



Original Contribution

**MENTAL SKILLS AND BEHAVIORAL COPING STRATEGIES IN
ELITE FOOTBALL REFEREES**

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ABSTRACT

The level of development of modern professional football imposes higher and higher demands on the mental health of football referees. A mentally well-prepared football referee would counter the means of influence more effectively, which is a basic prerequisite for making correct and timely decisions. Based on the above, we set the goal of the present study to investigate the mental skills and behavioral coping strategies of elite football referees and, on this basis, to look for ways to optimize them. We set the objectives of the research: to examine the mental skills and behavioral strategies of elite football referees and, on this basis, to draw conclusions and recommendations for optimizing the work of elite football referees. The subject of the research is the mental skills and behavioral strategies of Elite football referees. The object of the research are 102 elite football referees from Bulgaria. For the purposes and tasks of the present study, we used two psychological methods – COPE-1 and TOPS. We processed the results using the statistical software SPSS v.22. Conclusion – the development of a large part of skills during a match, mental or purely technical, is an extremely good prerequisite for activity and purposeful actions. For quick and accurate handling in various situations.

Key words: football, football referees, mental preparation, mental skills, behavioral strategies, optimization, referrals

INTRODUCTION

Football is the most popular and most practiced sport in the world. The great popularity and the mass practice of the football game is not accidental. The explanation of this fact should be sought in its accessibility, originality, dynamism and diversity. Football is a successful combination between the originality of the form, the specificity of the content and emotionality evoked by the skill, creativity and the fantasy of football players in the realization of individual and collective game actions, in the creation of goal situations, in the realization of the ultimate goal of the game – scoring a goal (1, 2). According to K. Naydenova, football in its essence is a collective ball game based on individual capabilities, teamwork and victory

over the opponent, united by the principles of fair play (3), and according to E. Atanasov, football is part of the physical culture of humanity and possesses some difficult-to-explain magical power to enthrall people (4). The continuous development and improvement of the football game increasingly elevates the role of the football referee. It is a major factor not only for the correct course of the game and for the regulation of the relationships between the players, but also for its quality stimulation of the game. Therefore, the judiciary is the object of extremely great attention among the world sports community (5). According to G. Kabakov, „The trends of FIFA and UEFA for the development of football refereeing are clear and well-founded – young individuals, who are ambitious and driven to work in a set pattern to reach the pinnacle of football refereeing“ (6). According to G. Ignatov, „The root cause for the mistakes the referees make, is not lack in their sports-technical knowledge and skills as much

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as their mental instability“. He adds that the mental preparation is part of the overall training of football referees, which requires such training to be conducted. Referee committees of UEFA and FIFA lead purposeful mental training of football referees at the seminars they conduct. In Bulgaria, it is a personal matter of each judge and there is not such an organized purposeful process of its detailed practical study, stabilization and improvement. The same author examines the main means of influencing referees, as well as the tasks of mental preparation before, during and after football matches (7). The author G. Kabakov claims in his work that „To be successful, football referees must acquire those skills and qualities, that will contribute to the excellent psychophysical preparedness, as a result of which they will be able to make correct decisions, to manage the football match effectively, to properly manage the players and the officials“ (8). The same author examines the mental preparation of football referees before, during, after football matches, as well as some mental qualities – motivation, ambition, courage, confidence and self-esteem, concentration, resilience, productivity and focus of attention, anticipation, imagination, mental resilience, adaptation and anxiety. He considers that „Each of the above mental qualities is extremely important to be formed and developed because owing to the strong connection between them, the football referee can reach maximum referee realization. This can only be done through a purposeful mental preparation in the training process“ (9).

Few authors have worked and delved into the psychology of a football referee. According to T. Yancheva and G. Ignatov, professional football referees have a higher need for security. They show more anxiety, more intense emotional reactions and feel the need for the support of others in situations of tension and risk (10). In another study, the same authors outline a psychological profile of the football referee and provide valuable guidance regarding the direction of mental training of referees (11). According to G. Ignatov, amateur football referees have a pronounced internal localization of control, while in professional football referees it tends to be external. They are more susceptible to social pressure and are more likely to attribute the causes of failure to external factors (12). Authors G. Ignatov, I. Ivanov and R. Miryanov explore the styles of

decision-making with elite football referees in Bulgaria. According to them, the elite referees with a high level of professional experience prefer individual mental and behavioral strategies and decisions. They have a higher level of activity-determination style. Taking responsibility is the leading of the four subscales of the activity-determination style. The authors found no statistically significant differences in the effectiveness of decision-making styles by age (13). In another study I. Ivanov and G. Ignatov investigate the cognitive styles of elite football referees in Bulgaria. According to them, the original cognitive style is leading among elite referees in Bulgaria. The oldest and most experienced referees have the highest level of originality, creativity, quick decision-making and use of information. Compliance of style diminishes with increasing age and experience. They add that the elite professionals with a high level of international experience prefer individual mental and behavioral strategies and decisions – an original cognitive style (14).

The factors outlined above led us to make this multi-component research to characterize in detail the mental readiness and behavior of the elite football referees in Bulgaria.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the mental skills and the behavioral coping strategies of elite football referees and on this basis to look for ways to optimize it.

To achieve our goal, we set the following tasks:

1. To study the mental skills of elite football referees.
2. To study the behavioral strategies of elite football referees.
3. To draw conclusions and make recommendations for optimizing the work of elite football referees.

The subject of the research is mental skills and behavioral strategies in elite football referees.

The object of the research are 102 elite football referees from Bulgaria.

The study was conducted during the months of February and March 2022 in the beginning of the spring half-season of the 2022/2023 season. We have processed the obtained results using the statistical software SPSS v.22, applying specific statistical methods.

METHODS OF WORK

For the purposes and objectives of the present study, we used two psychological methods:

1. Test for the study of preferred strategies for coping with stress (COPE-1), consisting of 53 items organized into 13 subscales, adapted for the sports environment by M. Georgiev, G. Domuschieva – Rogleva & I. Tosheva (15) on the Bulgarian version of the scale of Carver, Scheier & Weintraub (16). The scales are: „Active Coping”, „Planning“, „Suppression of Competing Activities“, „Abstaining“, „Seeking of emotional support“, „Positive rethinking and development“, „Acceptance“, „Turning to religion“, „Focusing on emotions and their expression“, „Denial“, „Behavioral Disengagement“, „Mental Disengagement“, „Alcohol and drug use“.

2. Thomas, Murphy & Hardy (17) Achievement Strategies Research Questionnaire, Bulgarian adaptation by Zhelyazkova-Koinova, Savcheva, Yordanov (18), through which changes in the level of mental skills during training were tracked and during an official match involving 21 questions. The scales are: „Goal setting skills“, „Automation“, „Emotional control“, „Visualization“, „Activation“, „Internal dialogue“, „Relaxation“, „Negative thinking“, „Attention“.

They were distributed via Google Forms to football referees (main and assistants), serving the First and Second Professional Leagues of Bulgaria. They answered 102 football referees, of which 97.3% are men and 2.7% are women. Of the football referees surveyed, 38 are chief referees and 64 are assistant referees. 98 are men, 4 are women. Of all the football referees 18 have international status.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mental skills are constructs that reflect the degree to which a given person manages and controls his thinking, emotions and behavior in different situations.

Mental skills are self-regulatory skills that unify the self-regulation of the course of mental processes and the manifestation of mental processes qualities that help the person to achieve a high level of realization in sports. Through the acquisition and application of these skills the contestants can control their behavior, their activity, their mental and psychophysical states in order to realize the goals they set for themselves in competitions and training. Some mental skills require a longer period of time to develop (19).

From **Figure 1** one can see the average values of the different types of mental skills of football referees during an official match and during training. The goal-setting skill has the highest average value and negative thinking – the lowest one. The ability to set long-term and short-term goals is of extreme importance in sports and in particular in the career development of an elite referee. Regarding negative thinking, it inhibits attention and decision-making, so its lower values are a sign of good cognitive self-control. The expectation for referees at this level is to demonstrate skills above the average.

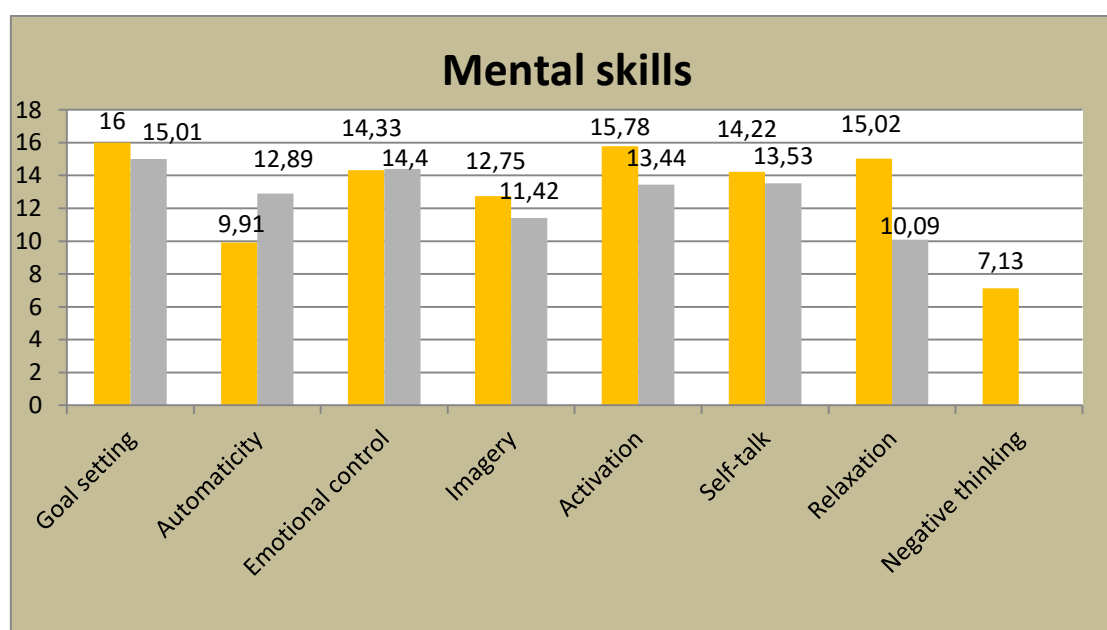


Figure 1. Average values of the scales of the mental skills methodology

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the values of behavioral coping strategies. Again, the methodology was completed by all 102 referees. The leading scales according to their mean values are „Planning“ (M=13.10), „Positive rethinking“ (M=12.90), „Active coping“ (M=12.34). On the other side with expectedly low values are „Behavioral disengagement“ (M=5.53) and „Alcohol and drugs“ (M=1.13).

Positive strategies and those related to requirements and activity are with a tendency for higher scores. This is a sign that judges use them for orientation and organization in training and competition in elite sport. The studied referees are the best in Bulgaria and part of their success is related to their mental skills and abilities. In case of negative results or errors, these strategies help them reframe the consequences and move on with the preparation. The "Active Coping" strategy is described as energetic and efficient action and good problem solving skills in different

situations. This means that they are proactive, ready to achieve and show their best.

In second place is „Positive reframing“, which means good cognitive strategies and abilities to view the situation from a different perspective and thinking about life events in a positive light. This is one of the most important things in sports where people try to successfully overcome problems by themselves and to achieve high sports results, while at the same time having another main profession.

The lowest scoring scales were „Behavioral Disengagement“ and „Use of alcohol and drugs“. This means that the examined referees do not exhibit self-destructive behavior. Their behavior is typical of elite athletes, such as they need to develop their personality, follow their goals and reduce strategies that cannot help them during training and competition. This profile shows higher scores on positive and adaptive strategies. They prefer activity, clear goals and direct problem solving.

Table 1. Variance analysis of coping strategies from the COPE-1 methodology

Strategies	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Active coping	102	7.00	16.00	12.34	1.81
Planning	102	8.00	16.00	13.10	2.22
Suppression of competing activities	102	4.00	16.00	10.38	2.18
Abstaining	102	5.00	15.00	10.14	1.71
Instrumental support	102	4.00	16.00	11.10	2.43
Emotional support	102	4.00	16.00	9.56	2.68
Positive rethinking	102	8.00	16.00	12.90	1.78
Acceptance	102	4.00	16.00	9.93	2.41
Religion	102	4.00	16.00	7.23	3.50
Focus on emotions	102	4.00	14.00	7.27	2.20
Denial	102	4.00	11.00	7.04	1.78
Behavioral disengagement	102	4.00	16.00	5.53	2.16
Psychological disengagement	102	4.00	13.00	8.31	2.01
Use of alcohol and drugs	102	1.00	3.00	1.13	.424
Valid N (listwise)	102				

Table 2 shows a comparative analysis between referees with international status and others who manage matches only in Bulgaria. There are statistically significant differences between four indicators. The referees of international level have statistically significant higher values on „Active Coping“, „Planning“ and „Positive Rethinking“. All three strategies are important for high achievements and for working under pressure and high expectations. The development of such ways of coping is one of the essential factors for career development of international judges. This has made them more

competitive and ready for a higher level in the profession. The pressure on them is extremely high and the specific thing is that in many cases it is completely subjective and is not covered by facts at the football match, but with the subjective experience of football players, coaches and audience. This means that positive reframing is of utmost importance for them to keep mental resilience in perspective.

The „Accept“ strategy has statistically significant differences in favor of national judges. On one hand, accepting the facts is a

fruitful strategy, but it can turn into resignation and unwillingness to change, which is the explanation for differences in conversion rates between referees. Modern football refereeing is

very dynamic, and if there is no adaptability, it is difficult to achieve development. A change happened in the work of the referees in the last few years that used to take decades.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of strategies and mental skills by the international status factor

Strategies	N	Mean	F	Sig.
Active coping	18	12.52	3.25	0.05
	84	11.30		
	102	11.34		
Planning	18	13.17	2.24	0.04
	84	12.09		
	102	12.30		
Positive rethinking	18	13.25	1.34	0.03
	84	12.11		
	102	12.56		
Acceptance	18	9.11	1.78	0.03
	84	11.13		
	102	9.93		

To reveal the connections and interdependencies between the researched variables, correlation analysis (Spearman's test) was applied – **Table 3**. Numerous interdependencies are observed between the components of the „Self-talk“, „Relaxation“, „Active coping“ and „Positive rethinking“.

High levels of „Self-talk“ are accompanied by low levels of „Activation“. In this case, the dialogue during the phase of activity and determination clearly fails to trigger and this can lead to decreased emotional self-control, and hence to probability of errors in field decisions.

Table 3. Correlation analysis of the studied indicators

	Self-talk	Relaxation	Activation	Active coping	Positive rethinking	Abstaining	Automaticity
Self-talk		0,455**	-0,417**				
Relaxation	0,455**				0,565**	0,498**	0,622**
Activation	-0,417**			0,344*		0,337*	0,524**
Active coping		0,483**	0,750**		0,613**	0,422**	0,681**
Positive rethinking	0,383*						
Abstaining			-0,645**	0,413**		0,632**	0,645**
Automaticity			0,388*	0,622**			0,782**

* p<0,05; ** p<0,01.

There is a significant correlation between the constructs „Positive rethinking“ and „Active Coping“. Positive rethinking leads to more activity and focus on addressing problem areas. The reformulation of destructive and maladaptive cognitions is also a prerequisite for behavioral response. The negative correlation between „Abstinence“ and „Activation“ is also logical, these trends are opposite in direction. „Automation“ as a skill is significantly correlated with „Active Coping“. Skills mastered to the point of automation facilitate activity and purposefulness, due to the ability to

quickly and promptly respond and give additional confidence about the actions, because the judge is aware of what and how to do.

CONCLUSIONS

The data collected is extensive enough to draw certain conclusions and generalizations that follow from the logic of the analysis, namely:

1. The higher qualification of the investigated football referees is a clear premise that they have more developed qualities of adaptability and activity towards variable situations, which

gives them the opportunity to achieve higher professional development.

2. An extremely important component is the rethinking of information, events and even mistakes in a positive way and these skills again benefit the international referees compared to those with national status.

3. Developing most of the skills during a match, be it mental or technical, is an extremely good prerequisite for activity and purposeful actions and quick and accurate handling of various situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. One of the recommendations based on the conclusions of the research and analysis is that the mental ability to reformulate thoughts, actions and events in a positive way is extremely important and it may prove to be one of the reasons for career development of the referees.

2. The skills to set short-term and long-term goals and the ability to plan is also a key component and should be developed in primary school stages of training and realization of the referees. Better referees have higher planning indicators.

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