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Choking under pressure: the case of elite figure skaters

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Background: Choking in sport is defined as, “a process whereby the individual perceives that their resources are insufficient to meet the demands of the situation, and concludes with a significant drop in performance – a choke” (Hill, et al., 2009: European Journal of Sport Science, 9[4], 203-212, p. 206). It occurs as a result of attentional disturbances caused by heightened anxiety, yet the precise mechanism of choking remains subject to debate. The self-focus models have been presented as the most likely mechanism of choking, although the distraction models have received increasing support, particularly from studies which have adopted qualitative methods (e.g., Hill et al., 2010: International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 3[1], 24-39). Indeed, through the growing number of choking studies that have employed idiographic approaches, an enhanced understanding of choking has been offered. Nevertheless, the need for further qualitative choking research remains.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine choking in sport through qualitative methods and to explore specifically, the cognitions, emotions, and ineffective coping strategies experienced by elite athletes during their choking experience.

Methods: Following ethical approval, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four international figure skaters (3 female and 1 male; aged between 18 and 34), who had experienced choking regularly during the previous season. Each interview examined at length the participant’s cognitions, emotions, and ineffective coping strategies associated with their choking episodes. The interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and the data were

analysed via inductive content analysis. Trustworthiness of the data was enhanced by allowing the participants to verify the transcripts and emergent themes.

Results: The results of the study indicated that the participants' main sources of stress were related to organisational demands, such as competition and training environments, accommodation, and external expectations. Immediately prior to, and during a choke, the participants recalled having several negative and distracting cognitions, including self-doubt, worry, and self-presentational concerns. Moreover, they also experienced negatively toned emotions, such as debilitating anxiety, disorientation, frustration, and panic. A variety of ineffective efforts to cope were also reported, such as physical and psychological disengagement, social support, and venting.

Discussion: The results of this study offer support for the distraction models of choking, and the recent work of Gucciardi et al. (2010: Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 32[1], 61-83) who identified that high levels of debilitating cognitive anxiety and self-presentational concerns play a critical role in the choking process.

Conclusion: The results suggest that practitioners should encourage their athletes to develop effective coping strategies, which particularly enable the effective management of debilitating anxiety and self-presentational concerns. Although it is not possible to eliminate all of the organisational demands placed on elite athletes, this study has highlighted the importance of alleviating organisational stress where possible, including the provision of high quality training and competitive environments.