a situation.

Coping theorists have also distinguished between acute and chronic stressors. Acute stressors are major life events, such as sickness or loss of a loved one, whereas chronic demands refer to recurring daily stressors (Compas, 1987). In sport, participation in major championships (i.e., Olympics, World Cup finals) could be considered major life events, whereas chronic stressors are recurring day-to-day events associated with sport participation. Considerable sport coping research has been concerned with elite amateur athletes perceptions of stress and coping responses at major competitions (e.g., Dale, 2000; Dugdale, Eklund, & Gordon, 2002; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Pensgaard & Ursin, 1998). Major competition stressors reported by elite athletes include: organizational factors, media pressures, travel, competitive expectations, preparatory training; coaches' communication, demands of elite sport, and distractions (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medberry, & Peterson, 1999; Holt & Hogg, 2002).

Adopting a retrospective approach, Gould, Eklund, and Jackson (1993) showed that 1988 US Olympic wrestlers dealt with adversity during their bouts by using thought control, maintaining task focus, behavioral changes, and emotional control. Dale (2000) found that elite decathletes ( $N = 7$ ) maintained task-focus during their most memorable performances by reinforcing the importance of competing against themselves and reminding themselves of their preparatory training to deal with doubts. Coping strategies reported by members of a women's international soccer team ( $N = 10$ ) during preparations for the 1999 World Cup finals included re-appraisal, use of social resources, performance behaviours, and blocking (Holt & Hogg, 2002). These investigations provide a descriptive foundation for understanding the different ways in which elite athletes cope at major competitions.

One previous investigation that appeared to tap into how athletes coped with daily hassles was a retrospective study of stress and coping among former elite figure skaters (Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993). Coping strategies used by former elite figure skaters to manage regular daily stressors during training and competition included: rational thinking and self-talk, positive focus and orientation, social support, time management, training hard, isolation, and blocking. Similarly, Noblet and Gifford (2002) examined chronic sources of stress among Australian Rules

football players ( $N = 32$ ). Sources of stress included performance concerns, lack of feedback, difficulty balancing football and study commitments, and job insecurity. Unfortunately the researchers did not actually examine the coping strategies used by professional footballers, but the wide range of indirect and direct performance stressors identified highlights the need to consider coping strategies used by professional athletes to manage daily hassles.

Overall, the majority of sport coping research has been concerned with responses employed by elite amateur athletes to deal with major competition stressors. Daily hassles research is underdeveloped and the coping strategies used by professional athletes to manage daily hassles have yet to be adequately examined. A fuller understanding of coping in sport will be developed by examining coping with different types of stressors (i.e., acute and chronic) among different sport populations. The purpose of this case study was to explore the lived experiences of a professional athlete in relation to the daily hassles stressors and associated coping strategies he employed during a competitive season.

## **Method**

### **Methodology**

The methodological assumptions that guided this study were based on Heidegger's (1927/62) hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology, which is an approach to understanding human experience that is directed by the question: 'What is the structure, meaning, and essence of this lived experience for the people involved?' (Kerry & Armour, 2000; Van Manen, 1997; Patton, 1990;). Using this methodology to access lived experiences enables researchers to come to a better understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human existence (Van Manen, 1997). Given that the purposes of this study were to examine the nature and content of coping strategies employed by a professional athlete, the capacity within hermeneutic phenomenology to focus on the structure and meaning of lived personal experiences made it an appropriate methodology.

### **Participant**

With phenomenological research it is vital to select an information rich case who can provide adequate depth of information based on his/her experiences (Patton, 1990). The participant in this case study (Guy) was a professional cricket player. At the time of data collection he was 31 years old, a senior bowler with a professional county cricket side in England, and had been a professional cricketer for 12 years. He had one international cap, but his opportunities at this level had been reduced due to a knee injury. As such, Guy was a veteran player who had successfully managed a professional career for many years and was in a position to provide detailed descriptions of the stressors and coping strategies professional cricketers experience.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected via four in-depth (one hour) interviews conducted during the first part of an English professional cricket season (from May to August). A female undergraduate student who had received training in research interview techniques conducted all interviews. The purpose

of the first interview was to establish rapport and trust with the participant (Patton, 1990) and inquire about his goals, values, and perceptions of stress. Subsequent interviews were guided by themes that arose during data analysis. The repeated interviewing approach facilitated the corroboration of emerging interpretations (on-going member-checking) and produced prolonged engagement which adds to the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It also facilitated interaction between data collection and analysis; another important element of qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### **Data Analysis**

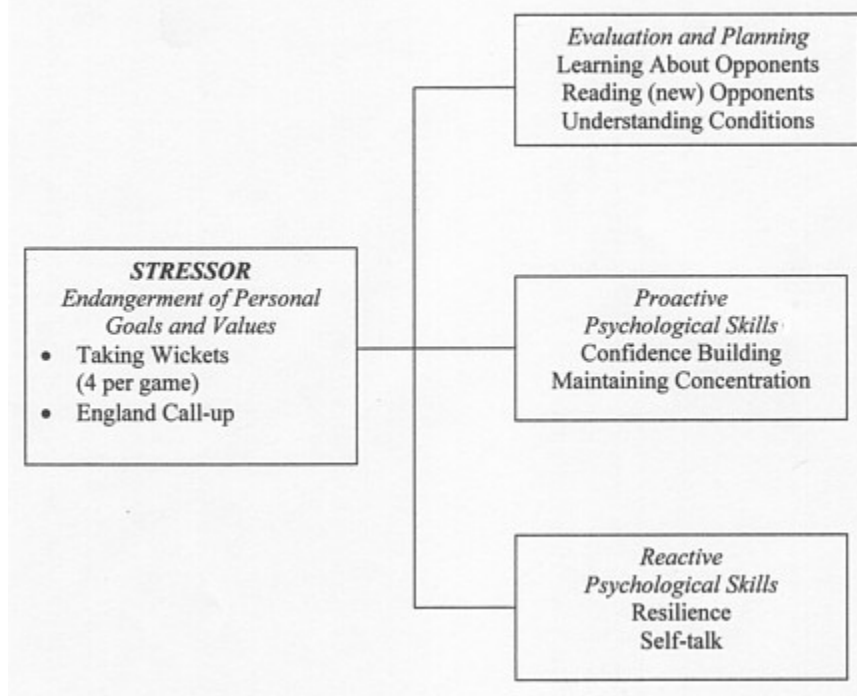
The data were subjected to phenomenological thematic analysis (Van Manen, 1997), which was designed to develop a series of pertinent themes that represented the participant's lived experience of coping in cricket. Inductive, line-by-line analysis was used to identify and code units of meaning, which were then organized as central themes pertaining to the participant's experience. Each sentence was subjected to the question "what does this sentence reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?" (Van Manen, p. 93). Themes were developed as several similar units of meaning were identified. Once the central themes had been established, meaning units within one theme were compared to other meaning units (intracase comparisons) to ensure the accuracy of units assigned to each main theme. Finally, themes were compared to extracase comparisons from existing theory.

## **Results**

### **Personal Goals and Values**

An overview of the results is provided in Figure 1. It is important to establish the personal goals and values that underscores stress appraisal and subsequent coping processes (Lazarus, 1999). Guy explained that his job as a professional cricketer dominated his life: "Cricket is my main source of income, and it has been for the last 10 or 12 years. It's a huge part of my life, playing 5 days a week. It's a pretty nice way to make a living." As an experienced member of his team, Guy was the senior bowler and he also had some coaching responsibilities with the youth development program. His life was dedicated to and dominated by being a professional cricketer.

Figure 1. Coping with daily hassles in professional cricket.



Guy defined success as a cricketer completely in terms of performance outcomes. He said, "Ultimately the best players are the ones that take the most wickets and score the most runs. It's what you come out with at the end of the day." Accordingly, Guy's personal goals for the season revolved around performance outcomes. He had learned to focus on short-term goals, and aimed to take four wickets in every county championship (four day) game. However, Guy also possessed longer-term aspirations that formed an important part of his values and beliefs. He said, "I played for England once about three years ago. I mean, obviously I would like to try and get back into the England set up, that's what I would like to try and achieve." Given that the goals Guy set for himself were to take wickets, the main stressor he reported was failing to take wickets. His goals were endangered when he performed poorly. As such, performing well enough to take four wickets per game was the major stressor he identified, to which all his coping strategies were directed.

## **Coping Strategies**

### **Evaluation and Strategic Planning**

Guy used three techniques to enable him to strategically plan ways in which he might be effective. He explained, "You've got to have a general overall plan. There are always things going on in your mind trying to keep one step ahead really, and I have a different game plan for different batsman... I supposed it's being one step ahead, being in charge of what's going on."

*Learning about opponents.* Guy learned about opponent's strengths and weaknesses through

prior experiences. He said, "90% of them [opponents] I've played against before so I know what to expect. I have an idea in my head of how I'm going to bowl at certain people... You sort of have to recreate what has worked for you in previous games." He explained how he used this experience against a specific opponent: "I remembered how I got him out and where he scored most of his runs, so where his strengths and weaknesses are. So then it's important that you try and work on his weaknesses."

*Reading (new) opponents.* Although Guy had played against most of his competitors before there were always new players coming into the league. He thought that it was important to evaluate these new players as quickly as possible. He said that he tried to "look at the way he stands. I suppose you look at his body language as well so you can tell whether they are actually up for it...When you've bowled the ball and followed through then I would sort of look at the batsmen and see what sort of signals he was giving out." Guy then used this information to then exploit any apparent weaknesses.

*Understanding conditions.* Guy had learned to evaluate environmental conditions and adapt his bowling to suit these perceived demands. In order to assess the conditions he said that "after I've bowled a couple of balls I can tell what the ball is doing." Again, previous experience assisted him: "If we play away somewhere I've never played before I might go out and bowl and expect things to go a certain way, but if they don't you've got to have a bit of a re-think and deal with it on your feet."

### **Proactive Psychological Strategies**

Guy used psychological strategies to proactively build his confidence and maintain concentration. They were proactive in the sense that he used these skills when he anticipated they would be required.

*Confidence building.* It was very important to Guy to nurture and protect his confidence in order to manage the pressures of being a professional cricketer. He said that "people who have done very well at the very top level, I think a lot of it is self-confidence, even on days when things aren't going very well for them they've got a lot of confidence." He used a number of techniques to build his confidence levels, but thought, "previous results often determine confidence a lot of the time." He recalled previous performance accomplishments against the particular opponent ("Before I start I would look back at when I've done well against the opposition. I suppose it's more of a confidence boost if anything, to give myself a bit of a gee up"). He practised in the nets on the morning of one game because that gave him "the confidence that I've done it in the nets for half an hour, so once the game starts I can put that into practice." He also engaged in mental rehearsal ("remembering and playing back what I've done in the past") and self-talk ("I might talk myself up a bit more").

*Maintaining concentration.* Concentration was an important factor in cricket because "It's a long day trying to concentrate all the time." Guy had developed the ability to switch his concentration when required, and he had a prepared concentration routine that he activated for every ball he ever bowled. This routine was: (a) Think about the previous ball as you are walking back and then think about what you are going to do with the next ball; (b) Pause at the start of the

run to get a clear idea in your mind of what you are going to do (c) Once you start to run in stick with your decision, do not change your mind.

### **Reactive Psychological Strategies**

In addition to the proactive strategies previously outlined, Guy possessed two more reactive skills that he used when he appraised poor personal performance levels. These reactive skills were resilience and self-talk.

*Resilience.* Guy coped with mistakes by displaying resilience (the ability of bounce back). He used resilience on a very specific level after a bad ball: "If you bowl a bad ball you can get away with it really, even if you get hit for fours and sixes it's no great problem because you just go back and bowl the next ball." He was also resilient on a day-to-day basis: "If I do have a bad day, which obviously everybody is going to do, then I'm reasonably confident that it's not going to get me down for the rest of the week or something and I'm able to come back the next day."

*Self-talk.* During competition Guy used self-talk quite extensively. If he was bowling badly he would say to himself: "you know that's not good enough, you've got to start doing this." He continued, "I suppose I say what I'd say to other bowlers if I wasn't happy with what they were doing. I'd try and say the same things to myself before anyone else did." The content of his self-talk appeared to be a mixture of positive and negative comments. For example, he said "if I've been hit for four I'll give myself a bit of a rollocking, but then as I get back to my starting mark then I would be starting to think about the next ball instead of the previous one. I never try to bowl a ball without having a positive idea of what I'm going to do."

## **Discussion**

The findings of this case study make two potentially significant contributions to the stress and coping in sport literature. First, the results indicated that appraisals (and subsequent coping responses) are goal directed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and support the notion that higher levels of anxiety in sport are encountered when personally relevant goals are believed to be endangered (Lewthwaite, 1990). Lazarus (1999) suggested that goal commitment is the most important appraisal variable because without this the individual has nothing at stake. Examining personal goals and beliefs as part of the research approach helped produced this important finding. Although it is difficult to examine the impact of personal background information in traditional research designs, future investigations that attend to personal histories and salient goals, values, and beliefs are likely to advance appraisal-coping research.

The second significant implication is that Guy used qualitatively different coping strategies to deal with different situational appraisals. Proactive coping strategies appeared to be employed in situations where Guy anticipated threat (i.e., the potential that harm might occur). Alternatively, reactive coping strategies appeared to be deployed following primary appraisals of harm/loss (i.e., when damage had already occurred following mistakes). The suggestion that different appraisals result in the use of different types of coping has been supported in the non-sport coping literature. McCrae (1984) adopted a situation specific approach and found that people used different coping strategies to deal with challenge, threat, and harm/loss. Such

situation specific investigations of appraisal and coping in sport represent important future research directions.

Following threat appraisals Guy used confidence and concentration strategies as proactive coping measures. It has been suggested that preventative coping (i.e., coping used to deal with anticipated problems) is an important coping mechanism in non-sport settings (Peacock, Wong, & Reker, 1993). Guy's proactive psychological skills served a preventative coping function and appeared to form an important part of his coping repertoire.

Following harm/loss appraisals Guy demonstrated resilience and used self-talk. The content of both these reactive coping strategies involved cognitive efforts to change the meaning he attached to the situation, and therefore served an emotion-focused coping function. It is proposed that emotion-focused coping will be effective in situations that are perceived as uncontrollable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Given that Guy employed emotion-focused coping after a mistake, it is likely he perceived this as an uncontrollable situation (i.e., the mistake had already occurred), and therefore attempted to deal with his emotional and cognitive responses to the stressor.

Guy also possessed a set of general coping behaviours that he used in all competitive situations. The categories of evaluation and planning (along with proactive psychological skills) represent problem-focused coping strategies that Guy used to get opponents out. Theory suggests that problem-focused coping is likely to be most effective when situations are appraised as being controllable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is plausible that, through experience, Guy had developed perceptions of control over apparently uncontrollable performance elements. For example, whereas environmental conditions are clearly uncontrollable, understanding the implications of these conditions for performance, and adapting skills and techniques to make the most of these conditions are controllable skills. It appeared that Guy had developed an understanding of his own reactions to a range of situations.

Although the results of this study corroborated previous coping research, the exclusively performance-related nature of the stressors Guy identified differed from previous findings. For example, Noblet and Gifford (2002) showed that professional athletes faced a range of in-direct performance stressors (e.g., job insecurity), but Guy's concerns were exclusively related to direct performance issues (taking four wickets). It is plausible to speculate that Guy had learned to make distinctions between his professional career and personal life. Clearly further research is required with experienced professional athletes to understand more about what types of stressors they experience and how they cope with such situations. Daily diaries approaches to assessing coping provide an alternative to psychometric measures and may be useful in examining coping longitudinally (Porter & Stone, 1996).

This study raises several applied implications. Given that Guy had successfully managed an extensive professional sport career and reached the top level of his profession, it is likely that the coping strategies he possessed were relatively effective. As such, these strategies offer a potential foundation for teaching coping skills to young athletes. The sport-specific nature of the coping skills identified will be particularly useful for developing talent in the sport of cricket, but may also be transferable to other fielding games (i.e., baseball, softball). Future research with more

professional athletes will strengthen the empirical basis for applied interventions even further.

## References

- Compas, B. E. (1987). Coping with stress during childhood and adolescence. Psychological Bulletin, 101, 393-403.
- Crocker, P. R. E., Kowalski, K. C., & Graham, T. R. (1998). Measurement of coping strategies in sport. In J. L. Duda (Ed.), Advances in measurement of sport and exercise psychology (pp. 149-161). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.
- Dale, G. A. (2000). Distractions and coping strategies of elite decathletes during their most memorable performances. The Sport Psychologist, 14, 17-41.
- Dugdale, J. R., Eklund, R. C., & Gordon, S. (2002). Expected and unexpected stressors in major international competitive: Appraisal, coping, and performance. The Sport Psychologist, 16, 20-33.
- Gould, D., Eklund, R. C., & Jackson, S. A. (1993). Coping strategies used by more or less successful U.S. Olympic wrestlers. Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 64, 83-93.
- Gould, D., Guinan, D., Greenleaf, C., Medberry, R., & Peterson, K. (1999). Factors affecting Olympic performance: Perceptions of athletes and coaches from more and less successful teams. The Sport Psychologist, 13, 371-394.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). Being and time (J. Macquarie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Oxford, UK: Blackwell. (Original work published 1927).
- Holt, N. L., & Hogg, J. M. (2002). Perceptions of stress and coping during preparations for the 1999 women's soccer world cup finals. The Sport Psychologist, 16, 251-271.
- Kerry, D. S., & Armour, K. M. (2000). Sport sciences and the promise of phenomenology: Philosophy, method, and insight. Quest, 52, 1-17.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1999). Stress and emotion: A new synthesis New York: Springer.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, appraisal, and coping. New York: Springer.
- Lewthwaite, R. (1990). Threat perception in competitive trait anxiety: The endangerment of important goals. Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 12, 280-300.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- McCrae, R. R. (1984). Situational determinants in coping responses: Loss, threat, and challenge. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46, 919-928.
- Noblet, A. J., & Gifford, S. M. (2002). The sources of stress experienced by professional Australian footballers. Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 14, 1-13.

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

Pensgaard, A. M., & Ursin, H. (1998). Stress, control, and coping in elite athletes. Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports, 8, 183-189.

Peacock, E. J., Wong, P. T. P., & Reker, G. T. (1993). Relations between appraisals and coping schemas: Support for the congruence model. Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science, 25, 64-80.

Porter, L. S., & Stone, A. A. (1996). An approach to assessing daily coping. In M. Zeidner & N. S. Endler (Eds.), Handbook of coping: Theory, research, and applications (pp. 133-150). New York: Wiley.

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 & Exercise Psychology, 13, 102-120.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Van Manen, M. (1997). Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy. London, Ontario: Althouse Press.