

Sport psychology: combat sports

Drs Anastasiya Khomutova and Claire Rossato provide some brief comments on the current state of sport psychology within combat sports.

With the recent emergence of a new, international and multi-disciplinary academic field dedicated to martial arts studies (Bowman, 2015), interest in the value of sport psychology research for understanding and making effective interventions into such practices is warranted. The reported use of sport psychology within combat sports (mixed martial arts, boxing, judo, etc.) has received relatively little attention in the way of academic research or applied case studies within recent sport psychology literature. This brief report will highlight two specific areas of interest, these are psychological preparation and weight regulation within combat sports. Psychological preparation within combat sports is important due to a unique “fighter mindset” (Jensen et al., 2013) and therefore should be taken into consideration. In addition, having weight categories in combat sports can lead athletes to attempt different methods of weight management – whether it is maintaining a specific weight or using different techniques for ‘cutting’ their current weight to an appropriate one for competition. This is a fast-developing area for sport psychology research, as more practitioners start working with combat athletes. Therefore, the following article provides areas that applied practitioners and researchers could examine further.

Psychological preparation

The reality of combat sports competitions is unique, requiring a unique “fighter mindset” and commitment (Jensen et al., 2013). However, some combat sports athletes disregard psychological preparation to competitions and think that if they have trained enough physically, it will consequently lead to being mentally ready (Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013). In contrast, Ziv and Lidor (2013) suggested mental preparation in sports, such as judo, is very important and should be included within the training process together with physical, technical and tactics-related training.

Combat sports athletes might struggle with pre-performance anxiety and may experience a feeling of fear directly before the competition (Jensen et al., 2013). To manage such feelings, which sometimes can lead to a negative effect on performance, athletes, with the help of sport psychologists, can use standard arousal regulation techniques - the most common of which include breathing control, relaxation, imagery, self-talk and, more recently, rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT) (Cunningham & Turner, 2016). One study has also linked emotional intelligence to combat sports, suggesting that it can help to foster its development (Szabo & Urbán, 2014).

Weight regulation

Pettersson, Ekström and Berg (2013) suggested that weight regulation in combat sport athletes could be considered as part of a pre-competition preparation, serving as a coping strategy, creating increased feelings of focus and commitment. However, weight regulation practices of athletes can be quite dangerous and many sport psychology practitioners must deal with ethical dilemmas whilst working with such athletes. For example, one of the debated aspects can be a referral of an athlete struggling with eating habits to a clinical psychologist (de Bruin, 2017). As stated by Franchini, Brito and Artioli (2012) methods used regarding rapid weight loss (RWL) affects both physical and cognitive capacities and may increase the risk of death. In particular Franchini et al (2012) suggest that RWL could lead to confusion, negatively affecting the capacity of decisions making during matches. In addition, RWL has been associated with depression and isolation, which could result in difficulty coping with rigorous training sessions.

Summary

We acknowledge that this is a brief report with limited studies addressed, however it provides an overview of the current state of sport psychology within combat sports. Research and applied practice within combat sports and martial arts still remain relatively limited. As this field of work has been expanding, it is important to discuss what sport psychology can offer to those in the field, as well as highlighting some ethical issues sport psychologists might face when working in such environments.

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