Discussion

Analyzing the Performance and Resilience of Neeraj Chopra Through the Lens of Theory of Threat and Challenge States in Athlete

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Abstract

The present study aimed to analyze Neeraj Chopra’s performance and resilience with the help of the theory of threat and challenge states in athletes (TCTSA). Multiple quantitative and qualitative data sources, such as media bites, newspaper articles, interviews from various print and digital media, and online sites, were employed in the current study. The data collection time frame was limited to 2018 to 2021. Furthermore, the concept of resilience has been discovered and encouraged by utilizing the Theory of Challenge and Threat States in Athletes (TCTSA). In this article, we have taken the case of Neeraj Chopra and suggested that the hardship and adversities he has faced in the past can be ascribed to his resilience. His story helps us understand how important it is to expose athletes to adversities for their psychological development. This also implies that coaches should expose their trainees to stressful situations for mental growth and to build their confidence. Exposure to adversities and competition stress will help them to increase resilience. Developing a positive attitude towards adversity is also essential, as it will improve athletes’ perception of competition situations.

Introduction

“India’s Neeraj Chopra Bagged India’s first ever Gold Medal in athletics at the Olympics Games after Winning the men’s Javelin Throw in Tokyo on Saturday, August 7. His throw of 87.58m, which came in the second attempt in the competition, won him the top podium finish” (The Hindu, 2021).

Representing one’s country in the Olympics is every athlete’s dream. The Olympics is a high-pressure event where the athletes must perform at their highest level of form. During the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, practice sessions for athletes were disrupted due to lockdowns worldwide, and as the situation improved, the Olympics were announced. This might have caused a lot more stress for the athletes. Expectation from others and oneself to perform at one’s best is one of the significant sources of stress for athletes to perform. Past research has found that stress experienced during the period prior to competition plays a critical role in determining performance, and types of stress experience (expectations, external distractions, negative thoughts, coach, competition itself and injury chances) are found to have a more detrimental effect on performance than the time of experience (A. et al., 2007).

The impact of stress on athletes depends on how athletes meet expectations and cope with situations, using psychological resources such as resilience. Resilience encloses modifiable psychological characteristics (upbeat personality, motivation, confidence, focus and perceived social support) that can help athletes face the adverse effects of stressors (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). In this paper, we will discuss the role of resilience in Neeraj Chopra’s recent performance at the Tokyo Summer Olympics in 2020. Neeraj Chopra had an...
exciting journey to the finals of the Tokyo Olympics, underscoring the role of resilience, geographical context, and preparation. This paper will also shed light on how past experiences impact the perception of the current situation, help build resilience, and impact the performance of the athletes.

Neeraj Chopra is an Indian athlete who competes in men’s javelin throw. He came into the public eye when he became the first Indian track and field athlete to win a gold medal in IAAF World Under-20 Championship in 2016. He set a world record by throwing a distance of 86.48m. A year before the Tokyo Olympics 2019, Neeraj faced injuries in the right elbow.

“We found loose bodies in the joint and eventually decided that he must undergo surgery to remove them in May 2019. He could not get his elbow into full extension. The pain was terrible,” says Dhananjay Kaushik, Head of Sports Science and Physiotherapy at Inspire Institute of Sport India (Mint Lounge, 2021).

“I started feeling my injury back in November 2018. Despite the pain, I continued to train but did not have too many issues. However, it was aggravated by April 2019.” Neeraj said. (Mint Lounge, 2021)

Neeraj was under high pressure and faced his career-low (adversities). After the surgery in May 2019, He went for meditation and rehabilitation training in Patiala. It was tough for any athlete to make such an impressive comeback.

“I had trained hard for the World Championships. It was constantly on my mind whenever I was at the training. But injury kiwajah se sab gadbad ho gaya, (Because of injury everything went wrong)” he told Hindustan Times in February, 2020

Due to injury, Neeraj could not participate in the world championship. Going for surgery just before the Olympics could have easily hampered Neeraj’s confidence. Staying away from the sport after a successful 2018 (winning gold at both Commonwealth and Asian Games) could have derailed the momentum of performance. How realistic were Neeraj’s chances? Players like Johannes Vetter, Walcott, Krukowski, and Julian Weber were better than Neeraj in the recent past. Johannes Vetter said, “I am looking to throw over 90m in Tokyo, so it will be tough for him (Chopra) to beat me” (ESPN, 2021). However, competing in the third Indian Grand Prix Meet in Patiala in March 2021, Neeraj flings the spear to the distance of 88.07, breaking his earlier national record. With this performance, Neeraj raised the hope of winning a medal in the Olympics for the country. Later in the year, Neeraj Chopra made India proud by winning India’s first Olympic gold in athletics (Javelin throw) in the Tokyo Olympics 2020. His winning came as a surprise to many.

Material And Methods

The present study uses multiple forms of quantitative and qualitative data sources such as media bites, newspaper articles, interviews from various print and digital media, and websites. For data collection, the period was confined from 2018 to 2021. Further, resilience has been determined and promoted using the idea from the Theory of Challenge and Threat States in Athletes (TCTSA).

Results And Discussion

Theory of Threat and Challenge States in Athletes (TCTSA)

Winning in sports depends on how well one deals psychologically with the demands of the competition. The theory of Threat and Challenge States in Athletes (Jones et al., 2009) proposes that the athletes’ appraisal of the sporting situation or competition will determine their performance. The idea behind the theory is that stress can be adaptive and maladaptive for a skilled athlete, leading to the perception of the upcoming situation as a challenge or threat. The theory talks about the psychophysiological support structure behind the athletes’ anticipation of the demands of the situation and the available psychophysiological resources to meet those demands. The theory also explains the three interrelated constructs of self-efficacy, perceived control, and goal orientation, which determine the athlete’s perception of being challenged or threatened. This perception of the athletes will affect their efforts, attention, physical functioning, decision making and eventually their performance. For example, if player X participates in a discus throw, he is ready to throw the discus. Pressure is mounting in his head, and his heart rate is high; he understands that people expect him to win. It is exhausting both physically and mentally. Player X knows he can throw a discus to a winning distance. He executes the technique as planned in his brain, and he achieves his personal best by dealing with the pressure.

On the other hand, player Y also participates in the discus throw. His heart rate is high, pressure is mounting in his head, and he executes the throw but cannot achieve the distance he planned while training. In the above
example, both players, X and Y, face similar events. Where X achieves his personal best, Y needs help to handle the pressure. We can consider that player X is in a challenge state, whereas player Y is in a threat state. The TCTSA proposes that athletes look forward to performance situations as challenge or threat states. The athlete experiencing a challenge state has high self-efficacy, high control over motions and a focused approach, whereas the athlete experiencing a threat state will have low self-efficacy, perceived control and goal focus.

“The two had shared small snippets of conversations as they warmed up for their qualification throws. They spoke of the heat (what else!), with the German thrower (Johannes Vetter) joking with the Indian thrower (Neeraj Chopra), saying that he would be used to the conditions considering how hot it is in India. “I said no, I am also coming from Sweden, so I am getting even more troubled by the heat,” revealed Neeraj.” – (Firstpost, 2021)

One thing troubling all the Tokyo athletes was the “hot and humid conditions”. Many athletes expected to reach finals, like Keshorn Walcott and Marcin Krukowski, failed to qualify. Johannes Vetter, a man accustomed to throwing above 85+, was struggling. He finished 2nd behind Neeraj Chopra with a distance of 85.64. The hot and humid conditions of Tokyo resulted in a threat to athletes. Johannes Vetter, who was accustomed to throwing above 85 and has thrown above 90 recently, may have struggled due to the hot weather. Figure No. 1 shows Neeraj Chopra’s top 10 performances. Figure no. 1 shows Neeraj Chopra’s top ten performances. We can see Neeraj had experience throwing javelins at different temperatures to the maximum temperature of 31°C. Neeraj has more experience of throwing in hot and humid conditions. High temperature often affects players’ physical performance (Ozgunen et al., 2010) but may improve by acclimatization to heat (Fortney & Vroman, 2012).

The revised TCTSA-R (Meijen et al., 2020) further enhances the idea that primary appraisal will direct the situation as a challenge or threat. If competition is highly relevant to the athlete’s goal and the conditions are favourable for success, the athlete will be challenged. Moreover, if the competition is highly relevant but the conditions are unfavourable, then the athlete will be threatened. Primary appraisal is not always the end. Suppose athletes have sufficient resources to meet the demands of the situation. Then, with the primary appraisal of the threat, the athlete approaches the competition in a challenged state. Balascovich J. et al. (2004) studied college softball and basketball players to examine the relationship between pre-performance motivational states (challenge vs. threat) and subsequent performance in athletic competition. They found that players who experienced challenges performed better than those who experienced threats. In competition, athletes can take challenges and threats as primary appraisals and
have high or low resources against perceived demands. Therefore, a 2x2 bifurcation theory of threat and challenge is proposed (High Challenge, low challenge, high threat and low threat). Neeraj Chopra belongs to an Asian country (India) with similar hot and humid conditions, like Tokyo. He was better equipped with resources against the perceived demands of weather. He may have made the primary appraisal of the threat state like other problems of the medal, but the sufficient resources against demands helped him be challenged.

Resilience

The ability to handle the adverse effects of stressful situations is essential for elite athletes. Over the years, researchers have identified a core group of stressors that athletes encounter (Mckay et al., 2008). To cope with those stressors, athletes need to build psychological resilience. It helps athletes to utilize and develop mental qualities to cope with the pressure they experience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Resilience in sports is “the role of mental processes and behaviour in improving personal mental state and preparing an individual to face the potential effect of negative stress” (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012 & 2013). The hardship and stressful situations that athletes face socially, psychologically, etc., help them to prepare better and be resilient to competition stress. Early life experience can contribute to resilience (Seery, 2011). Athletes who participate at a high level for an extended period are prone to face adversities (Tamminen et al., 2013). Lundberg (1982) states that performance itself may be affected similarly to a stressor.

Best, Garmezy, and Masten (1990) define resilience as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances.” According to the model proposed by Galli and Vealey (2008), sports adversities faced by athletes in the past resulted in positive outcomes. Resilience is one of the most essential qualities elite athletes should possess. Resilience positively impacts sports performance and the psychological well-being of athletes ( Hosseini & Besharat, 2010). According to the Biopsychosocial Model (BPSM), individuals evaluate the demands of the event and whether they are capable of facing those demands. That evaluation of demand comes with experience. The process of positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity is defined as resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012, 2013; Galli & Gonzalez, 2015).

Nervousness? When I got on the runway for my first throw, everything else faded into the background,” Neeraj told journalists in Tokyo after his qualification. “When I am about to throw now, I do not overthink about inconsequential things. I do not obsess over whether I could have a foul throw” (Firstpost, 2021). The above statement illustrates Neeraj’s psychological approach towards the sport. He has a mature approach, is calmer under pressure, and is focused on the throw. His approach to sports shows that he has had successful experiences coping with stress. In 2019, Neeraj had an elbow injury; “We found loose bodies in the joint and eventually decided that he must undergo surgery to remove them in May (2019). He could not get his elbow into full extension. The pain was terrible,” says Dhananjay Kaushik, Head of Sports Science and Physiotherapy at Inspire Institute of Sport India. He only rested for a week after the surgery and started working in the morning and evening. This shows Neeraj’s commitment and focus towards his goal. Neeraj Chopra’s gold-winning performance under high pressure with hot and humid temperatures shows his resilience to adverse situations and stress. Chopra is the reigning Asian Games, Commonwealth Games and now Olympic gold medalist. “What makes him different from other javelin throwers in India is his athleticism,” coach Klaus Bartonietz (The Week, 2021).

Neeraj has faced natural adversities in his life. Those tough times have helped him build a resilient character, which we see during competition pressure. Winning an Olympic gold in Tokyo was the biggest win for him. The more an athlete dreams or mentally visualizes in terms of sports technique, the more chances he will perform that technique accordingly (Short et al., 2005).

Conclusion

Exposure to adversity in the past will lead to success. The story of Neeraj Chopra gives us a clear path of how he performed under pressure and dealt with adversities, how the period of struggling with illness has soaked in him the zeal to win, building resilience to cope and finally winning an Olympic gold cherished by the whole country. In line with the Theory of Threat and Challenge (Jones et al., 2009 & Meijen, 2020), we can illustrate that Neeraj, with complete confidence, has high self-efficacy, took that pressure situation positively and went into a challenging state. Neeraj Chopra belongs to India and is already familiar with Tokyo’s hot and humid weather. Which ultimately helped him excel and win a gold medal. Neeraj Chopra’s luck was favoured on the day of the final competition. However, we have to understand that conditions are the same for all. All the athletes who have participated were
trained for years; they had world-class training. Athletes need control over their skills and focus on what they need to perform well (Jones et al., 2009). An important point is that resilience is essential, but that perception (threat or challenge) of the situation is more critical. It is a perception that determines performance. Neeraj is a highly resilient athlete, and his perception of threat and challenge made all the difference in the Tokyo Olympics.

The case of Neeraj Chopra suggests that hardship and adversities faced in the past can be ascribed to resilience. It also helps us to understand how important it is to expose athletes to adversities for their psychological development. This also implies that coaches should expose their trainees to stressful situations for mental growth and to build their confidence. Exposure to adversities and competition stress will help them to increase resilience. Developing a positive attitude towards adversity is also essential, as it will improve athletes’ perceptions of competition situations.

Reference