

The Process of Competitiveness in Professional Polo: A Way to Enhance Performance

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Abstract

This naturalistic inquiry focused on providing further insight on competitiveness and its role in athletic performance. Although competitiveness is frequently discussed within the world of sports, athletes’ perceptions of it have not been investigated in depth. A qualitative design enabled the collection of real-world experiences from six elite, professional (horse) polo players. Following Denzin's (1989) interpretive interactionism approach, themes were identified and categorized while a cross-case analysis procedure synthesized the categories across all interviews. The obtained information was interpreted and discussed as it relates to performance and the existing literature. For poloists, being competitive means having a point of reference which provides (a) a clear focus on what they need to do, and (b) energy and determination to work hard as they bring all of themselves and skills into one specific task. This process can help us understand more about where competitive energy comes from and how it can be present on a more consistent basis.

Introduction

Athletic performance is tested to its maximum within competition, and being competitive is a trait that can be found at the heart of competitors who strive for achievement (Gill, 1986). By definition, when one competes, s/he strives to obtain a goal (Fabian & Ross, 1984) or to compare favorably to another person (Martens, 1976a). The competitor who strives to achieve success expresses her/his need for competence. Athletes’ desire to attain goals, to do something well, to win and to achieve distinction are issues often discussed within the sport environment. To date, the author knows of no studies that reviewed the athletes' perspectives on competitiveness. Moreover, the language

used to describe this internal energy, competitive fire, spirit, edge, or desire to move to the next level of excellence is still unexplored.

The theoretical basis of competitiveness can be found in the psychology literature of achievement motivation and orientation, as well as social evaluation (Gill, 1992; 1993; Weinberg & Gould, 1995). According to Atkinson's (1983) model of motivation, when presented with an achievement situation a person's achievement motive interacts with his/her expectancies of goal attainment to produce the temporarily aroused-state of achievement motivation. Achievement situation was defined as a situation where the individual

will be evaluated by him/herself and/or others while comparing her/himself to a social or non-social standard (Atkinson, 1983). Hence, achievement motivation reflects one's tendency to strive for satisfaction of the achievement motive and emerges from previous successful comparisons with a standard (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953). Athletes have a sport-specific achievement motive that directs their behavior (Gill, 1992; 1993; Martens, 1976b; Weinberg & Gould, 1995). According to Weinberg and Gould (1995), this sport-specific achievement motivation "is popularly called competitiveness" (p. 74).

In terms of sport competitiveness, Martens (1976b) wrote that it is the trait that builds strength and persistence in athletes when pursuing excellence and helps them stay in the present. In other words, "competitiveness is a personality disposition or motive ... that describes the intensity or the energy directed toward achieving satisfaction in competition" (Martens, 1976b, p. 325). Despite the fact that sport psychologists and coaches consider competitiveness as an important attribute of their athletes (Martens, 1976), little is known about what competitiveness means to the athlete. What exactly is competitiveness? Is it a trait? Is it an attitude or a behavior? How is it expressed and what is its role in athletic performance? What are the distinctive attitudes and behaviors of a competitive athlete (if any)? Is competitiveness a key factor for athletic success? When coaches look for that "competitive element" within their athletes, for what exactly are they looking? Is it a facial characteristic, a gesture, an attitude, a way of handling themselves in the game-practice, or a series of behaviors to be exhibited?

A number of sport-specific instruments have been developed to date in order to explore and quantify an athlete's sport-specific achievement motivation (Duda, 1989; Fabian & Ross, 1984; Gill & Deeter, 1988; Nishida, 1988; Pezer & Brown, 1980; Rushall & Fox, 1980; Vealey, 1986; Willis, 1982), yet, how athletes perceive competitiveness and how they define it has never been reported in published studies. Understanding competitiveness in sports can be valuable when educating and facilitating athletes in their journey toward their goals and dreams.

In this study, the researcher attempted to further explore and comprehend the horse-polo (hereafter referred to as polo) athlete's perspective and perceptions on competitiveness and its role for athletic performance. Polo was chosen as it is a sport where athletes all over the world try to excel and reach their maximum potential, while it is not very popular in terms of fan, media, and commercial support within the United States (Beal, 1993; Milburn, 1994; Price & Kauffman, 1989). According to Milburn (1994), polo brings together many sports on one field. It is like playing hockey, baseball, tennis, and soccer while riding a horse. Just like all other athletes, poloists practice and play games, aspire to become better, want to win, want to compete and be competitive.

Method

The challenge when conducting research is to gather the best possible information to be used by the people for whom it was gathered (Patton, 1990). To explore the concept of competitiveness in depth and its role in an athlete's performance, the qualitative paradigm was chosen. More specifically, Denzin's (1989) Interpretive Interactionism methodological approach was followed, which is described as an

attempt to make experiences of ordinary people available to the readers. The researcher's goal was to obtain information and understand competitiveness in polo using the best possible resources (i.e., elite polo players). According to Denzin (1989) by making these polo players' experiences available, an understanding can be created.

Sources of Information

Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985), Patton's (1990), and Denzin's (1989) suggestions, interviews with poloists were not the only source of information. Books on polo, articles on the participating poloists, and observations of the players within their polo world in practice and tournaments provided adequate information to overcome possible methodological limitations (see trustworthiness section).

A semi-structured interview mode was utilized, as it provided the necessary freedom and the opportunity to learn about competitiveness in depth (Donaghy, 1984; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some structure was apparent as the present inquiry focused on competitiveness, while questions were not formulated ahead of time to avoid forcing and guiding the players to answer in a manner determined by the researcher. Open-ended questions were followed by probing techniques to refine and elaborate on issues relative to the players' stories and experiences. No two interviews were exactly the same as no two athletes have had the same lives, perceptions, and experiences.

Polo Players as Participants

The participating poloists were selected based on the following three criteria: (1) each participant was employed as polo player at the time of the study, (2) each had a goal handicap of 7 or higher, and (3) each player was proficient in English. The decision to talk to only to high goal play-

ers was based on the assumption that years of experience and high levels of performance would appoint them as the most beneficial resources on competitiveness. Six poloists who met these criteria were asked to participate in the study: Julio (7-goals at the time of study, now rated at 8-goals), Adam (7-goals then, now rated at 9-goals), Hector (8-goals), Owen (9-goals, previously rated at 10-goals), Mike (10-goals), and Memo (10-goals). All poloists asked, consented to participate and to have their real names used. With the players' permission, the interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim (total of 110 single-spaced pages).

Procedures

To make this project feasible and to be able to use multiple information sources, data were gathered in West Palm Beach, FL, at the onset of "Florida High-goal Season". Obtaining the information in FL allowed the researcher to observe the players and interact with them within their competitive environment.

The interviews were conducted at a location chosen by the participant, where he felt comfortable and relaxed in order to disclose personal stories, thoughts, and experiences (Donaghy, 1984; Douglas, 1985; Gorden, 1969). Four of the interviews took place at the players' barns and two at the players' condominiums. All interviews were conducted by the researcher and ranged from one hour to two and-a-half hours (total of nine hours). Variable time with each poloist was spent (met twice with three of the players and once with the other three), to ensure that his perception of competitiveness was explored in depth and comprehended by the interviewer. The researcher perceived that saturation of information was reached after completing six interviews. Therefore, she

did not invite other players to participate in the study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a big concern for the reader (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher can only do her/his best to reconstruct the interviewee's world and present it to the reader. In this inquiry, trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation, peer debriefing, and thick description. To serve the prolonged engagement method, prior to the study, the researcher had been around polo for two-and-a-half years through performance education work. Member checking was initially performed during the interview by means of paraphrasing, summarizing, and asking for clarifications. In addition, the poloists were asked to review their transcribed interviews, where they could add, delete, or revise information to ensure that the information in the final draft accurately represented their thoughts and beliefs (no modifications were made by the players).

Triangulation of sources was completed with information obtained by (a) the interviews, (b) the interviewer's personal observations during practices and games, and (c) information from published books, magazine articles, and daily newspapers on the participants. A peer debriefer, challenged and supported the process and the product of this inquiry (inquiry design, interview themes and categories), while a second peer debriefer worked with the researcher mainly on the product (themes and categories). The product of this inquiry (themes and categories, cross-case analysis) was extensively discussed during multiple sessions with the peer debriefers until consensus was reached. The researcher and both debriefers had previously conducted qualitative research and completed graduate courses on qualitative

methodology. Finally, a thick description of the inquiry's methodology, procedures, and analyses is presented in this manuscript.

Analyzing the Information

Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion, the analysis method was determined after conducting the interviews, to accommodate the uniqueness of the acquired information. Denzin's (1989) phases of bracketing and construction were ensued as part of the qualitative data analysis. In the bracketing phase, essential themes on competitiveness were identified from the poloists' stories. Key phrases that associated with competitiveness were taken apart. Words and expressions perceived by the researcher as relevant to competitiveness aided in identifying sentences, phrases, and/or paragraphs as themes (e.g., winning, playing well, becoming the best, being a champion, playing hard, keep going, intensity, persistence, etc.). In the construction phase, the experiences that were taken apart during bracketing were gathered together, classified, and reassembled. The generation of a category system allowed the researcher to classify and bring each poloist's thoughts and perceptions together. The bracketed elements were listed into categories which were mutually exclusive, exhaustive, ensured independence, and were based on a single classification principle. The meaning and contents (i.e., quotes) of each category were extensively discussed with the peer debriefers until agreement was secured.

A cross-case analysis procedure was utilized to synthesize the categories of competitiveness that emerged in all six interviews. Denzin (1989) described this as a form of analysis that "pays more attention to the process being studied than the persons whose lives are embedded in

those processes” (p. 39). Hence, the analysis concentrated on the process of competitiveness. Categories were deemed of equal importance in describing and explaining competitiveness from the athletes’ point of view. Emergent categories are presented with direct quotes taken from the interviews.

Results

Emotional benefits associated with competition

Benefits from playing polo were linked with the players’ desire for being great in polo.

...It’s like the ultimate challenge to yourself, to risk going out there and it’s knowing that you can fail that makes success that much sweeter. It is a rush and it’s something that I’ve had for most of my life in various sports and there’s almost like a chemical aspect to it of the feeling that I get from competing hard in an event that I care a lot about (Adam).

You feel intense and you feel the adrenaline, you feel a bit of pressure, but you don’t feel it, it’s a different type of pressure. ...The fun of being out there and having that competitive competition that I go for all the time. I go out there to be on the top so I’m in demand all the time (Mike).

You’re going into another dimension of speed, quickness and anticipation. The mental, the strategy, the horse power, playing ability, everything, just kind of excels into a super shot of adrenaline, and just everything happens so quickly and rapidly and aggressively that it’s very-very

exciting. You cannot have enough of them (Memo).

As Memo said, “High goal polo is ‘the fantasy of polo.’” In high-goal polo, players get to live their dreams and fantasies. They get the adrenaline rush and high level of competition that they desire. They feel the speed, the intensity, and the pressure. They receive money and awards. And more than anything else, they get an opportunity to be great on the field and become one of the best in a “cool” sport. Without competition, they don’t have a chance to become the best and becoming the best was integral to their thoughts about competitiveness.

Thoughts about competitiveness

Success in polo is commonly measured by winning tournaments and how many handicap goals each player earns. All six players believed that being competitive was an asset to their performance as it helped them strive for success. In describing competitiveness, the poloists offered the following thoughts:

Definitely the ultimate is to win. But then at the second step you look at ‘OK, did I play well?’ ...You start getting more down to a personal level and I think all that can be considered competitiveness. ...I’ve never finished a game where I didn’t get beat on a certain play or whatever, but that’s what I’m striving for. ...To want to strive to be better than the next person, to want to better yourself, to want to win...(Julio).

...[It is] kind of a gritty will to win on the field. When you’re really in the thick of it, [you are] just like willing to get the ball through the posts to win the game in the last

second. I think of going to a ride-off and both horses staying 50/50 and just somehow finding a way to get a little extra push to win the ride-off. I have this image of it. It's sort of a grit staying in the top of your stomach and you got to release that. ...Performing releases it. But also, performing is what causes it too, because thinking about performing is what causes this, but it's also what makes me alive--the process (Adam).

...I feel like I want to get the edge on a person, one way or another I can (Hector).

I want to play with these great players and I want to have a good time and I want the best horses, but I want to win also. Obviously everybody can't win, but that's competitiveness. You want to be the best (Mike).

...Some people, they lose one game or they feel the pressure and they want to kind of get inside their shell, and some others they want to excel and get the courage and the class out, that's what you call competitiveness, it's the same with the horses (Memo).

When players thought about competitiveness, they thought about the gritty will to win, the desire to excel, outperform the opponent, play great and win, absorb the pressure, and overcome difficulties. These challenges encompassed the poloists' sense of what it means to be competitive. These thoughts and feelings energized them to strive for their goals and justified competitiveness as an important attribute for athletes.

Behaviors showing competitiveness

The interviewed players perceived themselves as competitive. Learning how they recognized competitiveness in their performances provided valuable information for the researcher to understand competitiveness from the athletes' point of view. The players talked about things they do on and off the field, which they believed were related to their competitiveness.

If they knew me, and they knew how I prepared and my training schedule and all the things that I do off the field in order to make things happen on the field, I think they would know that I'm competitive (Julio).

I think on the field they know I go hard, I play hard, I'm very aggressive... determined to go hard and win and I get very intense on what I'm doing (Hector).

...Finding ways to score, never quitting, maintaining steadiness, winning, having the best horses, being prepared, being organized would be things that show my competitiveness (Mike).

My work ethic on the field, I think that hustling, just pushing to the last minute, every single play pushing it to the limit. ...A huge work ethic off the field (Owen).

I think it's the dedication. I'm very fully dedicated to what I'm doing. I'm very focused on what I'm doing. I'm very intense on what I'm doing (Memo).

The outward, visible expressions of the poloists' competitiveness are demonstrated by the above quotes. The players believed

that if you are competitive you prepare well before the game, you play intensively during the game, and you learn after the game, which made competitiveness an ongoing process of becoming better.

The role of competitiveness in performance

Discovering the role of competitiveness in the poloists' performance was an aspect of the purpose of this inquiry. The participants thought that competitiveness had a very significant role in their performances.

Makes you have to play and prepare 100, 110%. It makes me enjoy the sport but it makes me strive every step to better myself (Julio).

It's because of the desire to win that I perform well. That can be broken down into an individual play as two people go to the ball, and I think about beating that other player. ...I think the desire, which is involved in competitiveness is very important for us to end up winning. Having the will to win gets you a lot of the way (Adam).

I think, probably the competitiveness is what got me here. Wanting to do better, wanting to get better, and wanting to win has pushed me to this level and hopefully to get higher at one point. ...I think competitiveness gives you an edge on a person ... (Hector).

...I think when you're competitive you can have your fears, you have your thoughts, your doubts, your dreams, but when you're on the field, you're competing. You don't think you're going to lose until it's over. It's like you always think you're going to win. You always

think that some things are going to happen and you're going to make it happen (Memo).

Competitiveness took the game of polo to the next level. Without competitiveness they believed that they would not get better. It provided the goal of wanting to achieve while playing and supported the players' growth and development in the game. It provided the goal for winning and then a way to discover how to achieve the victory. The players offered multiple examples of things that competitiveness does for them, like, giving them the extra push, a way to win a ride-off or to score a goal, keeping them playing hard until the end, etc.. The ultimate goal is to win according to Julio, but successful completion of small tasks is the way to approach winning. Thus, the researcher rationalized the role of competitiveness as providing the players with a specific task, with a focus on what they needed to do at each moment (prior to, during, or after a game) and the energy to pursue it.

Being 'too competitive'

In the poloists' stories, players suggested that overdoing something was not always beneficial to one's performance. The quotes show that what a player considers as 'too competitive' is an individual definition. The concept of 'being too competitive' triggered the following interesting thoughts:

If you get too nervous it can affect your effort, even if you want you go overboard, and like when you try to overdo something sometimes you do worse than better (Hector).

I think that if you take the winning and losing competitive part of it too serious, it will mess up your thought game (Mike).

If you overdo it, I think the same time that you're trying to achieve, you create a block. You create a frustration and I would say you go from competitiveness to a fear of losing. Kind of anxiety, kind of getting worried about not happening. I think you have to keep a balance in performance, execution, and then obtaining the result. You have to be ready to take challenges, you have to be ready to regulate or to defend your territory. Part of being competitive and part of being a winner is the control that you have... I also think you have to have certain aggressiveness. If I decide to go to the ball and run with the ball to goal, I'm aggressive enough to defend, everybody knows that I'm one with a determination. I think you have to change it from aggressiveness to determination. They're two different things. Aggressiveness is wrong, but determination I think is right (Memo).

Are you too competitive if you get out on the field and end up getting in fights or saying things rudely to other players in order to prove a point or in order to think that you're going to win the next play because of that. Are you being too competitive or is your real personality coming out? (Julio).

The concept of 'being too competitive' is seen differently by the poloists. How much of competitiveness was a personal decision or one's personality? Overreacting and being verbally or physically aggressive may portray personal characteristics instead of competitiveness. As a behaviour it may come out in other

ways, e.g., becoming over-committed and over-focused on what the player is trying to achieve can result in tension and worries, which then impact one's performance in a negative way. The poloists' varying views on being 'too competitive' offered a wealth of information on what is and what may not be optimal competitiveness.

Motivation within their competitive performances

Each person's journey starts with the first step. Motivation has been an essential aspect of sport participation. Thus, learning from the participants what motivates them and how that affects their performance in addition to their sense of being competitive was perceived as a corner piece in the puzzle of competitiveness. The poloists shared the following thoughts:

If you have a higher motivation for whatever reason it may be, then I think you're more competitive in the sense that you'll try harder, you know you want it more badly, and if you want it more badly then you are more competitive. ...If you have the motivation, which drives competitiveness for me, that's how you derive the level of performance (Julio).

I think that I am motivated by a love for competing and during the competition, I am determined to do well. The determination to do well is the competitiveness and the love for the competition is the motivation (Adam).

Motivation is desire. I am motivated by money, I'm motivated by trying to do well for my family and myself. ...I know how you learn to be motivated: if you want something that creates motivation. Mo-

tivation is created by me, competitiveness is created by somebody else in me. ...I think [the desire to win] has to come from competitiveness (Owen).

I think the motivation is the beginning. You have to be motivated first and then from there, you find the competitiveness, and the level of the determination that you want to dedicate to the sport or the practice or anything you want to do. I think [motivation] comes before being competitive. ...You can put somebody that doesn't know anything and is not motivated he's never going to be competitive. He's not there, he's not attracted to it. It's not so important for him (Memo).

Being motivated was very important to the players. Competitiveness may play an important role in their performances, but without motivation nothing was going to happen. Having the motivation to get involved into polo was essential. Sustaining that “stimulation” in order to keep playing and trying to become one of the best players was even more important. Competitiveness did not stand-alone. According to Hector and Memo, it's not one thing, but many things which when chained together can support the player's journey for success.

Overall, the researcher perceived that as the players complemented each other with their stories, so did the six categories. Each player described multiple aspects of competitiveness and helped the researcher view a different and more complete picture of competitiveness. Beginning with their ‘benefits from competing’, and proceeding through the cross-case analysis categories, a more colorful picture may

now be drawn to enhance our understanding of competitiveness. All these thoughts bring distinct aspects of competitiveness to our attention and offer different perspectives and perceptions which are valuable when consulting, researching, or teaching as performance educators. In the discussion section, the researcher took the poloists' stories one step further by interpreting their thoughts, while attempting to understand competitiveness a little better and make it more explicit in a way that can be meaningful to those who are interested in it.

Discussion

Julio, Adam, Hector, Mike, Owen, and Memo described themselves as competitive, very competitive, or even super competitive. Being competitive for the interviewed poloists is an internal feeling about doing well, being better than others, becoming better than themselves, and ultimately about winning plays, chukkers, games, and tournaments. There is no single form of competitiveness nor one constant level of competitiveness, it is a personal feeling, a unique state of mind that pushes them to do more and better, to play high-goal polo games, and perform at a high level regardless of how the game is going. Being competitive energizes them to prepare harder for what they want to achieve, pushes them to learn as much as they can in order to become the best, and gives them the extra edge of strength and endurance while on the polo field. As Owen discussed, competitiveness gives him the goal and the energy to reach for that goal.

Competitiveness as a Process

The polo players' stories described competitiveness as an on-going process; it's not only about being competitive on the field during a game. They are also competitive before and after the game, in order

to make things happen. The best way to describe competitiveness based on these interviews and observing the poloists play is as ‘having a point of reference’. This point of reference pertains to an awareness of where the athlete is and where he wants to go, like “I am this good and I want to become this much better” or “I am here with the ball and I want to get through the goal-posts.” For example, in a ride-off situation, the poloist becomes aware of the competition between himself and an opponent and wants to win the ride-off. Winning the ride-off is the point of reference for the task-at-hand. This precise point of reference gives the poloist a specific task to focus on and strive for (i.e., outdo the player next to him), which makes his playing job relatively easier as he is aware of what he needs to do at that particular moment in the game.

What led the researcher to viewing competitiveness as a point of reference were the poloists’ ideas of wanting to become the best (which entailed some kind of comparison) and their way of thinking in parts (plays, as they referred to them); performing well in each play, and building intensity and momentum based on each play. Julio, Adam, and Memo were very particular in taking care of a play, concentrating on each play, and not the whole game. They built their performances on striving to win play-by-play, chukker-by-chukker, and game-by-game. Owen helped the researcher verbalize this idea by saying that “if you don’t have competitiveness then you don’t have the goal that you want to achieve” with playing, whereas Memo also talked about knowing how much self-improvement you need.

The role competitiveness played was to create focus, and to trigger the necessary behaviors. Riding hard, becoming “brick-walls” to defend their positions, finding

even risky ways to score, persisting, never letting go or quitting are behaviors that help them acquire their points of reference. These behaviors have been described by sport psychology researchers as distinctive of highly competitive athletes (Gill, 1993; Scanlan, 1974; Weinberg & Gould, 1995). These researchers also argued that highly competitive athletes seek challenges. Memo and Mike shared with the researcher that they love challenges and new job opportunities as well as playing in demanding and difficult games. Adam talked about his love-hate attraction to game situations. Owen mentioned his need for competition, and Mike also admitted going after the “competitive competition” all the time. From the poloists’ stories, it was apparent that challenges capture their attention.

The interviewed poloists believed that less competitive players perform with less excitement and often exhibit weaker playing behaviors, than challenges may demand. Challenges do not capture their attention. For example, Julio perceived differences in players who are not very competitive with regard to “what extent will they go to try to win the game, how hard will they push, will they go the extra inch or that mile to win the a game?”

Competitiveness, is triggered by performance (i.e., mental and physical; performance as creation and expression of one’s ideas prior to, during, and following competition). For Adam “Performance releases [competitiveness.] Also performing is what causes it, but ...it’s also what makes [him] alive.” Performing in polo, whether it is playing in tournaments, practicing, or revisiting and learning from past games gives the players the opportunity to be competitive.

In conclusion, competitiveness as a point of reference provides a clear focus as to what the athlete needs to do. Awareness of this point of reference also triggers the energy, strength, intensity, and determination to improve and work hard (e.g., toward getting the ball through the posts), as the player brings all of himself and skills into one specific task. In other words, it appears to simplify things for the athlete. When the athlete has clear means of comparison (e.g., scoring another goal, marking closely an opponent) it is relatively easier to push to the limits and exhibit strong achievement behaviors.

Poloists' Competitiveness and the Literature

The literature defines competitiveness as a sport-specific achievement motive. A contribution of this study is in expanding the definition of competitiveness and explaining what it can do for one's performance. Being competitive, as having a point of reference and a focus on what the athlete needs to do, may appear to overlap with the goal setting performance enhancement technique, yet the researcher recognized a few differences. In goal setting, the athlete gets direction from the goals as s/he goes after them, whereas in being competitive, the athlete gets direction and energy from the distance that s/he has to travel between where s/he is and where s/he wants to go. Competitive athletes use their goals plus the gap between their present position and their goals to direct and energize their performances. Competitive athletes become aware of the distance they want to travel and lock into it, while non-competitive athletes respond to the goal but the distance to be traveled is not a source of energy.

Being competitive also differs from one's competitive orientation. Based on Gill (1986) and Vealey's (1986) work, win-

and outcome-orientations direct the athlete's approach to competition, influence their choices and focuses but not their energy and intensity. Both win-and outcome-oriented athletes can be very competitive when they become aware of what they need to do. Similarly, sport-specific achievement motivation reflects the athlete's tendency to approach or avoid achievement situations and strive for success when engaged in one. Competitiveness as presented in this study is a process, not a tendency or personal disposition. The athlete's achievement motivation can influence her/his decision to approach or avoid competition, while competitiveness will provide the athlete with the specific focus and energy for performing in the competition or practice session.

Gill (1986) argued that being competitive is a trait that can be found in the heart of competitors who strive for achievement, and competitiveness was described in this study as an integral part of the poloists' experiences. Martens (1976b) discussed competitiveness as an attribute that motivates an athlete to persist and be strong. Similarly, the polo players talked about trying hard, never quitting, and enduring through pressure as a result of being competitive. At this point, this inquiry supports that being competitive makes a difference in one's performance. Competitiveness does not guarantee success, but based on the poloists' stories and the achievement motivation literature (McClelland, 1976), it can enhance one's chances for success as it can make her/him more effective as a player by being focused, stronger, and persistent.

According to the players' stories, being competitive was about being single-minded, determined, and dedicated. In order to reach the point of reference (e.g., win a ride-off, score a goal, and mark an

opponent closely) certain behaviors were necessary. These behaviors were described by the poloists as riding hard, being persistent, determined and strong, and were similar to the achievement motivation behaviors that the literature offers. Nonetheless, based on the researcher's interpretation of the poloists' competitiveness, there are a few differences between what sport psychology literature (Gill, 1992; 1993; Martens, 1976b; Scanlan, 1974; 1978a; Weinberg & Gould, 1995) and the poloists describe as competitiveness.

Scanlan (1974) hypothesized that athletes high in competitiveness would choose an opponent/standard of equal or a little higher ability/level (50 - 50 chance of success). In contrast, to get better, become the best, and rise their playing levels even higher, Mike and Memo talked about always seeking high level competition and great athletes to play with and against. The poloists also talked about 75 - 25 game situations (i.e., achievement situations) where they would still do their best when playing as the underdogs. As Hector and Mike explained, being an underdog gives them even more to strive for when playing. Scanlan (1974) also hypothesized that highly competitive athletes sustain effort and expect success, where the interviewed players offered additional evidence with their stories. Adam, Owen, and Memo shared their thoughts about believing that they can win when they go out on the field. Mike described a game where his team was behind by seven goals, and the team stayed in the game, did not quit, and persisted until the end losing only by one goal.

Finally, the poloists talked about being competitive before, during, and after a game. Being competitive was presented as

an on-going process, whereas Scanlan (1974) argued that competitiveness (a sport-specific type of achievement motivation) occurs prior to the competitive behavior stage of competition. This research offers evidence in describing competitiveness as an on-going process, where the points of reference help the players focus and energize on what they need to do throughout the preparation, playing, and learning phases of their sport. Expanding Martens' (1976b, p. 325) description of competitiveness 'it is a process of acquiring a point of reference which provides the specific focus, the determination, the intensity and the energy that the athlete will direct toward reaching her/his point of reference in all aspects of competition (game and preparation).'

Limitations and Practical Applications

This inquiry was about thoughts, life stories, and experiences. The poloists' stories and experiences may be similar to other athletes' experiences and their thoughts may be applicable to similar situations. The researcher's perception and interpretation of competitiveness may be transferable to other sports and achievement situations. However, the limitations of the study need to be examined before any practical applications are offered.

The poloists', the peer debriefers', and the researcher's perceptions and interpretations can be perceived as a limitation. The small number of participants; the variable amount of time spent with each participant; the different interview locations; as well as the semi-structured interview mode possibly effected the amount and quality of information that was obtained.

In addition, the researcher's previous experiences with competitive sports (as an athlete and coach), training in performance education and involvement in polo as a

performance educator may have also influenced her position. Nonetheless, all the aforementioned limitations were integral parts of the inquiry. They are discussed here so that the readers can determine the applicability of the findings knowing that these can be perceived as being limited by several factors.

Educating athletes about the process of competitiveness may be the greatest application of this study. Helping athletes understand that being competitive means having a reference between where they are and where they want to go, can be valuable. Observing practices where pressure is lower compared to games, or watching previous games and discussing the athlete's performance in parts can be helpful in learning to recognize those points of reference as these occurred. Communicating with the player about how to become aware and set points of reference, as well as how to move from one to the next during the performance can also be beneficial.

Educating athletes, coaches, and parents on competitiveness as locking into the distance to be traveled may aid in distancing their notion of competitiveness from exhibiting aggression on and off the field. Being aggressive (i.e., playing strong and hard, with the intent to harm, humiliate, or injure the opponent in order to win) did not mean that the athlete was competitive in this study. However, being

determined, dedicated, and responsible to defend your position and playing strong and hard, with the intent to win, without causing harm, injuries, or humiliation to the opponent, was being competitive. The athlete's focus on a clear point of defending his play, ball, or territory and an awareness of what he needs to do to be effective and successful was being competitive. As Memo suggested, the word aggression in reference to competitiveness must be replaced with determination. This notion of being competitive may help athletes understand more about where their competitive energy comes from and how they can apply it on a more consistent basis.

To fully comprehend competitiveness additional research is needed. For here and now, this inquiry can only serve as a starting point for a different way of viewing competitiveness. More interviews should be conducted with athletes from different sports, based on how success is evaluated (outcome or performance), on team or individual type, on short and long duration performances. In addition, the athletes' coaches and parents may also offer valuable information. To grow as educators and facilitators for athletes in their journeys, there is still a distance to be covered with listening and learning from their experiences and with discovering ways to apply this knowledge. For a start, we could allow this distance to energize our endeavor for higher learning.

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