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The Scientific Approach to Mental Preparation in Team Sports to Deal with Anxiety **Takım Sporlarında Kaygıyla Başa Çıkma Zihinsel Hazırlığa Bilimsel Yaklaşım**

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the impact of anxiety on the performance of youth football players during sports competitions and to examine the role of mental preparation in dealing with it. The descriptive-analytical method was employed, as dictated by the nature of the subject. The study population comprised the youth (cubs) category football teams of the Regional Division in the province of Bouira, Algeria; from four clubs, a randomly selected sample of 10 coaches and 80 players completed structured questionnaires containing closed, semi-closed, and open questions, and responses were analyzed using percentages and the chi-square (χ^2) test. The results showed that the majority of players receive advice from their coaches, that such guidance plays a substantial role in players' willingness to train, and that good psychological preparation is reflected positively in players' on-field performance; conversely, neglect

Özet

Bu çalışma, spor müsabakaları sırasında kaygının genç futbolcuların performansı üzerindeki etkisini belirlemeyi ve kaygıyla başa çıkma zihinsel hazırlığın rolünü incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Konunun doğası gereği betimsel-analitik yöntem kullanılmıştır. Araştırma evrenini Cezayir'in Bouira vilayetindeki Bölgesel Lig genç (yavrular) kategorisi futbol takımları oluşturmuş; dört kulüpten seçkisiz olarak belirlenen 10 antrenör ve 80 oyuncudan oluşan örnekleme kapalı, yarı kapalı ve açık uçlu sorular içeren yapılandırılmış anketler uygulanmış, yanıtlar yüzdelere ve ki-kare (χ^2) testi ile analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular; oyuncuların çoğunluğunun antrenörlerinden tavsiye aldığını, bu rehberliğin oyuncuların antrenmana katılım isteğinde önemli rol oynadığını ve iyi psikolojik hazırlığın sahadaki performansa olumlu yansıdığını göstermiştir. Buna karşılık psikolojik hazırlığın ihmal, rakip taraftar

of psychological preparation, pressure from opposing fans, and the perceived importance of the competition were associated with declines in performance. These findings are consistent with contemporary sport psychology evidence that cognitive anxiety impairs attentional control and performance and that competitive anxiety in young athletes is shaped by situational and social factors. The study recommends focusing on the psychological preparation of players—particularly in youth categories—including psychologists within teams' technical staffs, and strengthening coaches' guidance role in training so that it serves official competition.

Keywords: Anxiety; performance; football players; mental preparation; youth sport.

baskısı ve müsabakanın algılanan önemi performans düşüşleriyle ilişkili bulunmuştur. Bu bulgular, bilişsel kaygının dikkat kontrolünü ve performansı bozduğunu ve genç sporcularda yarışma kaygısının durumsal ve sosyal etkenlerce biçimlendiğini ortaya koyan güncel spor psikolojisi kanıtlarıyla tutarlıdır. Çalışma; özellikle genç kategorilerde oyuncuların psikolojik hazırlığına odaklanılmasını, takımların teknik kadrolarına psikologların dahil edilmesini ve antrenörlerin antrenmandaki rehberlik rolünün resmî müsabakalara hizmet edecek biçimde güçlendirilmesini önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kaygı; performans; futbolcular; zihinsel hazırlık; genç sporcular.

1. Introduction and Research Problem

Sports training science relies on the support of the natural and human sciences, and among these, sport psychology occupies a central position: it stands at the forefront of the disciplines that underpin the coach's success and the development of athletic performance. As a result, training experts have come to pay close attention to the psychological aspects associated with training and competition. Methods of physical, technical, and tactical preparation have converged considerably in recent years, to the point of being highly similar across teams and levels of practice; the decisive differences therefore increasingly lie in psychological factors within players, and a need has emerged for greater attention to this dimension. International consensus now recognizes athletes' mental health and psychological preparation as integral to performance and well-being rather than as an optional supplement to physical training (Reardon et al., 2019).

Football is among the sports that have attracted the greatest research attention from a psychological perspective, given its extraordinary popularity across ages, cultures, and countries. Because competition serves as the principal means of assessing the level and effectiveness of training, it exerts a significant impact on the psychological state of players, making matches emotionally charged occasions that can generate anxiety. Competitive anxiety is conceptualized multidimensionally as comprising cognitive anxiety, understood as worry and negative expectations about performance; somatic anxiety, understood as the perception of physiological activation; and self-confidence, which functions as a distinct and largely independent dimension rather than as the mere absence of anxiety (Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that cognitive anxiety is negatively related to performance, whereas self-confidence shows a stronger positive relation, so that interventions raising confidence may be more effective than those merely reducing worry (Woodman & Hardy, 2003).

The mechanisms by which anxiety degrades performance have been clarified by cognitive research. Attentional control theory explains that anxiety consumes working memory resources and shifts attention toward threat-related stimuli, thereby impairing the efficiency of goal-directed processing even when effectiveness is preserved through increased effort (Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007). A complementary account holds that pressure induces conscious self-monitoring of movements that are normally executed automatically, disrupting well-learned skills — the phenomenon commonly described as choking under pressure (Baumeister, 1984). Both accounts predict that the athletes most vulnerable are those whose skills are least automatized and whose attentional resources are most limited, which places youth players in a position of particular risk.

Given the complexity of the problem and its multiple causes, the study posed the following general question: What is the impact of anxiety on the performance of football players during competitions? Three sub-questions were addressed. Does a coach's neglect of psychological preparation during training lead to a decline in players' performance during competitions? Do fans have a negative impact on the performance of football players during sports competitions? Does the perceived importance of the competition have a negative impact on players' performance?

2. Hypotheses, Objectives, and Significance of the Study

2.1. Hypotheses. Based on the questions posed in the statement of the problem, hypotheses were developed as provisional solutions to the problem at hand. The general hypothesis stated that anxiety has a negative impact on football players' performance during sports competitions. Three sub-hypotheses were formulated: coaches' neglect of psychological preparation during training leads to a decrease in players' performance during competitions; fans have a negative impact on football players' performance during sports competitions; and the perceived importance of the competition has a negative impact on players' performance in football.

2.2. Objectives. The objectives of the study were to identify the most important causes of the problem and the ways of addressing them; to understand the extent to which anxiety affects players' performance; to help players overcome anxiety by providing sufficient and accurate information about the phenomenon; and to raise the awareness of officials regarding the need to provide specialists in sport psychology so that players may receive the best psychological care.

2.3. Significance. The significance of the study lies in its focus on the psychological factors affecting player performance and the overall level of sports competition, primarily anxiety. Attention to players' psychological preparation is among the most important factors in sports activity, since the athlete's personality requires extensive preparation on account of the emotions encountered in competitive activity; the present study limits these emotions to the phenomenon of anxiety because of its impact on the level of player performance. The choice of the youth category adds a further dimension: meta-analytic evidence identifies younger age as a salient correlate of anxiety symptoms in athletes (Rice et al., 2019), and adolescence is precisely the period in which enduring patterns of coping with competitive stress are established.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. The Nature of Anxiety in Sport. Anxiety in sport is an unpleasant emotional state characterized by apprehension, tension, and heightened physiological activation in response to a perceived threat. Following the standard distinction, it may be examined as a relatively stable disposition to perceive competitive situations as threatening, termed competitive trait anxiety, or as a situational response occurring at a particular moment, termed competitive state anxiety (Martens et al., 1990; Weinberg & Gould, 2019). The two are related but not identical: athletes high in trait anxiety experience more intense state anxiety in evaluative situations, yet situational factors such as event importance and audience composition modulate the response substantially.

3.2. Arousal, Anxiety, and Performance. Classical formulations relate arousal to performance in an inverted-U fashion, whereby performance deteriorates when activation is either too low or too high, and the optimal level varies with task complexity (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). Multidimensional approaches refine this picture by distinguishing the differential effects of cognitive and somatic anxiety: somatic anxiety typically shows an inverted-U relationship with performance and dissipates once competition begins, whereas cognitive anxiety exhibits a negative linear relationship and persists throughout (Martens et al., 1990; Woodman & Hardy, 2003). Catastrophe models add that the two dimensions interact, so that high physiological arousal is facilitative when cognitive anxiety is low but precipitates a sudden and dramatic performance collapse when cognitive anxiety is high (Hardy, 1996). A further refinement concerns direction rather than intensity: athletes who interpret their anxiety symptoms as facilitative perform better than those who interpret identical symptoms as debilitating, and this interpretive tendency distinguishes elite from non-elite performers (Jones & Swain, 1995; Hanton, Neil, & Mellalieu, 2008). Lazarus (2000) situates these findings within a broader appraisal-based account in which emotions in competition arise from the athlete's evaluation of what is at stake and of the resources available to cope.

3.3. Sources and Correlates of Competitive Anxiety. Sport-related anxiety arises from the interaction of personal characteristics — trait anxiety, age, competitive experience, perfectionism, and self-confidence — with situational demands such as the importance of the event, the presence of evaluative audiences, and uncertainty about the outcome (Mellalieu, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2006; Ford, Ildefonso, Jones, & Arvinen-Barrow, 2017). The presence and behavior of spectators is a particularly well-documented situational source. Sports competitions are characterized by taking place before an audience, a circumstance rare in other domains of daily life, and the effect of spectators on the individual athlete varies markedly: sometimes it raises the level of performance, at other times it is a reason for its deterioration. The style of encouragement matters as much as the size of the crowd; a player observed by dozens differs from one observed by thousands, and a player competing among their own supporters differs from one competing before opposing supporters, while a fanatical audience produces emotional responses different from those elicited by an audience characterized by sporting conduct. Competition importance operates similarly, heightening perceived threat and thereby state anxiety, particularly in young athletes with limited competitive experience (Rice et al., 2019; Cerin, Szabo, Hunt, & Williams, 2000).

3.4. Mental Preparation and Psychological Skills. Psychological preparation for competition is an essential and fundamental component of every competitive sport: through it, the coach prepares players psychologically and creates motivation, harmony, and confidence in their ability to achieve satisfactory results. Contemporary applied sport psychology operationalizes mental preparation through psychological skills training, the principal components of which are goal setting, arousal regulation through relaxation and breathing techniques, imagery, self-talk, attentional control, and pre-performance routines. Such training has been shown to reduce debilitating anxiety and to support performance, and it is recommended as part of routine athlete care in international consensus statements (Weinberg & Gould, 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). Reviews of coping in sport indicate that problem-focused strategies are generally more adaptive than avoidance strategies in controllable situations, and that young athletes benefit from explicit instruction in coping rather than being left to develop strategies by trial and error (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). In the Arab literature, Rateb (2001, 2002) similarly emphasizes systematic mental skills training and the psychological preparation of young athletes as prerequisites of stable competitive performance.

3.5. The Role of the Coach and the Motivational Climate. The coach is not merely a source of technical instruction but the principal architect of the psychological environment in which players compete. Self-determination theory holds that environments supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster more adaptive motivation and lower anxiety than controlling, ego-involving environments (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intervention research confirms the practical implication: training coaches to create a mastery-oriented motivational climate significantly reduces young athletes' sport performance anxiety over the course of a season (Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007). This finding is directly relevant to the present study, since it identifies coach behavior — rather than the presence of a psychologist alone — as a modifiable determinant of youth athletes' anxiety, and therefore locates part of the solution within the reach of clubs that cannot employ specialist staff.

3.6. Manifestations and Symptoms of Competitive Anxiety. Competitive anxiety manifests at three levels that are conceptually distinct but empirically intertwined. At the physiological level it appears as increased heart rate and respiration, muscular tension, sweating, gastrointestinal disturbance, and disrupted sleep in the nights preceding an important match. At the cognitive level it appears as worry about the outcome, negative expectations, difficulty in concentrating, narrowing of attention, and intrusive thoughts about the consequences of failure. At the behavioral level it appears as restlessness, changes in pre-match routines, rushed or hesitant decision-making, avoidance of responsibility on the field, and, in the youth categories, occasionally as withdrawal from selection altogether. The practical significance of this triple manifestation is that anxiety is observable to an attentive coach well before it is reported by the player, which makes coach education in the recognition of these signs a low-cost intervention available to clubs that cannot employ specialist staff (Weinberg & Gould, 2019; Ford et al., 2017).

3.7. Anxiety in Youth Sport. The youth categories present a distinctive profile. Meta-analytic evidence identifies younger age as a significant correlate of anxiety symptoms among athletes, alongside injury history and adverse life events (Rice et al., 2019). Several factors converge to produce this vulnerability: technical skills are less automatized and therefore more susceptible to disruption by self-focused attention (Baumeister, 1984); competitive experience is limited, so that appraisals of threat are less calibrated; the evaluative significance of performance is heightened by its implications for selection and for identity at an age when identity is under construction; and coping repertoires are still forming, so that young athletes frequently rely on avoidance strategies that are maladaptive in controllable situations (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Adolescence is consequently the period in which durable patterns of responding to competitive stress are established, which is precisely why intervention at this stage has disproportionate long-term value, and why

the motivational climate created by the coach exerts measurable effects on anxiety across a single season (Smith et al., 2007; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

4. Previous and Related Studies

Research on competitive anxiety has developed along three lines that together frame the present investigation: measurement and structure, correlates and determinants, and intervention.

4.1. Measurement and Structure. The decisive contribution of Martens, Vealey, and Burton (1990) was to replace unidimensional conceptions of competitive anxiety with a multidimensional model and to provide an instrument — the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory–2 — that operationalized cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and self-confidence as separate subscales. Subsequent psychometric work refined the instrument and confirmed the factorial independence of the three dimensions across samples (Cox, Martens, & Russell, 2003). Research on the temporal patterning of competitive emotions established that the three dimensions follow different trajectories in the days and hours before competition, with somatic anxiety rising sharply close to the event and cognitive anxiety remaining comparatively stable, a finding that has methodological consequences for any study measuring anxiety at a single time point (Cerin et al., 2000).

4.2. Correlates and Determinants. Woodman and Hardy (2003) synthesized the accumulated evidence meta-analytically and reported that cognitive anxiety bears a negative relationship to performance, whereas self-confidence bears a stronger positive relationship; moderator analyses indicated that these effects vary with the standard of competition and the sex of the athletes. Rice et al. (2019) extended the picture to elite athletes specifically, identifying age, injury, and career stage among the determinants of anxiety, and Reardon et al. (2019) synthesized the field into consensus recommendations for practice. Studies of the direction rather than the intensity of symptoms established that the interpretation of anxiety as facilitative or debilitating discriminates between performance levels more reliably than intensity alone (Jones & Swain, 1995; Hanton et al., 2008).

4.3. Intervention. The intervention literature demonstrates that competitive anxiety is modifiable. Psychological skills training programs combining goal setting, relaxation, imagery, and self-talk reduce debilitating anxiety and improve performance indicators (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). More significantly for the present study, Smith, Smoll, and Cumming (2007) showed that an intervention directed at coaches rather than at athletes — training coaches to create a mastery-oriented motivational climate — produced significant reductions in young athletes' sport performance anxiety over a season. This finding relocates the practical lever from the specialist to the coach, which is decisive in contexts where sport psychologists are not available.

4.4. Position of the Present Study. Against this background, the present study contributes a description of the psychological preparation actually available to youth players in an Algerian regional division, obtained from both coaches and players, and an assessment of the extent to which the three situational sources most frequently identified in the literature — inadequate preparation, audience pressure, and event importance — are perceived to affect performance in that setting. It does not seek to replicate psychometric work already conducted elsewhere, but to establish whether the conditions that international research identifies as protective are present in the local context, which is a precondition for any subsequent intervention.

5. Method

5.1. Design. The descriptive-analytical method was adopted. The method is the path leading to the desired goal, or the thread that connects the research from beginning to end in order to reach results; and this choice was not arbitrary but followed from the nature of the subject, since the study aimed to describe and interpret an existing psychological and social phenomenon in its natural context rather than to manipulate it. The descriptive approach is understood here as a method of scientifically organized analysis and interpretation aimed at arriving at specific characteristics of a social situation, problem, or population.

5.2. Variables. The independent variable was defined as anxiety, and the dependent variable as football players' performance during sports competitions.

5.3. Population and Sample. The research population comprised the youth (cubs) category football teams of the Regional Division in the province of Bouira. The sample was randomly selected and consisted of two sub-samples: a first sample of 10 coaches and a second sample of 80 players. The study was conducted at four clubs: the Sports Entente of the Municipality of Ain Bessam, the Amateur Sports Club of Najm Bir Aghbalou, Mouloudia Bouira, and the Popular Club of Bouira. The field phase extended from the second half of December to May of the season, with the first four months allocated to preparation, instrument development, and distribution, and the remainder to collection and analysis.

Table 1. *Composition of the study sample*

Sub-sample	n	Clubs represented	Instrument
Coaches	10	Four regional-division clubs	Coaches' questionnaire
Players	80	Four regional-division clubs	Players' questionnaire
Total	90	—	—

5.4. Instruments. The questionnaire method was used as the means of collecting information, as it is widely employed in scientific research and derives information directly from the original source. The questionnaire consists of a set of questions divided into closed, semi-closed, and open formats, which the researcher distributes to the selected sample as the initial procedure, then collects, studies, and analyzes in order to draw conclusions. The questionnaire was chosen because it permits the collection and analysis of information easily and at low cost. Separate forms were prepared for coaches and for players, addressing the three thematic areas corresponding to the sub-hypotheses: psychological preparation in training, the influence of the audience, and the perceived importance of the competition. Content validity was ensured by submitting the draft items to a panel of specialists in physical education and sport psychology, whose observations were incorporated before distribution.

5.5. Statistical Methods. The statistical treatment converted the data from their raw quantitative form into percentages, using the tripartite rule to extract percentages for each item. The chi-square (χ^2) test was then applied to determine whether the observed distribution of responses differed significantly from chance, with the significance level set at .05 and one degree of freedom for dichotomous items; the calculated value was compared against the tabulated critical value of 3.84 (Field, 2018).

6. Results

The results are presented in two parts. An illustrative item is first analyzed in detail in order to demonstrate the analytical procedure applied to every question in both questionnaires; the aggregate findings across the full instrument are then summarized thematically.

6.1. Illustrative Item. Question 8 of the coaches' questionnaire asked whether the coach is aware of the social status of the players. The purpose of the item was to determine the extent of coaches' interest in the social circumstances surrounding their players, on the assumption that awareness of these circumstances conditions the coach's capacity to interpret and respond to a player's psychological state.

Table 2. *Coaches' awareness of the social circumstances of their players (Question 8)*

Answer	f	%	χ^2 (calculated)	χ^2 (tabulated)	df	Sig. level	Conclusion
Yes	6	60%	0.84	3.84	1	0.05	Not significant
No	4	40%					
Total	10	100%					

Note. The difference between response categories is not statistically significant at $p < .05$.

As Table 2 shows, 60% of coaches reported being aware of their players' social status, while 40% confirmed that they were unaware of the social circumstances surrounding their players. The calculated chi-square value (0.84) is below the tabulated value (3.84) at one degree of freedom and the .05 level, so the difference between the two response categories is not statistically significant; that is, the sample of coaches is effectively divided on this question rather than clearly oriented toward awareness. Substantively, the fact that a majority reported awareness is favorable, since knowledge of players' social circumstances enables the coach to choose the appropriate way of dealing with each player according to their situation, which is reflected positively in team results. The absence of statistical significance, however, indicates that a substantial minority of coaches operate without this knowledge, which is consistent with the general picture of uneven attention to the psychological and social dimension reported below.

6.2. Aggregate Findings. Across the full set of items in both questionnaires, the following patterns emerged. Most players reported receiving varied training sessions. The majority of players receive advice from their coaches, and this advice plays a significant role in players' willingness to attend and engage in training. Good psychological preparation was reported to have a positive effect on players' performance on the field. At the same time, not all coaches attend to the psychological aspect of their players' development. The pressure exerted by opposing supporters, and aggression directed at players, were reported to affect players' psychological state and on-field performance negatively, whereas most players reported that their enthusiasm and performance increase with greater support from their own supporters. The importance of the competition was reported to influence players' behavior and performance in both directions: important matches increase enthusiasm, while at the same time reducing some players' presence and concentration during the match.

Table 3. *Summary of aggregate findings by thematic area*

Thematic area	Principal findings	Relation to hypothesis
Psychological preparation	Coach advice increases training engagement; preparation improves on-field performance; provision uneven	Supports H1
Audience influence	Opposing-fan pressure and aggression impair performance; home support raises enthusiasm	Partially supports H2
Competition importance	Important matches raise enthusiasm but reduce concentration for some players	Partially supports H3

6.3. Findings on Psychological Preparation. Items addressing the first thematic area produced a consistent picture. Players overwhelmingly reported receiving advice from their coaches and identified this advice as a significant factor in their willingness to attend and to engage in training, which indicates that the coach already occupies the position of primary psychological influence irrespective of whether that role is exercised deliberately. Players who reported that their team engaged in psychological preparation before matches also reported better concentration and composure on the field. On the coaches' side, however, the responses revealed uneven provision: while all coaches acknowledged the relevance of the psychological dimension in principle, a substantial proportion reported no systematic activity directed at it, and none reported access to a sport psychologist. The gap between acknowledged importance and actual provision is the single clearest finding of this thematic area, and it is precisely the gap that international consensus recommendations address when they call for psychological support to be embedded in routine preparation rather than improvised (Reardon et al., 2019).

6.4. Findings on Audience Influence. Items addressing the second thematic area produced a bidirectional pattern. The pressure of opposing supporters and, in particular, aggression directed at players were reported by both samples to affect players' psychological state and on-field performance adversely, with coaches describing lapses of concentration and rushed decision-making in away fixtures. Conversely, most players reported that their enthusiasm and performance increase with greater support from their own supporters. The two findings are not contradictory: they identify audience composition and conduct, rather than audience presence as such, as the operative variable, which is exactly what the theoretical literature on social evaluation predicts (Eysenck et al., 2007; Baumeister, 1984).

6.5. Findings on Competition Importance. Items addressing the third thematic area likewise produced a dual pattern. Important matches were reported to increase players' enthusiasm and motivation, while simultaneously reducing the presence and concentration of some players during the match itself. Coaches distinguished in their responses between players who rise to significant occasions and those who visibly deteriorate, which corresponds to the individual differences in symptom interpretation documented in the direction literature (Jones & Swain, 1995; Hanton et al., 2008) and to the catastrophe model's prediction of abrupt rather than gradual decline when cognitive anxiety is high (Hardy, 1996).

7. Discussion of the Hypotheses

7.1. First Hypothesis. The results concerning psychological preparation in both the coach and the player samples supported the first hypothesis: neglect of psychological preparation during training is associated with decreased player performance during competition. This accords with the position, emphasized in the theoretical framework, that psychological preparation for competition is essential and fundamental for every competitive sport, since through it the coach builds motivation, harmony, and players' confidence in their capacity to achieve satisfactory results (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). It is likewise consistent with international consensus recommendations that psychological support be embedded within athletes' routine preparation rather than mobilized only in response to crisis (Reardon et al., 2019), and with intervention evidence showing that modifying coach behavior toward a mastery-oriented climate reduces performance anxiety in young athletes across a season (Smith et al., 2007).

7.2. Second Hypothesis. Concerning the influence of the audience, some results supported the hypothesis that fans negatively affect performance, while others indicated the opposite. This two-sided pattern is theoretically expected rather than anomalous. Spectator effects on athletes differ markedly, sometimes elevating and sometimes impairing performance, depending on the size of the audience, its partisanship, and its style of encouragement; the emotional state of a player competing before a hostile, fanatical crowd differs from that of one supported by an audience characterized by sporting conduct. The mechanism is well specified in the cognitive literature: anxiety generated under social evaluation consumes attentional resources and shifts processing toward threat, degrading the efficiency of skilled performance (Eysenck et al., 2007), while heightened self-focus under pressure disrupts movements that are normally automatic (Baumeister, 1984). What determines the net effect is the player's appraisal of the situation and interpretation of their own symptoms, which is why athletes who read their activation as facilitative outperform those who read identical symptoms as debilitating (Jones & Swain, 1995; Lazarus, 2000).

7.3. Third Hypothesis. Regarding competition importance, results again partially supported the hypothesis: important matches increased players' enthusiasm but simultaneously reduced presence and concentration for some players. This dual effect corresponds closely to the classical arousal–performance relation, in which activation is facilitative up to an optimum and detrimental beyond it (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908), and to multidimensional anxiety theory, in which perceived event importance raises both motivational intensity and cognitive worry, with net effects on performance depending on players' interpretation of their anxiety symptoms and on their self-confidence (Martens et al., 1990; Woodman & Hardy, 2003; Mellalieu et al., 2006). Catastrophe models further predict that when cognitive anxiety is high, increases in physiological activation of the kind produced by an important match do not merely reduce performance gradually but may precipitate an abrupt collapse (Hardy, 1996), which corresponds to the sudden lapses of concentration described by the coaches in this sample.

7.4. General Interpretation. Taken together, the analyses indicate that youth football in the studied context suffers from a lack of systematic psychological preparation, which leaves players vulnerable to anxiety before the public and in high-stakes competition. The three hypotheses were confirmed to a substantial extent. Anxiety emerged as a significant, though not exclusive, factor affecting team performance; other contributing causes identified in the analysis include shortcomings of team management, the weight attached to competition, and an insufficiently developed football culture. It is important to note that the desirable outcome is not the elimination of anxiety, which is neither possible nor beneficial, but its regulation: an appropriate level of activation, interpreted as facilitative and accompanied by high self-confidence, is associated with better rather than worse performance.

7.5. Limitations. Several limitations should be borne in mind. The study relied on self-report questionnaires developed for the purpose rather than on standardized multidimensional anxiety inventories such as the CSAI-2R, whose factorial structure has been validated across samples (Cox, Martens, & Russell, 2003); consequently, cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and self-confidence could not be distinguished empirically, although the theoretical discussion depends on that distinction. The sample was confined to one province and to the youth category of a single division, and the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference: the association between weak psychological preparation and poorer performance is compatible with several causal orderings. Coaches and players reported on the same phenomena from different positions, but no objective performance data were collected against which perceptions could be checked. Finally, anxiety was measured retrospectively rather than temporally, whereas the intensity of anxiety is known to change systematically in the days and hours preceding competition (Cerin et al., 2000). Future research should employ validated multidimensional instruments administered at defined time points, incorporate objective performance indicators, and adopt longitudinal or intervention designs with larger multi-regional samples.

7.6. Practical Implications. Three implications follow for clubs operating without specialist psychological staff, which describes the great majority of clubs in the studied setting. First, since players already identify the coach as their principal source of guidance, the most efficient point of intervention is coach education rather than the recruitment of psychologists, and the intervention evidence indicates that this route is effective (Smith et al., 2007). Second, because the operative variable in audience effects is conduct rather than presence, habituation is achievable at no cost: training sessions can be conducted with spectators, with recorded crowd noise, and with consequences attached to outcomes, so that evaluative conditions become familiar rather than exceptional. Third, because important matches produce dual effects, pre-match preparation should be individualized: players who are known to deteriorate under significance require attention to arousal regulation and to the reinterpretation of symptoms, whereas players who rise to the occasion require no such intervention and may be disturbed by it. This last point implies that coaches need a simple means of identifying

which players belong to which group, which is one practical argument for adopting a validated anxiety inventory even in modest club settings.

Table 4. *Recommended measures by level of responsibility*

Level	Measure	Expected effect
Club	Integrate a sport psychologist or a trained referent into the staff	Systematic rather than improvised psychological provision
Coach	Adopt a mastery-oriented motivational climate; learn to recognise anxiety signs	Reduced performance anxiety across the season
Training	Replicate competitive and evaluative conditions in sessions	Habituation to social evaluation; fewer surprises on match day
Player	Instruction in goal setting, breathing, imagery, and self-talk	Regulation rather than elimination of activation
Federation	Courses for coaches and competition organisers on the psychological dimension	Diffusion of practice beyond individual clubs
Public	Media campaigns promoting sporting conduct among supporters	Reduced hostile-audience pressure on young players

7.7. Contribution to the Regional Literature. Finally, the study makes a modest but specific contribution to the regional literature. Research on competitive anxiety has been conducted overwhelmingly with elite and semi-elite adult samples in Europe, North America, and Oceania, and the instruments, norms, and intervention protocols derived from that work presuppose organizational conditions — available psychologists, longitudinal athlete monitoring, formalized athlete-support pathways — that do not obtain in most Algerian regional-division clubs. Documenting what is actually available to youth players in such clubs, and doing so from the perspectives of both the coaches who deliver preparation and the players who receive it, is a precondition for designing interventions that are feasible rather than merely desirable. The present findings suggest that the necessary starting point is not the importation of elaborate psychological skills programs but the systematic exploitation of a resource already in place: the coach, whom players themselves identify as their principal source of guidance and whose behavior is demonstrably modifiable through short, targeted training (Smith et al., 2007; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study addressed a topic that remains in need of further in-depth and analytical investigation by specialists, given the prominence of football and the extent of public interest in it. Anxiety exerts a considerable influence on the overall performance of youth football teams, and this influence is intensified by the neglect of psychological preparation, by hostile audience pressure, and by the perceived importance of competition. It is not, however, the only factor: management shortcomings and the wider football culture also contribute.

In light of the study's objectives and results, the following recommendations are offered. Attention should be focused on the psychological preparation of players, especially in the younger categories, where patterns of coping with competitive stress are established. Sport psychologists should be integrated into teams' technical staffs. Coaches should guide and advise players during training sessions in a manner that serves official matches, and should be supported in creating a mastery-oriented rather than ego-oriented motivational climate. A competitive atmosphere should be created during training at the same pace as official competition, so that players habituate to the conditions of evaluation. Internships and training courses should be conducted for coaches and organizers of sports competitions, particularly on the psychological dimension. Collaboration and coordination between clubs, sports bodies, and supporters' committees should be strengthened to promote sports culture. Competitions should be managed by those with genuine expertise in organizing structures and tournaments. Finally, public awareness should be raised, and advice and guidance provided regarding sportsmanship, through the various media outlets.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Institutional permission was obtained from the participating clubs before data collection.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all coaches and players who participated in the study; for underage players, consent was additionally obtained from parents/legal guardians.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

S. Arezki designed the study and drafted the manuscript. M. Mohammadi and A. Haddache contributed to instrument development and data collection. Y. Ait Tahar and D. Dahmani contributed to the statistical analyses. M. Bouhadj, N. Mansouri, and I. Hamani contributed to the literature review, interpretation of results, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used in the design of the study, data collection, analyses, or interpretation of results of this manuscript.

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Giriş

Spor psikolojisi, antrenörün başarısını ve sportif performansın gelişimini destekleyen bilimlerin başında gelmektedir. Fiziksel, teknik ve taktik hazırlık yöntemleri son yıllarda büyük ölçüde birbirine yakınsadığından, belirleyici farklar giderek oyuncuların psikolojik özelliklerinde yatmaktadır. Yarışma kaygısı; performansa ilişkin endişe ve olumsuz beklentiler olarak anlaşılan bilişsel kaygı, fizyolojik uyarılmanın algılanması olarak anlaşılan bedensel kaygı ve kaygının yokluğu değil ayrı bir boyut olarak işleyen öz-güven

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bileşenlerinden oluşan çok boyutlu bir yapı olarak kavramsallaştırılmaktadır. Meta-analitik bulgular bilişsel kaygının performansla olumsuz, öz-güvenin ise daha güçlü biçimde olumlu ilişkili olduğunu göstermektedir; bu da endişeyi azaltmaya değil güveni yükseltmeye yönelik müdahalelerin daha etkili olabileceğini düşündürmektedir. Kaygının performansı nasıl bozduğu bilişsel araştırmalarla açıklığa kavuşturulmuştur: dikkat kontrol kuramına göre kaygı çalışan bellek kaynaklarını tüketmekte ve dikkati tehdide kaydırmakta; tamamlayıcı bir açıklamaya göre ise baskı, normalde otomatik yürütülen hareketlerin bilinçli izlenmesine yol açarak iyi öğrenilmiş becerileri bozmaktadır. Her iki açıklama da becerileri en az otomatikleşmiş ve dikkat kaynakları en sınırlı sporcuların en kırılgan grup olduğunu öngörmekte; bu da genç oyuncuları özel bir risk konumuna yerleştirmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, müsabakalar sırasında kaygının genç futbolcuların performansı üzerindeki etkisini belirlemek ve kaygıyla başa çıkmada zihinsel hazırlığın rolünü ortaya koymaktır.

Yöntem

Araştırmada betimsel-analitik yöntem kullanılmıştır; bu tercih rastlantısal olmayıp konunun doğasından kaynaklanmıştır. Evreni Bouira vilayetindeki Bölgesel Lig genç (yavrular) kategorisi futbol takımları oluşturmuş; Ain Bessam Belediyesi Spor Birliği, Najm Bir Aghbalou Amatör Spor Kulübü, Mouloudia Bouira ve Bouira Halk Kulübü olmak üzere dört kulüpten seçkisiz yolla 10 antrenör ve 80 oyuncu olmak üzere toplam 90 kişilik örneklem belirlenmiştir. Bağımsız değişken kaygı, bağımlı değişken ise oyuncuların müsabaka sırasındaki performansı olarak tanımlanmıştır. Veri toplama aracı olarak kapalı, yarı kapalı ve açık uçlu sorulardan oluşan, antrenörler ve oyuncular için ayrı formlar hâlinde hazırlanan anketler kullanılmıştır. Anket maddeleri alt hipotezlere karşılık gelen üç tematik alana odaklanmıştır: antrenmanda psikolojik hazırlık, seyircinin etkisi ve müsabakanın algılanan önemi. Kapsam geçerliği, taslak maddelerin beden eğitimi ve spor psikolojisi alanındaki uzmanlardan oluşan bir kurula sunulmasıyla sağlanmış; uzman görüşleri dağıtımdan önce metne yansıtılmıştır. Saha aşaması aralık ayının ikinci yarısından mayıs ayına kadar sürmüştür. Veriler yüzdelere ve tek serbestlik dereceli ki-kare (χ^2) testi ile .05 anlamlılık düzeyinde analiz edilmiş; hesaplanan değerler 3.84 kritik değeriyle karşılaştırılmıştır.

Bulgular

Örnek madde olarak sunulan 8. soruda antrenörlerin %60'ı oyuncularının sosyal durumundan haberdar olduğunu, %40'ı ise haberdar olmadığını belirtmiştir; hesaplanan ki-kare değeri (0.84) tablo değerinin (3.84) altında kaldığından fark istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bulunmamıştır. Yani antrenör örneklemini bu konuda belirgin biçimde farkındalık yönünde eğilim göstermek yerine fiilen ikiye bölünmüştür. Anketin bütününde şu örüntüler ortaya çıkmıştır: oyuncuların çoğu çeşitlendirilmiş antrenmanlar yaptıklarını bildirmiş; çoğunluğu antrenörlerinden tavsiye almakta ve bu tavsiye antrenmana katılım isteğinde önemli rol oynamaktadır; iyi psikolojik hazırlık saha performansına olumlu yansımaktadır. Buna karşılık bütün antrenörler oyuncuların psikolojik yönüyle ilgilenmemektedir. Rakip taraftar baskısı ve oyunculara yönelik saldırganlık, oyuncuların psikolojik durumunu ve performansını olumsuz etkilerken; kendi taraftarlarının desteği arttıkça oyuncuların coşkusu ve performansı yükselmektedir. Müsabakanın önemi ise her iki yönde etki göstermekte, önemli maçlar coşkuyu artırırken bazı oyunculara maç içi varlık ve konsantrasyonu düşürmektedir. Üç hipotez de önemli ölçüde doğrulanmıştır.

Tartışma

Psikolojik hazırlığa ilişkin bulgular birinci hipotezi desteklemiştir: antrenmanda psikolojik hazırlığın ihmal edilmesi, müsabakada performans düşüşüyle ilişkilidir. Bu sonuç, psikolojik hazırlığın her yarışma sporu için temel ve vazgeçilmez olduğu; antrenörün bu yolla güdülenme, uyum ve oyuncuların tatmin edici sonuçlar elde etme kapasitesine duydukları güveni inşa ettiği kuramsal konumla örtüşmektedir. Ayrıca psikolojik desteğin kriz anlarında değil rutin hazırlığın içine yerleştirilmesi gerektiğini savunan uluslararası uzlaşı önerileriyle ve antrenör davranışının ustalık yönelimli bir iklim doğrultusunda değiştirilmesinin genç sporcularda yarışma kaygısını bir sezon içinde azalttığını gösteren müdahale kanıtlarıyla tutarlıdır. Seyirci etkisine ilişkin bulgularda ise sonuçların bir bölümü ikinci hipotezi desteklemiş, bir bölümü ise tersini göstermiştir. Bu iki yönlü örüntü kuramsal olarak beklenen bir durumdur; anormal değildir. Seyircinin sporcu üzerindeki etkisi, kalabalığın büyüklüğüne, taraflılığın ve destek biçimine göre belirgin biçimde farklılaşır; fanatik ve düşmanca bir kalabalık önünde mücadele eden oyuncunun duygusal durumu, sportmen tutumlu bir seyirci tarafından desteklenen oyuncunununkinden farklıdır. Mekanizma bilişsel alanyazında iyi tanımlanmıştır: sosyal değerlendirme altında ortaya çıkan kaygı dikkat kaynaklarını tüketmekte ve işlemeyi tehdide kaydırarak becerikli performansın verimliliğini düşürmekte; baskı altında artan öz-odaklanma ise normalde otomatik olan hareketleri bozmaktadır. Net etkiyi belirleyen şey, oyuncunun durumu nasıl değerlendirdiği ve kendi belirtilerini nasıl yorumladığıdır. Müsabakanın önemine ilişkin bulgular da üçüncü hipotezi kısmen desteklemiştir: önemli maçlar coşkuyu artırırken bazı oyunculara konsantrasyonu düşürmüştür. Bu çift yönlü etki, uyarılmanın belirli bir optimuma kadar kolaylaştırıcı, ötesinde ise engelleyici olduğunu öngören klasik uyarılma-performans ilişkisiyle ve algılanan müsabaka öneminin hem güdüsel yoğunluğu hem de bilişsel endişeyi yükselttiğini belirten çok boyutlu kaygı kuramıyla örtüşmektedir. Felaket modelleri ayrıca, bilişsel kaygının yüksek olduğu durumlarda fizyolojik uyarılmadaki artışların performansı kademeli olarak düşürmek yerine ani bir çöküşe yol açabileceğini öngörmektedir; bu da antrenörlerin betimlediği ani konsantrasyon kayıplarına karşılık gelmektedir.

Sonuç

İncelenen bağlamda genç futbol, sistematik psikolojik hazırlık eksikliğinden muzdariptir; bu durum oyuncuları seyirci önünde ve yüksek önem taşıyan müsabakalarda kaygıya açık bırakmaktadır. Kaygı, takım performansını etkileyen önemli fakat tek olmayan bir faktördür; yönetim eksiklikleri ve yeterince gelişmemiş futbol kültürü de katkı sunmaktadır. Arzu edilen sonucun kaygının ortadan kaldırılması olmadığı vurgulanmalıdır; bu ne mümkün ne de yararlıdır. Amaç kaygının düzenlenmesidir: kolaylaştırıcı olarak yorumlanan ve yüksek öz-güvenle birlikte giden uygun düzeyde bir uyarılma, performansı kötüleştirmek yerine iyileştirmektedir. Bu doğrultuda; özellikle genç kategorilerde psikolojik hazırlığa odaklanılması, teknik kadrolara spor psikologlarının dahil edilmesi, antrenörlerin ego yönelimli değil ustalık yönelimli bir güdüsel iklim oluşturma konusunda desteklenmesi, antrenman ortamlarında resmi müsabaka yoğunluğunda rekabet atmosferleri kurulması, antrenörlere ve müsabaka organizatörlerine yönelik psikolojik hazırlık kurslarının düzenlenmesi, kulüpler ile taraftar dernekleri arasında işbirliğinin güçlendirilmesi ve medya aracılığıyla sportmenlik

bilincinin yaygınlaştırılması önerilmektedir. Gelecek araştırmalarda geçerliği kanıtlanmış çok boyutlu kaygı ölçeklerinin belirli zaman noktalarında uygulandığı, nesnel performans göstergelerinin de yer aldığı boyamsal ve müdahale desenli çalışmalara gereksinim vardır.