

PRIOR EXPERIENCE, COGNITIVE PERCEPTIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS OF SENIOR SOUTH AFRICAN RUGBY PLAYERS

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate the interaction between the prior experience, cognitive perceptions and psychological skills of senior rugby players in South Africa. The study population included 139 trans-national players, 106 provincial players and 95 club rugby players (N=340). A cross-sectional design was used to assess the players' psychological skills by means of the Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28 (ACSI-28). Players' prior experience and cognitive perceptions were determined by means of a biographical questionnaire. Different biographical variables appeared to distinguish between the groups with respectively high and low levels of psychological skills on the different levels of rugby. The players' perceptions regarding their own abilities to optimally prepare themselves psychologically before a game appeared to be the only common denominator differentiating between the groups with high and low levels of psychological skills. A combination of perceptions and prior experience explained 44.81% of the variance in the psychological skills (ACSI-28 total) of the club rugby players, 9% of the variance on provincial level and 21.3% of the variance on trans-national level. There appeared to be significant interaction between prior sport experience, certain cognitive perceptions and the psychological skills of the rugby players involved in this study. Cognitive psychological intervention could therefore play an important part in the psychological preparation of senior rugby players in South Africa.

Key words: Psychological skills; Cognitive perceptions; Prior experience; Rugby.

INTRODUCTION

Recent research reported significant differences between the psychological skills of senior elite and club rugby players in South Africa (Kruger, 2005b). The rugby players with high levels of psychological skills were also reported to experience less cognitive and somatic anxiety in challenging circumstances than players with low levels of psychological skills (Kruger, 2005c). It is apparent that psychological skills play an important role in players' ability to cope with the demanding competitive environment in elite rugby. A number of