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The Role of Focus and Confidence in High-Level Athletic Performances

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Abstract

Despite the ability for past studies to link various psychological factors to optimal athletic performances, the roles of specific factors have yet to be fully discerned. Using a phenomenological-constructionist approach, the present study aims to gather a sharpened understanding of the roles that confidence and focus have on elite sport performances. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 Canadian and Norwegian high-level athletes originating from various sporting backgrounds. The athletes were interrogated about their general perspectives towards confidence and focus, inquired about the nature of their focus with regards to different game situations and asked to revisit their best and worst performances with the emphasis put on their confidence level and focus. The analysis of the interviews was inductive and followed Giorgi's (1985) phenomenological methodology. Results suggested that an optimal focus is very often, if not always, present in best performances and largely absent during worst performances, thus suggesting that focus indeed plays a direct role on sporting exploits. Furthermore, confidence appears to serve as a powerful facilitator for the occurrence of optimal focus, leading to suggest that its relationship with performance might be more indirect. The increased understanding of the roles that both confidence and focus have on athletic performance that is enlightened by this study can serve as basis for practitioners in the development of performance enhancement programs in addition to stimulate future research on the possible relationship between confidence, focus and performance.

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Chapter I: Introduction

For many athletes, performing their best and being or feeling successful in their chosen sport or performance domain is a key incentive for wanting to improve the level and consistency of their performances. The benefits of a good or best performance is not only positive for the individual athlete, but also has a positive effect on coaches, teammates, family members, fans, friends and others (Gratton & Henry, 2001). Many people can experience a genuine feeling of pleasure and happiness as a result of the success of an athlete or team of athletes. Major victories at international competitions including the Olympic Games have the potential to galvanize an entire nation. Success in sport can bring much satisfaction to the athlete and also inspire youth to become active in a variety of sports. In addition to the positive emotional benefits that good or great performances can provide, some successful athletes may also receive significant amounts of funding following a major success (Jackson, Dover & Mayochi, 1998). This financial support can then be invested to further develop the athletes' abilities and empower them to achieve to their full potential. In short, successful performances have repercussions that can extend beyond the immediate environment in which they take place.

Opportunities to participate in events like the Olympic Games are quite difficult to obtain. Getting to such high levels of competition requires not only talent and dedication, but it also necessitates the best possible preparation technically, physically and mentally. Nutrition, knowledge of the sport, preparation for the challenges, opposition or obstacles, relevant physical and technical training are all examples of factors that can influence athletic performances. For this reason, it is not uncommon to see a team of tactical, physical, medical and focus enhancement experts assisting many high performance athletes (Van Dusen, 2008). Behind every great champion, there is typically a great team of people helping the athlete in variety of different ways.

Over the past 30 years, sport and performance psychology has been increasingly mentioned as a major influence in sports performance by athletes, coaches and high performance experts (Horn, 2008). Anyone who has ever listened to a sport talk show or a postgame interview has certainly heard “experts” or athletes referring to psychological factors as one of the main reasons for a particular performance (good or bad). One example came from former American track and field Olympic athlete Bruce Jenner who once said, "I always felt that my greatest asset was not my physical ability, it was my mental ability” (BrainyQuote, 2013). While the importance of applied sport psychology to the sporting realm has been progressively gaining respect and acceptance, the role of certain psychological factors are still not necessarily fully understood (Horn, 2008). Studying on the inner workings of the mind is not as obvious as studying a particular muscle or a particular physical movement. This might be why even though past studies have been able to link some key psychological factors (like connected focus) to improved athletic performance (Orlick & Partington, 1988; Kriener & Orlick, 1993; Smith, Schutz, Smoll & Ptacek, 1995), it is difficult for some researchers in the hard physical sciences to gain a full understanding of the role that the mind can play in athletes’ optimal performances.

In order to help resolve this problem or lack of understanding, it becomes imperative that research focus on further understanding athletes perspectives on the roles that certain psychological factors have on their athletic performances. In depth interviews aimed at understanding the roles of focus and confidence in athletes best and worst performances could shed light on how their focus or lack of it and their confidence or lack of confidence influenced their best and worst performances.

The purpose of the present study is to provide a better understanding of the roles that certain psychological factors, namely confidence and focus, have on best and worst sport performances. The research attempts to answer this following question: What is the influences of

confidence and focus in high-level athletes' performances? Based on past relevant applied sport psychology literature and research and using a phenomenological approach, this research proposes to gain applied knowledge about the different effects that confidence and focus have or do not have on high-level athletes during their best performances and disappointing performances. A comparison of their individual and collective responses related to the two factors being investigated (i.e. Focus and Confidence in best and disappointing performances) provide a better understanding concerning the roles that confidence and focus play in sport performances.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Confidence

Sport psychology has been used in a wide variety of ways including helping athletes with mental health issues, explaining certain social behaviours, investigating factors external to the athletes that may have an influence on their performance and studying the influence or potential influence of psychological variables that may have an impact on athletic performance (Aoyagi, Portenga, Poczwardowski, Cohen & Statler, 2012; Cox, Shannon, McGuire & McBride, 2010). Due to the wide variety of factors that are believed to have an effect on an athlete's performance, attempting to predict performance can be a very difficult task. In a study aimed at predicting subjective performance (defined as performance evaluated by the athlete himself or herself) among collegiate athletes, Cox et al. (2010) looked at seven different psychological skills. Using the *Athlete Coping Skills Inventory-28* (ACSI-28) developed by Smith et al. (1995), the study looked at the following psychological skills: coping with adversity, concentration, confidence, goal setting, freedom from worry, peaking under pressure and coachability. The study concluded that some psychological skills were indeed related to subjective performance. For example, the study found that the factors "coachability" and "goal setting" were significant negative predictors

of subjective performance. The authors also found that self-confidence and freedom from worry were positively correlated with subjective performance; self-confidence being the strongest predictor of the two. Moreover, of all factors tested, confidence was the single strongest predictor of good performance; being responsible for 7.2% of subjective performance. This would suggest that 7.2% of subjective performance would be only due to confidence.

Cox et al. (2010)'s conclusions about confidence were not that surprising considering that Taylor (1987) had also previously concluded that sport-confidence was positively correlated with performance in a variety of sports. In fact, several other researches have also linked confidence with performance. For example, even though their primary interest was anxiety characteristics, Modrono and Guillén (2011) positively correlated the season's ranking of competitive windsurfers to their level of self-confidence. A meta-analysis conducted by Woodman and Hardy (2003) concluded that the correlation between confidence and performance is especially important among men who play an individual sport at high level. The importance of sport-confidence in term of performance was also mentioned in another meta-analysis done by Craft, Magyar, Becker and Feltz (2003). They identified self-confidence as the most consistent and strongest predictors of good performances in the studies that used the *Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2*. The relationship between self-efficacy (closely related to confidence) and performance was also observed in an experiment conducted by Gernigon and Delloye (2003). In one of the few qualitative study on the subject, Hays, Thomas, Maynard and Bawden (2009) studied 14 world-class athletes in order to explore the role of confidence in their performances. They found that athletes saw sport-confidence as a factor related to performance. Among the 14 athletes interviewed, all athletes reported good performances when they felt confident and bad performances when their level of confidence was low. A deeper exploration of those testimonies revealed that high level of confidence was linked with positive affect as well as appropriate focus

and behaviour during the competition (Hays et al., 2009). Meanwhile, low level of confidence resulted in the exact opposite effect (Hays et al., 2009). Such testimonies from world-class athletes tend to confirm what researchers previously suggested; that confidence and subjective performance are often correlated with each other.

The apparent important role that confidence played in athletic performance lead Robin Vealey (1986) to create a conceptual framework for sport-confidence (see figure 1).

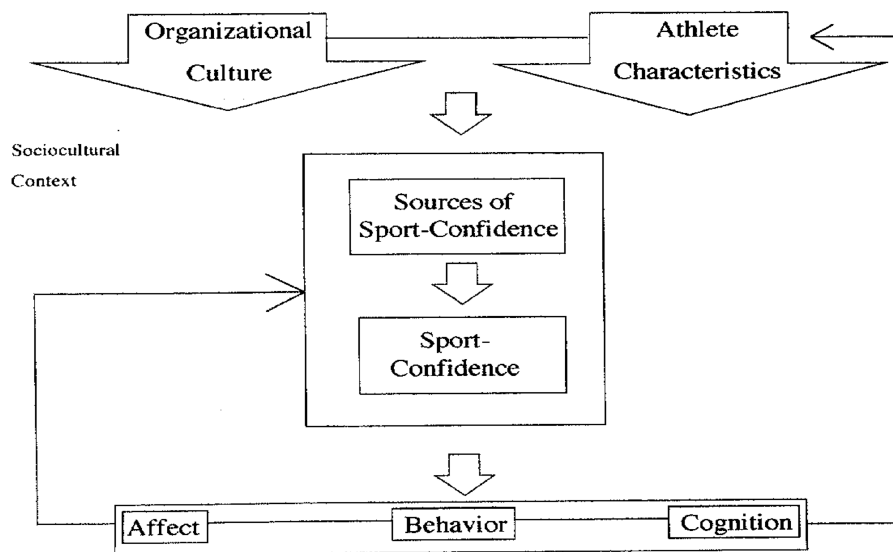


Figure 1—Conceptual framework of sport-confidence.

This framework suggests that organizational culture (e.g. level of competition and program's objectives) and the athletes' characteristics (e.g. age, gender, personality, skills) will have a direct impact on the origins of sport-confidence, also referred to the sources of sport-confidence. In 1998, Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman and Giacobbi were able to identify 9 sources of confidence, namely: mastery, demonstration of ability, mental and physical preparation, self-representation, social support, coach's leadership, vicarious experience, environmental comfort and situational favourableness. Based on the framework, those sources would have a direct influence on the athletes' sport-confidence. Vealey (1986) believed that sport confidence would

have an influence on how athletes feel, think and behave. Such influence on so many different levels might explain why other studies reported confidence to be a powerful factor of influence in athletic performances. Moreover, Vealey's framework suggests that the athletes' affect, cognitions and behaviours will then have an impact on the athletes' characteristics and the organizational culture but also on the sources of sport-confidence and even sport-confidence itself, thus suggesting that sport-confidence is a very complex phenomenon.

In a study completed in 1995, Jackson was also able to investigate the influence of psychological factors on sports performance. The study investigated the factors influencing the occurrence of the state of flow among high-level athletes. Although not necessarily associated with best performances, flow has often been linked with situations where athletes perform to their optimal levels (Jackson, 1995). Therefore, any factors that can influence the state of flow certainly have the potential to influence athletic performance. After interviewing 28 elite athletes from Australia and New-Zealand, Jackson came up with several factors that can help, prevent or disrupt the state of flow. Although some elements were not related to psychology (e.g. physical preparation or environmental conditions), most of the factors cited by the athletes were psychological. The two most powerful factors that reportedly helped the occurrence of flow were positive "pre-competitive and competitive plans and preparation" and also "confidence and positive attitude". "Motivation to perform", "optimal arousal prior to the competition", "feeling good while performing", "having a good focus" and also "positive team play and interaction" were all psychological factors believed to help the occurrence of flow. Conversely, "lacking motivation", experiencing a "non-optimal arousal level", "not feeling good when performing", "inappropriate focus" and "negative team play and interaction" were all mental factors mentioned by the athletes that could prevent flow. Finally, "inappropriate focus" or "problems regarding team interaction" were associated with a disruption of the state of flow as well. Due to the

relationship between flow and performance, it can be expected that the psychological factors impacting flow in Jackson's study could also have an effect on athletic performance. This would mean that factors that positively influence flow (e.g. confidence) could also have a positive impact on performance. On the contrary, lacking, preventing or disrupting the state of flow (e.g. focus) can have a negative influence on performance.

Focus

Jackson (1995), and other studies support earlier findings that focus impacts performance in sports. In Orlick and Partington's ground breaking study (1988), 235 high-level athletes participated in a study investigating mental characteristics linked to excellence in sport. The study had a qualitative component, where 75 athletes were interviewed, and a quantitative one, where 160 athletes were asked to answer a survey. The analysis revealed that the athletes reported that being "blown away by distractions" was a major source of bad performances. This was linked to the importance of being positive and having a fully connected focus while performing at such level. Combining both results from the qualitative and quantitative components of the study, Orlick and Partington (1988) concluded that attentional focus and positive imagery were two of the most important factors reported with respect to athletes performing their best at high-level competitions.

The influence of focus of attention on motor performance has been studied for many years and in many different contexts (Wulf, 2007). In her review of the literature, Wulf (2007) was able to report studies that investigated focus in the context of different sports (e.g. volleyball, golf, basketball, soccer) but also in relationship with physical skills (e.g. jumping, balance) and even medical conditions (e.g. Parkinson, stroke). Wulf concluded that attentional focus does indeed have an immediate effect on motor skills but can also influence the learning of those skills. Although attentional focus has often been studied, experts of the field have not yet come

up with a clear definition for it (Bernier, Codron, Thienot & Fournier, 2011). In most studies, attentional focus has been referred to the object or task that an individual centers his or her attention on (Bernier et al., 2011; Moran, 2012). One of the good analogies that have been offered in order to facilitate the understanding of the phenomenon is the spotlight's metaphor. The analogy, as explained in Moran (2012), is the idea that attentional focus is just like a beam of light controlled by the individual that shed light on a specific target while purposely leaving other areas dark. Depending on the type of focus, the beam can be broad or narrow, but also external or internal.

Research on this topic usually tends to make a distinction between external and internal focus (Bernier et al., 2011; Bredin, Dickson & Warburton, 2013; Ille, Sellin, Do & Thon, 2013; Lohse, Jones, Healy & Sherwood, 2014; Wulf, 2007; Wulf, Shea & Lewthwaite, 2010). External focus of attention will occur when the individual directs his or her attention towards the effect of the movement (Bredin et al., 2013; Wulf et al., 2010). On the other hand, an internal focus is when the attention is directed towards the body movement itself (Bredin et al., 2013; Wulf et al., 2010). Although external and internal focus of attention are usually the two main types of focus used, some researches have made more precise distinctions. Moran (2012) for example, added a distinction between narrow and broad focus for both external and internal. While the broad external focus aims for a quick assessment of the available options present in the environment (e.g. a quarterback looking at his different receivers while reading the coverage), a narrow external focus puts the emphasis on a specific target (e.g. a target that a biathlon athlete has to hit). The same goes for internal focus. A specific sequence of movement (e.g. an acrobatic ski jumper rehearsing the series of movement needed for his next jump) will be identified as a broad internal focus. On the other hand, the narrow internal focus will place the individual's attention on a specific movement in his body (e.g. the fingers' location during a baseball pitch). In their

naturalistic investigation of golfer attentional focus, Bernier et al. (2011) came up with even more diverse and specific distinctions. These distinctions were based on the content and characteristics of the athletes' attentional focus. Although interesting, the study was exploratory in nature and more research needs to be conducted to clarify and test those distinctions. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that analysis of data related to attentional focus can be more than simply external and internal.

The fact that attentional focus does have an immediate effect on motor performance (Bredin et al., 2013) led many researchers to study the different impacts that external and internal focus of attention might have on motor performance. In recent years, motor learning researchers have tended to agree that performance will be more advantaged by an external focus of attention (Wulf, 2007). In order to reach this conclusion, researchers have studied many different sports or motor tasks (Wulf, 2007). In a study using sprinters, Ille et al. (2013) found that an external focus of attention will result in faster execution of the movement. Bredin et al. (2013) looked at the influence of attentional focus on aerobic and musculoskeletal fitness tests. They found that an internal focus might negatively impact performance while an external focus can improve it. The reasons behind such a phenomenon have also been investigated. Moran (2012) offered one possible explanation. He referred to "paralysis by analysis" - the idea that an internal focus would result in less automatic reactions of the body, causing a deterioration of performances. Wulf (2007) had also previously argued that an external focus would facilitate automatic reactions in movements, improving motor performance. In an experiment using dart throws as the motor movement, Lohse et al. (2014) provided another possible explanation. They found that although internal focus will reduce the variability in the movement, it will also increase the variability in the task outcome. The exact opposite is true for external focus; it will increase variability in movement but decrease variability in task outcome. Simply put, internal focus may

help recreate the same motion more accurately, but external focus will allow for a more consistent performance. They concluded that an internal focus of attention will not necessarily interfere with the automaticity of the movement, but will change the goal of the motor action; desiring a specific movement instead of a specific outcome. Thinking a little bit outside the box, Maurer and Munzert (2013) advanced that direction of focus (external vs. internal) may not be the explanation for the different impact that focus can have on performance. Although the authors did not go against the idea that the direction of focus can influence performance, they claimed that the familiarity of the attentional focus might be a more critical element for explaining the differences in performance.

In the end, it is clear that different types of attentional focus exist and that they will have different impacts on motor performance. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that focus can play a major role in high-level athletes' performances. The direction and familiarity of the focus may explain why an athlete had a specific performance during a particular event, hence the importance of studying the roles that this factor might play in sport performances.

Several different theoretical frameworks have looked at focus or attentional focus. Boutcher (2008) identified three different frameworks that looked at the concept of focus: information-processing perspective, social psychological framework and psychophysiological perspective. The information-processing perspective concentrates on the role of controllability in the process by which athletes are able to gain and maintain focus. In the past, this perspective has often looked at the dynamic between controlled and automatic actions made by the athletes (Boutcher, 2008). With the social psychological framework, it is mainly the distractions that are faced by the athletes (causing interferences in their desired focus) and the attentional style (internal vs. external and broad vs. narrow) that are highlighted (Boutcher, 2008). Finally, the psychophysiological perspective revolved around the relationship between attentional focus and

physiological responses such as eye gaze, heartbeat and brain activity (Boutcher, 2008). Since the present study is centered on understanding the focus of high performance athletes in real-life high performance contexts, it will remain an exploratory study. For that reason, and as recommended by Boutcher (2008), all three frameworks were considered during the data collection and analytical process.

Qualitative Methodology

The depth of an athlete's mindset in best and worst performances has yet to be fully explored. Although the existence of a relationship between confidence, focus and performance has been supported in previous studies, the extent to which those factors influence performance still needs to be clarified. The large number of psychological skills that may be related to optimal athletic performance might suggest that a complex relationship exists between psychology and performance in sports. Consequently, it is important to get a more in depth understanding of the psychological factors that are related to best performances and worst performances.

It is possible that the limited understanding of the role that psychological factors can play in athletic performance may be due to the nature of the studies that have looked at the phenomenon. Although some studies (Bernier et al., 2011; Hays et al., 2009; Jackson, 1995; Orlick & Partington, 1988) used qualitative methods to investigate the influence of psychological factors in sport, quantitative research remains the predominant type of study reported in the scientific literature. In a response to an article written by John Smith (2009), Brustad (2009) advanced that the lack of consideration and understanding regarding qualitative research may have limited the types of research questions asked. This could have resulted in hampering the acquisition of new knowledge about sport and exercise psychology. In recent years, many sport psychology authors have made a call for more researches using qualitative designs. Inspired by Martens (1987) who was one of the first to demand further qualitative research in sport

psychology, Culver, Gilbert and Trudel (2003) conducted a review of qualitative literature in sport psychology from 1990 to 1999. The authors found that more than 80% of the studies published in three main sport psychology journals (*Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* and *The Sport Psychologist*) were quantitative studies. This led them to conclude that although qualitative studies may be present in the literature, there is an indisputable need for more qualitative research. They also added that qualitative studies can greatly improve the sport psychology scholarship, especially on the applied level.

In a follow-up study, Culver, Gilbert and Sparkes (2012) looked at the progress made by qualitative research in sport psychology literature. They noticed that the representation of qualitative research in the sport's literature made a significant improvement moving from 17.3% to 29% of the articles published between 2000 and 2009 in the same three main sport psychology journals. This growth might indicate that after many calls for more qualitative research, the scientific community has finally acknowledged the value and importance of qualitative research for answering essential questions in the sport and performance psychology field. On the other hand, Culver, Gilbert and Sparkes (2012) also pointed out that most qualitative studies did not state their epistemological stance. This was perceived as being a major drawback by the authors. They suggested that future research should clearly state and discuss the epistemological and methodological stance.

Although quantitative studies remain the most common type of research, many researchers believe that qualitative inquiries are absolutely necessary to meaningfully improve our knowledge of applied sport psychology. In their meta-study about coping and stressor appraisals among adolescents in sport, Tamminen and Holt (2010) noted that qualitative inquiry could be particularly useful when personal meanings and processes are investigated. Brustad (2009) gave the example of the effect completing a marathon can have on someone's life. He

argued that without qualitative research, it would be practically impossible to really understand and comprehend the influence of such accomplishment on a particular individual. Several researchers who added a qualitative component to their quantitative studies reported that they discovered findings and interpretations originally not present in their first conclusions (Gill, 2011). The reason why qualitative inquiry is able to provide greater understanding is mainly explained by the specific advantages associated with this type of research.

While reflecting on the value of qualitative research in sport psychology, Randall and Phoenix (2009) claimed that an important advantage of qualitative methodology is the potential to obtain deeper observations and understandings of particular phenomena. Focusing especially on interviews, they added that as compared to quantitative methods of data collection, interviews allow researchers to get a thicker “slice-of-time insights into a participant’s world” (p.136). This “thicker slice” leaves the door open for conclusions that are more nuanced and provide a more accurate picture of complex processes. As mentioned in Eklund, Jeffery, Dobersek and Cho (2011), in order to “garner a holistic understanding of an athlete’s perceptions and experiences, or of complex social processes in a particular athletic domain, the researcher can probably obtain more relevant data from interviews and observations than from quantitative survey instruments” (p.286). This enlighten statement, coming from quantitative researchers, aligns well with Randall and Phoenix (2009), due to the recognition that it is the extensive and nuanced data that will enable researchers to get that holistic understanding.

While most quantitative studies focus on the descriptive aspect of a phenomenon, or also known as the *what*, the depth of the data collected through the use of qualitative methods allows for descriptive conclusions but also for conclusions that are more directed towards the process underlying the object of study, the *how*. When looking at past literature on sport and exercise, Culver et al. (2012) noticed that qualitative studies are useful when investigating the *what* but

also the *how* of things. Even if less present in the literature than quantitative research, many qualitative studies brought important contributions to the scientific knowledge regarding the influence that certain psychological factors have on athletes. In a study reviewing the contributions of qualitative inquiry in competitive anxiety and competitive stress, Neil, Mallalieu and Hanton (2009) concluded that qualitative research has given valuable understanding on the *how* and *why* athletes are influenced by stress and anxiety. Not only did those findings guide future research using the quantitative approach, they were also beneficial for practitioners helping the athletes.

In conclusion, although qualitative research has become more present in the sport and exercise psychology literature, there is significant room for improvement. Considering the advantages that qualitative research brings to holistic understanding and in-depth knowledge of the data, it seems wise to use this approach for this study. Qualitative research in this particular domain can certainly provide relevant, interesting and useful knowledge for researchers and practitioners involved in sport and performance enhancement.

Chapter III: Methodology

Epistemology

In order to truly answer the research question, and as recommended by Culver et al. (2012), researchers should attempt to clearly state their epistemological stance. The goal or purpose of this present study is to gain an in depth understanding of the role that two psychological factors, confidence and focus, play in high-level athletes' performances. In order to achieve this objective, in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the athletes in order to gain an understanding of: 1) the perceptions of their confidence and focus in their best and worst performances and 2) whether they feel their confidence or lack of confidence or their focus influenced their performances in any way. Each athlete's recollection of his or her confidence

and focus for a best and worst performance served as the data used to draw conclusions about the possible influences that confidence and focus can have on best and worst performances. Since the analysis of the data is grounded in the direct experiences of the athletes, the epistemological standpoint or framework use is constructionism and phenomenology served as theoretical perspective.

Constructionism has been defined as the view that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p.42). Considering that conclusions presented in this study will be based on constructed knowledge from the participants, constructionism was chosen as the appropriate framework. In order to understand the role of confidence and focus in athletic performance, both objectivity and subjectivity have to be considered. This is perfectly in line with constructionism (Crotty, 1998). As many researchers have advanced, an absolute objective truth does not exist (Gill, 2011; Randall & Phoenix, 2009; Smith, 2009). This is especially true for social and psychological phenomenon such as the one being studied in this research. In addition to the inevitable social influence when studying the field of sport and exercise (Gill, 2011), the fact that the analysis performed in this study will be based on recollections from the athletes brings another concern regarding a possible absolute truth. Due to time passage and social influence, the recollections from the athletes might not be completely representative of the exact situation described (Randall & Phoenix, 2009). They will always remain approximations. Nonetheless, a point can be made that those vivid memories of particular highly memorable events (best ever and worst ever performances) have now become the truth or reality for these athletes. Acknowledging the social influence and interpretative role of the individual in the building of “truth”, constructionism views those kinds of recollections as valid and “real” (Crotty,

1998), confirming the researchers choice to go with this particular epistemology for this study.

Following the commitment to constructionism as the epistemological approach of this study, the next step was to identify theoretical perspective. Due to the emphasis on the athlete's experience, phenomenology is believed to provide the best framework for this research.

Phenomenology has been defined as “the study of phenomena, things as they present themselves to, and are perceived in our consciousness” (Allen-Collinson, 2009, p.279). Although phenomenology has been underutilized in the field of sport and exercise, it still has the potential to bring new insights to the understanding of sport and exercise (Allen-Collinson, 2009).

Phenomenology can be broadly divided in three main categories: constitutive/transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology and existentialist phenomenology. Although somewhat overlapping, those main branches of phenomenology focus on different aspects or components. While hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the interpretive aspect of a phenomenon, constitutive/transcendental phenomenology aims at giving a more objective and scientific look of the study of human existence (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Remaining objective towards the collected data by avoiding taking for granted certain assumptions regarding a phenomenon is also another characteristic of the constitutive/transcendental phenomenology (Allen-Collinson, 2009). The purpose for such precaution is to grasp the essence of the phenomenon (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Regarding the existentialist phenomenology, which has often been associated with Merleau-Ponty's view, the emphasis is placed on the meaning of what being human means (Allen-Collinson, 2009). This last branch of phenomenology is viewed by Allen-Collinson (2009) as the most appropriate for research seeking an in-depth understanding of phenomena present in the sport and exercise domain. This is because existential phenomenologists believe that perception will come from someone's own body. It has been argued that in order to get an accurate picture of a phenomenon in sports, an athlete will not only

need a cognitive understanding of his experiences and performances, but will also need to refer to his past sensorial experiences (Allen-Collinson, 2009). It is through a mix of cognitive and bodily recollections that knowledge on the influence of psychology in sports will be obtained.

To summarize, the present study adopted a constructionist approach, viewing the subjective and objective as both interrelated and essential in order to acquire knowledge on the influence of psychology on athletic performance. The theoretical perspective of this study is a mix of constitutive/transcendental phenomenology and existentialist phenomenology.

Constitutive/transcendental phenomenology is visible through the attempt to remain free from pre-existing assumptions regarding the influence of psychological factors in high-level athletes' performances. The existentialist phenomenological approach is present due to the emphasis on the importance of the bodily perceptions as a way to acquire knowledge regarding a sport phenomenon.

Based on the goals of the study and the philosophical standpoints, the research question for this study can be articulated the following way: What is the influence of confidence and focus in high-level athletes' performances? In order to answer this question, a phenomenological methodology using interviews as the primary instrument for data collection was used.

Participants

The participants in the present study were 12 high-level athletes, 8 men and 4 women, between the ages of 18 and 39. Eight of the participants were Canadian and four were Norwegian. Eleven participants were still fully active and one was semi-retired. The semi-retired athlete stopped doing international competitions and training full time a year before the interview, but was still doing national competitions, "just for fun." In order to be considered high-level athletes, participants needed to have competition experience at the professional or international level. Those criteria were respected for all but one athlete. However, this athlete,

despite having only competed on the national level, holds a world record in his sport. Because he was able to obtain a world record, an exception was made with this participant since any athlete who owns a world record would be considered a high-level athlete.

The reason for selecting individuals considered to be high-level athletes is because they are considered to be the “experts” in their chosen performance domain. In order to attain the highest levels of performance, those athletes had to dedicate many years of their lives to their sports. Their experiences at the highest levels of sport surely gave them profound personal knowledge related to the influence that confidence and focus can have on high level performances. Therefore, in order to get the best possible input about the topic being investigated, these athletes are the ones who were selected, approached and interviewed. Their extensive experience, competing in many challenging contexts, likely provided in-depth knowledge related to confidence, focus and sustaining high levels of performance.

Although Culver et al. (2012)’s review found that the mean number of participants in interview studies was 15.5, there is no scientific consensus with respect to the optimal number of participants to include in an interview study (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis & Sparkes, 2001). The present study interviewed 12 high-level athletes. Elite athletes represent a small percentage of the population, and accessing athletes at this level is often very difficult. High-level athletes tend to have busy schedules and extensive travel that can interfere with their availability for research. Due to the rarity and difficulty of access to the targeted population, and since there is no consensus regarding the number of participants that a qualitative study should have, it is believed that 12 high level participants provide enough information to allow for realistic conclusions with respect to the roles or impacts that confidence and focus have on sport performance. Comparable interview studies have used between 8 and 14 high-level athletes (Alves, 2013; Hanton, Mellalieu & Hall, 2004; Hays et al., 2007; Hays et al., 2009).

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of the roles of focus and confidence in high performance sport, interviews were conducted with athletes from different sport backgrounds. This included lacrosse (two), freestyle mogul skiing (two), freestyle ski cross and alpine ski (one), short track speed skating (three), Cross Fit (one), handball (two) and Olympic sailing (one). Some of these athletes were involved in team sports (e.g. handball and lacrosse) while others were individual sport athletes (e.g. skiing and Cross Fit). Interviewing athletes from different sports backgrounds provided an opportunity to gain a more holistic understanding of the role confidence and focus play in different types of athletic performances.

Finally, in order to preserve the athletes' anonymity, the participants' names were not given in the results' section. Instead, participants were assigned different number ranging from 1 to 12.

Data Collection

In order to collect and analyze the data, all interviews were audio recorded with two separate recorders in an attempt to avoid any technical issues. Many qualitative researchers have pointed out that when doing interview studies, the researcher is the main instrument (Culver et al., 2012; Dowling & Flintoff, 2011; Randal & Phoenix, 2009; Smith, 2009). The researcher in this study tried to develop a friendly interaction with the participants and create a non-judgemental environment by clearly explaining the goals of the study. The positive feedbacks from the athletes and the overall feeling of connection during the interviews were good indications that this objective was reached.

One benefit of creating a positive environment was that it allowed the participants to feel comfortable sharing their "views" or "stories" regarding the phenomenon being discussed and not feel pressured to corroborate or support pre-existing assumptions (Randall & Phoenix, 2009). As advocated by Dowling and Flintoff (2011), in order to create an "active interview", participants

were sometime challenged or asked to share more details in their testimonies. This was always done in a respectful manner and at times where it was appropriate to do so. The logic behind this procedure was to make sure that the recollections given by the participants were really their own thoughts and not ones influenced by pre-existing beliefs (Dowling & Flintoff, 2011). The researcher reminded the participants that their honest and personal views on the subject was what desired. They were also told that the interviews would remain confidential and only the main researcher and his supervisor would have access to the names and the full interviews.

Procedure

Participants in this study were recruited using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was selected since it allows the researcher to select the participants based on the potential of their ability to answer the questions (Marshall, 1996). Since this research was centered on better understanding the influence of focus and confidence on high-level athletic performances, individuals with first hand experience in high-level sport competition had the best chance to provide the most detailed insights. The first contact with participants was usually through an individual that knew both researcher and the participant. Once the participant expressed his or her interest in participating in an interview (by informing the middle person), the researcher contacted the participants providing a general outline of the study (see Appendix C & D). If the athlete was still interested, another message, with more details about the study was sent (see Appendix E & F). Finally, if the athletes remained interested, a date, time and location of the interview were set. Prior to beginning the interviews, the interviewer would explain to the athletes the nature of the interview and the athlete were then asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix G & H).

The method of data collection consisted of individual interviews. This particular method is common to qualitative research as it is the most popular procedure for data collection in

qualitative research in sport (Culver et al., 2012). Interviews lasted between 110 minutes to nearly 5.5 hours. Most of the interviews were a little over two hours long. Most data was collected through one single interview with each participant. However, in two athletes' cases, multiple interviews were conducted. One athlete shared his thoughts on two different days, and another athlete was interviewed on three different days. The interviews were conducted in Canada (Quebec and Ontario) and in Norway (Oslo). They took place in several different locations. Some of them were conducted in the researcher's office, others were done at the participants' home, coffee shop, and also at the athletes' training facilities. The time and location of the interviews was always based on what was best for the participants. All interviews were realised face to face. The interviews were conducted in French for French speaking athletes, and in English for English speaking athletes. The interviews with Norwegian athletes were done in English since the researcher does not speak Norwegian and all of the Norwegian athletes were very fluent in English.

The interviews were open-ended phenomenological interviews. Dale (1996) pointed out that interviews that are too rigid might prevent the researcher from truly capturing the participant's experience. When trying to understand the participants' knowledge, Dale suggested that phenomenological interviews might be the most pertinent type of interview for a study like this since it gives the athlete a direct influence on the direction of the interview. Following this line of thought, it is believed that using open-ended phenomenological interviews was the appropriate choice for the present study. On the other hand, although the interviews remained open, a series of pre determined questions about the effect of confidence and focus during the athlete's worst and best performance served as a basis for the interviews. The interview guide was inspired by the ones used by Hays et al. (2009) and Alves (2013) who did similar studies to

this one. The interview guide and the researcher's interview skills were pilot tested with three lower level athletes in an attempt to be well prepared for the interviews with high-level athletes.

The interviews proceeded approximately as follows. To start, a set of questions was asked in order to gain an overall idea of the athlete's perceptions about confidence and focus in general (e.g. Can you explain to me what confidence means to you? What does it mean to be focused to you?). Once the first set of questions was answered, the participants were asked to think about one of his or her best performances. While reflecting on their best performances, more specific questions were asked (e.g. "Please share with me any thoughts that you remember experiencing on the day of that competition?", "What were focused on before the performance or event"? "What were you focused on during the event?"). The participants were then asked to answer the same set of questions but for this time, regarding their worst performances.

Finally, the last section of the interview consisted of questions concerning the interview itself (e.g. Do you think there are areas I failed to cover regarding confidence and focus that you feel would be important to discuss? Do you think I influenced your answers in any way?). During the entire interview, probes were used to clarify or get more details on what was shared. It is through those probes that the participants were challenged to provide more details in their answers, as was recommended by Dowling and Flintoff (2011). For a complete version of the interview guide, please see appendix A and B.

As mentioned previously, the interview guide used in this study was inspired from the one used in Hays et al. (2009) and Alves (2013). Although they did not clearly specify that the questions used were phenomenological (Alves did recognize that he used a constructionist approach, but nothing was mentioned about the interview guide), an argument could be made that those questions were indeed phenomenological in nature and respected the philosophical standpoint that this study adopted.

First, the interview guides offered the possibility for the athletes to describe their own personal experience in a “nonstandardized” way, which is a common characteristic of phenomenological interviews (Dale, 1996). Second, as Dale (1996) pointed out, phenomenological interviews are made to be a conversation. The presence of probes in the interview guide, which allow for a back and forth discussion between the participant and the researcher, is another indication of the phenomenological foundation that those interview guides share. Finally, Hays et al. (2009) and Alves (2013)’s interviews recognize the athlete as the expert of the field, not the researcher. This is another feature of phenomenological interviews (Dale, 1996). Although the authors of the interview guides used in this study did not clearly mention their philosophical standpoint, it is clear that the characteristics of their interviews are in line with the phenomenological commitment that the present study embraced.

Once the interviews were completed, a detailed transcription of those interviews was executed for later analysis. Eight interviews were completely transcribed word for word. Those interviews included 4 Canadian athletes and 4 Norwegian athletes. The last four interviews were analysed word for word directly from the audio recordings.

Analysis

The analytical process followed the example of the phenomenological method provided by Giorgi (1985) (as cited in Allen-Collinson, 2009). First, the data were collected in a naïve manner so they can be free from pre-existing assumptions that the researcher might have. The second step was to read the interviews transcripts or listen to the audio recording in order to gain a general feeling of the interviews. Once this step completed, a more specific reading or listening was executed so key points of the interviews could be identified. Using QSR International's NVivo 10 software, those key points were then assigned to themes that were created from the interviews and linked with the research question. This kind of analyses of the data could be

described as inductive analysis as opposed to deductive analysis, which organizes the data based on pre-determined categories and themes. Inductive analysis will create categories and themes based on what arises from the data (Biddle et al., 2001). This type of analysis is believed to give more voice to the participants and is also congruent with the study's phenomenological standpoint. Once all the interviews were analysed in order to find key points and themes, the next step consisted of analyzing each of the key points within each theme in order to find a certain pattern across all participant's testimonies. Finally, important and interesting quotes that truly represented the essence of the phenomenon were identified in each theme for the writing of the final report. Note that the researcher translated French quotes from interviews conducted in French.

Trustworthiness

As mentioned previously, when conducting qualitative research, the researcher is often considered the main instrument. Therefore, just like a chemist will want to calibrate his instruments, a few strategies were used to ensure that the data collected through the researcher would be as accurate as possible.

First, in an attempt to remain loyal to its commitment vis-a-vis constitutive/transcendental phenomenology, the researcher made a genuine attempt at remaining free from pre-existing beliefs about the topic of research during the interviews. However, it would be difficult to claim that a total separation between the researcher and the phenomenon studied is possible (Smith, 2009). In order to help solve this potential bias, a bracketing interview was executed. This process helped the researcher to become aware of his own biases and preconceptions regarding the roles of confidence and focus in athletic performance. The result from the bracketing interview was consulted during the analytical process of the research. This was done so the researcher could remind himself of his personal bias and avoid biased conclusions.

Once the analyses completed, a copy of the researcher's interpretations was sent to each athlete. This is known as member checking (Neil et al., 2009). This procedure was used to ensure that the interpretations made by the researcher in the production of the final version of this study were representative of what the athletes actually experienced and shared regarding their focus and confidence during their best and worst performances. Five of the twelve athletes responded. They were all in agreement with the researcher's interpretation. Finally, the fact that only one researcher was involved with all the steps of the data collection, transcription and data analysis help to create a certain consistency among the participants. All the testimonies were treated the same way and every athlete had the chance to express freely their personal opinions on the subject of research.

Chapter IV: Results

Confidence in General

View of confidence. The word has been used across numerous situations and does not always have the same meaning for everybody. The athletes' definition of what confidence was for them was examined in this study. Although they had different definitions of confidence, the general consensus was that confidence is the belief in one's ability. As stated by athlete 9, it is "the feeling that you know you are able to do this". Participants often used the expression "being sure of myself" and "trusting myself" when attempting to define confidence. Confidence was also frequently associated with a feeling of well-being about one's self and an overall feeling of happiness.

Based on the participants' testimonies, it is possible to prepare being confident, by training hard and using specific techniques before the competition, but it could not be forced. Athlete 7 clearly felt that confidence has to come naturally and from within: "It does not matter if you work with a sport psychologist or if you try to convince yourself or lie to yourself that you

can do it. You have to feel it [confidence]”. A few athletes in this study felt that confidence is innate and cannot be taught. Finally, the lack of doubts was often mentioned as something that comes with confidence. As athlete 11 stated, when you are confident, you do not hesitate about the actions you are going to take or the next actions that are coming: “When confident, I have no doubts. No interrogations. What do I do next? I already know it.”

The different types of confidence were also a topic of interest of this research. For example, is the confidence that is present in sport the same as the confidence outside of it? Although some athletes mentioned it was exactly the same thing, others felt that parts of it were different. For most athletes in this study, confidence in their sports was more related to their bodily sensations, more performance oriented and more specific to certain moments of the competition. Confidence in sport was also identified as being more intense and for some, “very unstable” and in those cases, required more validation either from results or significant people around them.

For many athletes, confidence in their sports was seen as more important than their general confidence in their daily lives. This statement from athlete 7 supports what many other athletes said:

“When you are doing a sport, it comes down to *that* confidence that you can do it at *that* specific time, in *that* course, on *that* day in *that* heat with those other people. [...] It is definitely much more intense. It is an achievement situation that is linked to a small period of time. Maybe the smaller time, the bigger the error if you f**k up”.

Many athletes said that it is easier to be confident off the field than it is to be on the field. Some also mentioned that they feel they need more confidence in their sport than they need in the rest of their lives.

While confidence in and outside their sports may not be the same, the participants certainly believed that confidence in different contexts interact with each other. As athlete 12 stated: “My achievements and my skills on the court kind of influence me off the court”. This comment suggests that the confidence you get from your performances in your sport can possibly influence what you do outside of it. One athlete was particularly clear about that. For him, it was impossible to be confident in your sport and not be confident in himself as a human being outside of his sport. If in fact confidence from your sport can impact your confidence out of it, the opposite could also be true. When athletes in this study felt confident in their general lives, they felt it was easier for them to feel confident in their sports. They seemed to view it as if confidence on and off the field were “complementary” to each other.

When athletes were asked to discuss details of their confidence in more depth, they discussed being more or less confident about particular aspects of their sport performance. For example, some of them mentioned that they had difficulty being confident about performing well at a certain competition even when they truly believed that they had the necessary skills to be one of the best, if not the best, in their sport. Being able to perform their best in a consistent way was often mentioned as something problematic or challenging on a confidence level. This suggests that being confident about his or her own skills is not the only type of confidence required in consistent high-level athletic performance. Confidence in their personality and how well they know themselves was also mentioned as something that can influence confidence. Finally, athlete 7 mentioned that one of the most influential types of confidence that she experienced was the degree of certainty she had regarding her ability to learn and master new things and new skills quickly: “I just knew I had the talent in sport and could learn anything I want.”

Sources of confidence. To add some further insight about athletes’ confidence, the research participants were asked about their sources of confidence. They mentioned many

different sources confidence. The most common source of confidence was past experiences, whether it was by mastering a specific skill or experiencing great results during a specific competition. Athletes mentioned that they were able to gain confidence from a good performance that happened the day before or weeks before or even from positive events that happened up to 30 years ago. As athlete 7 expressed it, “confidence from good performances transcend time”. In addition to good performances in their sports, athletes also mentioned that they also gained confidence from success and general well being outside of sport. Having a good start early in a game or race was also mentioned as a positive source of confidence for some participants. Another highly valued source of confidence among high-level athletes was the support they had from others. This could come from supportive friends or family but also from teammates and coaches.

Participants also mentioned good preparation as an important source of confidence. This was particularly helpful early in the season when they arrived from training during the off-season. Other factors that were mentioned as sources of confidence included the quality of the equipment, the course and/or conditions, physical appearance, knowing themselves, receiving credit or positive attention from media and putting things in perspective. Finally, feeling good physically was brought up as additional source of confidence.

General influence of confidence. Athletes in this study were also asked to explain what was the influence of confidence in their life and sport. In a unanimous manner, all athletes described confidence as a very important factor, if not the most important factor for performance. Athlete 6 said: “Confidence is the biggest asset any athlete can possibly have”. Other statements that support this perspective included: “Confidence in sport is really really important! It is key to so many things. If you lack confidence, you won’t go far” and “You absolutely need to be confident! As soon as you focus on doubts on the ice, you will lose!” These statements are strong

indicators of how important confidence is for those high performance athletes. All of them believed that confidence gives athletes a better chance of succeeding, especially at higher level.

Two professional athletes (4 and 6) had similar experiences with respect to the importance of confidence when they moved from the minor league to a professional team. Both of them used to be the best player on their respective teams and they both dominated the leagues they played in. When they took the step up to the professional level, things changed. For instance, they were asked to be “role players” instead of playing the dominant role they were both used to play. They had to change their style of play to a more supportive role. They said they felt they were limiting themselves because they did not believe they had what it takes to be dominant players at that highest level. Fortunately for both of them, due to the support from their coaches and respected teammates, in addition to their improved performances, their level of confidence increased. Both of them said that gaining confidence at that level was key for them to play to their full potential. These two athletes and several other athletes interviewed felt that confidence is what allows you to “unveil your full potential”.

Athlete 6 shared that her confidence allowed her to start an alpine ski career that led her to several Olympic and World Championship medals. She said that without confidence, she would have not have even dream of the career she had. In her own words she said:

“I think being confident will make you do things that are challenging without being scared. It makes you do things that you would otherwise not do. An example of that is when I started being an alpine skier. Because I started when I was 17 years old, people would tell me that I was too old, that I would not make it. All the theories, everything says that it is not possible to start a technical sport that late. And there is also the fact that alpine skiing is the biggest skiing sport too. It’s not like it is a very small sport and should be easy to reach the top. [...] I knew my history. When I was really young, I had always been really good at sports. I was able to learn

things really fast. And because I was confident in my abilities to learn new things, I knew that if I just got the chance to train as well as the best people, I could become the best despite the fact that everyone told me that it was not possible.”

As these examples demonstrate and as confirmed by other athletes, confidence seems to allow athletes to do things that they would otherwise never do. Confidence can have a positive influence over a long period of time but it can also have a positive influence during a specific performance. For example, one handball player reported that during a game where he felt especially confident, he started throwing the ball with his wrong arm, a technique that is very rare. This technique allowed him to score a few goals that he would have not scored otherwise. He mentioned that although he knows that he has this ability to play with either hand, he would only do it when he feels totally confident.

Another reason that athletes value confidence so much might be because of the influence it has on their emotions. Many athletes reported that when they are feeling confident, they are calmer and more relaxed, have less fear and seem to have more fun when competing. As athlete 11 stated, confidence seems to be especially useful for controlling emotions when facing difficulties due to errors:

“Too often when I miss a shot or commit an error, I can’t seem to let that go immediately. But when I am in that zone [zone of confidence], I know that is like: ok I missed my shot, damn, and then I run back on defense and I am done with it. It’s like a voice that tells me *ok next shot*”.

Confidence also appears to play a role in trusting your feelings. For an Olympic sailor (athlete 10), confidence played a major role in his performance:

“In sailing, confidence is really important because you only get a feeling of what pays off with the wind. You are always looking for where there is a little bit more wind. It is really intuitive.

You have to really go for what your feelings are telling you. You need to trust them. And if you don't have that confidence, it is very hard to do so”.

Another very interesting aspect of confidence mentioned by the athletes was the influence it has on hesitations and distractions. For many athletes, confidence reduced the amount of the distractions an athlete face during an important competition and also let them act and react in a fast and effective way. Athlete 5 gave a great example of why this can be so important:

“I have no hesitation [when confident]. I do it and I know it can work. You are convinced that it will work. In our sport, things happen so fast that as soon as you get a small hesitation, it's already too late. It won't work anymore. That's it: decisive decision! When you take a decision, it has to be right now. A fraction of second too late and you just missed your opportunity”.

In the same line of thought, athlete 3 linked confidence to the influence it can have on distractions and focus. She said:

“It helps your focus because you do not have this small voice in your head that says *can I really do it? Will it really works?* When you are truly confident, you know it will work and that you can do it. [...] It [a lack of confidence] is a big distraction that you don't have anymore”.

In summary, based on the experiences that these high-level athletes shared, confidence seems to have the potential to influence behaviours, emotions and thoughts in very positive ways. Although many athletes felt that it is probably still possible to do well without a high level of confidence, it makes thing a lot easier when you have it working for you and not against you.

Focus

View of focus. The athletes in this study were asked to define what focus meant to them. Although each of them had different definitions, the essence that they assigned to focus was similar. For these high-level athletes, focus was best described as being able to think or connect exclusively with what you have to do in order to perform your best. Athlete 5 summed it up this

way: “When we say being focused, this means that we channel all of our attention in one single direction in order to be as efficient as possible so we can achieve our objectives”. Focus was also linked to the avoidance of distractions and the skills of *being fully in the moment* and *being totally absorbed in what you are doing*. Their best performance focus was often identified as being “in flow” or “in the zone”. This fully connected focus was described as the optimal focus to have if they want to have their best chance of performing at their best.

Participants were asked what would be their personal optimal focus. The general consensus was that every athlete has his or her own personal optimal pattern of focus. However, some aspects of what they considered to be an optimal focus were similar across the athletes. Based on the testimonies collected, an optimal focus was identified as an automatic process, almost unconscious. Athlete 11 described as:

“A different state of mind, a different state of awareness. [...] It’s almost like a state of mindfulness or a special state of mind. It’s like there is no one around. I will hear the crowd if I score, but I don’t sense anything that happens around me. I am just... connected!”

Almost all the athletes stressed the importance of really being in the moment and fully present. This was evident through testimonies such as: “It’s a matter of being present. Really being present. Not having worries about things that may happen or have happened in the past” and “It means that you are there in the present fully connected to the task that you want to do at that moment.” Clearly their descriptions of being fully focused indicates that their desired focus is one that is tightly linked to the present. For all the athletes interviewed, optimal focus was always positive, connected and associated with a feeling of enjoyment. It was described as a very pleasant experience that feels natural.

Characteristics of focus. The participants were also questioned about specific details of what they focused on during their optimal focus. The answers were specific to each of their

sports, but they were all similar in the sense that it was always being fully connected to the task at hand. In their optimal performances all their concentration was put on specific relevant aspects of their sport; on things that they have to do in order to perform well at that specific moment.

This focus was often described as being *centered*, *narrow* and *precise*. When performing at their best, almost all participants reported to be fully engaged in the action of competing and did not want to focus on technical points. However, occasionally an athlete might want to focus on something technical during specific moments of the performance. Athletes 2 explained:

“Before I drop into the competition run, like on top of the course, I will be thinking about little key points for what I have to do in that run, so be present in the moment and just have a few key words [...] so focusing on those technical things instead of *what if I fall*, *what if I do this or that*, those other thoughts that are creeping in. I Just really be in the moment and know what you have to do”.

Focusing on technical points or technical reminders seems to often occur when athletes are on the verge of competing, but once they are actually performing, the athletes do not want to think about their technique anymore. They want things to happen naturally. Moreover, the vast majority of the participants did not want to focus on the results when competing, as they perceived this as a distraction from what they have to do at a specific moment to perform their best. In some rare instances, an athlete did focus on the results while performing. However this only happened when they needed an extra boost of motivation or when an extra effort was needed during a manageable task (e.g. having to do one last repetition in a weightlifting competition).

A bad or non-optimal focus also existed for these athletes. This non-optimal focus was described as “unbalanced”, “negative” and “not on task”. A negative or disconnected focus will happen when an athlete’s attention is placed on distractions. Distractions can be many different things, and from the athletes’ own comments, there are so many that it is really difficult to avoid

all of them and be purely focused on the task. The crowd, fear of failure, injuries, referees, personal issues, life outside of sport, media... those are all examples of distractions faced by high-level athletes. Based on the information shared by the participants, an athlete can be in a bad or negative focus if his or her attention is given to one specific factor that is not helping him or her to perform their best (e.g. fear of failure) or if his or her focus is scattered all over the place. Here is an example of an incident where an athlete, athlete 11, was not able to focus on the task:

“My head was in other places. I thought about school. I did not focus about the game [...] I remember how unfocused I was. I could have looked at butterflies. I was like a kid. [...] I was thinking about a tv show. I was thinking about soccer [not his sport], my girlfriend, exams... My mind was flying away. It's not like I was sitting like I am sitting right now. I was watching the game, ready to catch the ball if I get it, but my mind was not where it needed to be”.

Athlete 9 described bad focus as “being like a spectator while performing”. A high-level CrossFit athlete (1) mentioned that most of the time, when his focus is not where he wants it to be, it is because he either puts his attention on things he cannot control or on other negative thoughts such as “what if I drop the bar? Or what if this guy start very fast”.

Focus operation. In an attempt to gain a better understanding of how focus actually works, athletes were asked their opinions on the subject. Based on the information collected through the interviews, focus is not an on/off switch. It is more like a spectrum. As athlete 5 cleverly mentioned, there is an “attentional potential” that exists. It is like if you had a certain amount of attention that can be placed on different subjects or elements. For example, one could place 50% of his attention on his hand position, 35% on his teammates position, 10% on the defenseman in front of him and 5% on the crowd. As pointed by the same athlete, if we follow this idea (an idea shared by many athletes), a bad focus would not necessarily means that an

individual is not focused at all, he is just not focusing on the right things at the right time. When asked if he believes that it is possible to be not focused at all - he answered:

“I don’t think so. I think that if a bigger percentage of your attention is directed towards a certain thing, then you are focused on this thing! [...] For me, a lack of focus would occur when you focus on too many things. [...] If you divide your attention too much, ultimately you are not concentrating anymore. You are not focused”.

This is an interesting observation on how focus can really work (or not work). This comment fits very well with what many athletes have described as the main objective of focusing during a performance. Many athletes have reported that an optimal focus allows them to not only be more relaxed and enjoy the competition even more, but most importantly it frees them to *read*, *recognize* and *react* in a very effective and rapid manner. To maintain a best possible focus, not only do you need to place all your attention on an element that will help you perform your best, you also need to change or shift your focus to things that become more important at a specific moments during your race, game or competition. An Olympic sailor (athlete 10) explained the difficulty of maintaining and shifting focus as needed within a performance context.

“You are struggling all the time to focus as much as you can, but also to change the focus a little bit. [...] For example, after the start, you have more space and then you can start to look for the wind more and then maybe you see; ok 300 meters over there, there is more pressure. Maybe I want to go there and attack. Then you kind of make the plan. Then you focus more on just going as fast as possible. Then you focus again on options once you get there. Should I attack now as I planned or go a little bit longer? It is a pattern of adapting your focus to what is most important at the time. [...] You have to recognize what kind of condition there is, then choose. Ok in this condition the wind is shifting that much, so the most important thing now would be to see where the wind is and try to adjust the plan very fast. In some conditions, the wind is more stable and

you don't have to make those choices all the time so you can just go for speed. So you recognize that and change your focus to what is important.”

This is a good example of the importance of reading, recognizing and reacting in the best way possible in a sport where conditions can change quickly. That being said, athletes involved in different sports have reported similar experiences. A world-class skier (athlete 7) made the following comment about the need to stay focused on the right things at the right time:

“If you are a skier, you need to have this focus. You have to notice where the next gate is, what the snow is like... I have to go around that way. You have to know these things automatically.

You have to pre program yourself to act a certain way in a certain situation when it happens. [...]

You have to know that if I am third in that turn, I can go high to get more speed and pass them in the turn. You just act when you get in that situation”.

In order to maintain this best performance focus, an athlete needs to be able to read what is happening around him, quickly recognize the best available options and react very quickly. In order to perform his best, he needs to be able to switch his focus quickly so he can adjust to what he needs to do in order to have his best performance. This is where the automaticity of the focusing process and the lack of hesitation become so important.

Another interesting aspect about the athletes' descriptions of their optimal focus is that although they made it clear that they feel really connected to the present when experiencing it, they also anticipate what will happen in the next fractions of second as they decide what will be the next move they need to do. Athlete 11 explains:

“I only think about here and now. I am in the moment and maybe I think about seconds in the future, try to read the game. But I don't have anything else on my mind. All I think about is the game, my next move, try to anticipate what will happen next”.

Athlete 3 also mentioned: “I am able to calm down and not to think about too much stuff at the same time. Just visualize the performance that is coming up. Visualization plays a big role in focus”. These statements demonstrate that even if the athletes feel that they are really *in the moment*, they also have the capacity to read the game or the race so they can project themselves in a very near future. They can only do this if they have the capacity to remain focused on the task that is at hand.

It seems that having and maintaining an optimal focus is demanding for an athlete. It requires a lot of energy. As athlete 3 explained: “You have to put all your energy on what you have to do. It is really difficult to do, nearly impossible”. Maintaining an optimal focus for the duration of an event is still quite rare and even when it happens, it has the potential to drain an athletes energy for a long period of time. Athlete 7 reported that after her best performance ever, where she was “the most focused of my life”, she was tired for almost a year! This same athlete also explained that for her, the energy necessary to focus comes from her motivation to do well. She said:

“That [motivation] creates more energy. The desire creates bigger motivation, which creates more reasons for why I should focus because focusing is tiring! [...] I am thinking about all the positive things, like the praise from my family, standing at the medal ceremony, being in the newspaper, feeling a sense of mastery, being happy... and that activates my system. It activates my motivation and energy towards my goal, which help my focus and helps to do well in really tough situations”.

Athlete 12 also shared a similar point of view about focus: “I think motivation is important. To focus, it’s tiring. To really focus, you need a lot of motivation to do it”. These high performance athletes want their focus to come up naturally and enjoy having an optimal

focus. However, it seems that it still demands a lot of energy and therefore requires a lot of motivation to do it.

General factors influencing focus. During their interviews, athletes shared some of the things they do to help themselves focus at their best. One of the most common ways to help themselves enter their desired focus is preparation, which is also sometimes referred to as programing. Athlete 7 explained:

“These things [the desired reactions to different situations] you can pre-program them in your preparation [...] I do it a lot in racing. To prepare myself, I call it programming because I program myself for when *that* happens, I react *that* way. [...] It helps my focus because when you get to a situation, you know what to do”

This athlete felt that this was the best way to facilitate the automaticity needed to have and maintain an optimal focus. Meanwhile, athlete 5 felt that preparation can help not being affected by unexpected surprises or unexpected events. He commented:

“The only things that can affect your emotions and focus are unexpected events and surprises. However, you can prepare yourself for practically everything. You always know what will happen. And for the things you can’t prepare for, you can prepare for the emotions. I cannot be prepared for all the things that will frustrate me, but I can prepare for being frustrated”.

Clearly, based on these athletes experiences, preparation not only plays a big role on the physical and confidence aspects, it is also very important in terms of maintaining an optimal focus. Many athletes felt that preparation can help them to effectively focus. For some athletes, a primary role of preparation was to avoid distractions so their focus can be as good and undisturbed as possible. Another strategy for avoiding distractions when it becomes crucial to really focus (e.g. on top of the hill just about to go down the course) was to voluntary narrow their focus. One way to do so was to put all their concentration on a few keys words (usually two

to four words) just before their actual performance. Another way to facilitate the occurrence of an optimal focus was to use small phrases that purposely calmed the athlete and allowed him to only think about what they were about to do.

One skier (athlete 2) described how she made an effort to keep things in perspective. When she was about to ski down the course, she often asked herself “what is the worst thing that can happen”. She felt that this sentence calmed her down and helped her focus on the task at hand. A short-track speed skater (athlete 5) used the following reminders to clear his mind of all distractions: “I am strong. I am tough. I am cunning. In [name of this city he is currently competing in] I love to skate”. This athlete repeated this sentence a few times in a row and felt that this helped him to focus on the right things. Other athletes tried to put themselves in situations where they had to focus. This was especially true with athletes competing in team sports where getting involved early in the game and on a regular basis truly helped them to get into their desired focus. One athlete pointed out that preparation is key to obtain a consistent focus.

All the athletes that were part of this study recognized the importance of focus in high-level athletic performance. When they were asked about the factors that can influence focus, they all said preparation has a major influence. They also said that their motivation and level of energy seemed to impact their level of focus. One other factor of influence that was mentioned by many athletes was having balance. Some athletes referred to balance as “that fine line between too much focus and concentration, and too little focus when you are almost out of it or too many distractions and not paying enough attention”. So as athlete 2 stated “I think balance is key”. Other athletes also mentioned balance as an important factor for focus. Balance for them meant a good balance in life in general. They mentioned the importance of having a good life outside of

their sport and felt that their life off the field, can easily affect their focus on the field... for best or worse.

One athlete (11) gave a vivid example of how he was affected by a tragedy that had happened to a close relative and how he had real difficulty practicing the night he learned of that news. He told the coach, and fortunately his coach understood and gave him the choice to play or not the next game. The athlete decided to play regardless of the emotional pain. As he recalled: "I played but I was not fully present. Something was off. I was thinking about how sad I was. I did not think that people could see that. But they could see it and the coach too. Luckily we won the game, but I was not very good".

He later had to take some days off in order to bring his play back to where it was before the tragedy. This example demonstrates the importance of having a good and balanced life inside and outside of sport.

Another factor that was mentioned by athletes that is important regarding focus is the knowledge an athlete has about himself or herself. Since the optimal focus is personal to each athlete, knowing what focus is best and how to attain it is very important. As athlete 5 pointed out: "Every body has a zone... this zone exists, it's true...and it is different for everybody. So you have to know yourself, prepare for your best focus and try many sorts of focus and preparation patterns". Confidence was mentioned many times as a factor that is related to best focus.

General influence of focus. Focus can impact an athlete on many different levels. This became clear in the interviews conducted. First of all, focus can impact the athlete inside and outside of the sport. As athlete 7 pointed out, if an athlete is too focused on his sport and forgets about the rest of life, the "passion can quickly become the obsession". This athlete said:

“Maybe in the long run it makes you unhappy. You are so self-focused that you don’t have a normal life, hang out with friends and family... You are so focused that you don’t think that maybe at 30 you will need an education. Maybe it’s a good idea to spend some time with friends for your life *after your sporting career*. So I definitely think that it can be very negative if you get too focused (only on your sport)”.

This statement reinforced the importance of sometimes taking breaks from only focusing on the training and performance so it becomes possible to experience and enjoy other aspects of life. On the other hand if you don’t focus enough on your sport, it may negatively impact your overall athletic career. Some athletes mentioned that it is important to keep a certain focus on your sport even outside of competition. This is part of what is required for the training component that comes with performing at the highest level. Some athletes said that they have seen people with great potential fail to reach the top simply because they were not focused enough on their sport. This is why balance remains so important when dealing with focus.

Focus can impact an athlete on the large scale. Most high performance athletes recognize that success in their sport is often a matter of fractions of seconds or centimeters. Consequently, having a bad or good focus, a fully connected or disconnected focus during the actual performance can make a tremendous difference in an athlete’s life. Focus was recognized by all the athletes in this study as having an important influence on their performances. Some athletes identified focus as the final step to the highest levels of performance. Other athletes said that you cannot perform well without it. Therefore, it becomes essential to fully understand the link between focus and performance.

Specific focus at different times. An attempt was made to gain a better understanding of the most common types of focus used by these athletes at different time in their games or competitions.

Focus Before the Event

The vast majority of the athletes interviewed preferred to keep a light or relaxed focus during the time leading up to their events (a few hours before the event). The main objective is to feel good and make sure to save energy for the actual performance. One athlete compared this process to taking an energy drink. You want to make sure you are not taking it too soon or you might peak too early. It was similar for their level of arousal before a competition. Almost all participants wanted to preserve their energy so it could be at an optimal level when they were fully engaged in the action of performing.

Other preparation elements that were given attention included making sure the equipment was ready. Whether it was a lacrosse stick, a pair of skates or a sailing board, the athletes mentioned that they focus on the equipment at some point before the event. The intention is to make sure that the equipment is exactly how and where they want it to be when the competition starts. Gathering information about the conditions and the course or performance arena was also something the athlete chose to focus on before the event. This include being aware of the weather, the winds, the hill and the way the course is set. These were all elements of the preparation that are seen as important to focus on before the competition. Once the athletes have prepared themselves for the conditions they will face, they then think through the strategies they would prefer to use. This could be done alone or with their coach depending on their preferences.

Some of the participants mentioned that before they compete or begin their performances, they devote some of their focus to make sure that that they enter the competition with a positive state of mind. Doing some relaxing techniques to calm themselves before they begin the race, game or performance seemed to be important for some athletes, especially those who felt they were more subject to stress. It is interesting to note that none of the athletes interviewed

mentioned focusing on technical aspects of their games or performances a few hours before the competition started.

Focus Moments before the event

This time of the competition is probably where the athletes differ the most in terms of their focus. It could be concluded that all athletes have their own personal routines and will focus on different things depending on their personalities, styles, experiences, strengths and weaknesses. Some of them mentioned focusing on technical aspects; other wanted to avoid thinking about technique as much as possible. Some athletes wanted to focus on their opponents in order to evaluate their strategies while others preferred to only think about what they wanted to do. Some of the participants competing in team sports mentioned that they focus on their teammates, making sure that their level of arousal is where it needs to be, while others only focus on themselves. A lot of the athletes mentioned that just before the competition starts, they focus on their own level of arousal. But once again, there is wide difference between the athletes at this level. While some of them want to raise their level of arousal, other will focus on calming down.

Some participants reported that they visualize or do some self-talk in order to boost their level of confidence. Others felt it is too late to boost their confidence level at that point. It was very interesting to see that some of the preparation descriptions given were very general while others were very specific. Below is a detailed description of the step-by-step focus that one athlete (5) shared that he uses minutes before the start of a short track speed skating race:

“ I step on the ice and do one lap. I speed up my breathing. [...] Then I focus on being relaxed when I salute the crowd. [Is it a distraction?] No I like that. I am happy. Then they will call us on the starting line. I smile and I am happy. I always shake my legs so my muscles are loose. I breathe and I smile. Then I stiff myself to get ready for the start. I make myself bigger. Eye-contact with others. [...] Then they say *go to the start*. Then you have 30 seconds before we go.

There, I am only focusing on my breathing. When I get to the starting line, the only thing I think about is image of explosions, guns and fire. I repeat to myself *gun, gun, gun, gun*. It is the only thing on my mind. I take position and I block my respiration. They say *ready* and all I think is *explosion, explosion, explosion*. I am 100% focused on explosions and guns. [...] It is not how I will start or what is going to happen. It's only explosions and guns! I do not need to close my eyes, but I see it in my head!"

This athlete reported that the reason why he was able to describe his focus so well moments before a race is because he spent a lot of time preparing and developing a process that will maximize his chances of best performance. It is impressive to see that this athlete can explain exactly what he would do and focus on during the two hours preceding a race. Only a few other high-level athletes could explain the preparation process with the same precision as this athlete.

One preparation strategy that was common across all these high performance participants was how narrow their focus is just before they perform. Another interesting aspect is that many of them switch their focus to different things depending on how much time they have left before the performance. These top athletes can switch their focus from internal to external and vice-versa many times in a very short period of time. The common objective for all these high performance athletes is to focus on doing what will help them to perform their best consistently. In order to do this, their focus needs to be totally connected to the right things at the right time.

Focusing during performances

The participants were asked about their focus during their best performances. Most of them said it was an automatic process or like performing on auto-pilot. Many of them could not identify specifically what they were focused on when performing their best. However, most of the athletes reported having an external focus during their best performances. The only athlete

that reported having an internal focus when competing was the one competing in CrossFit. This might be explained by the nature of the sport. CrossFit is more tied to pure athletic abilities. During competitions, the CrossFit athlete focused mainly on his body, trying to avoid thinking about the pain, managing his energy level and focusing on his objectives so he could push himself to the limit.

All the other athletes were focused externally. Athlete 5 said:

“I focus on my surrounding. Never on my technique. All my attentional focus is 100% external. So I can make a decision. [...] It’s directed towards what is happening in front of me or around me. You can’t think that you are skating well. If you do, you just lost a fraction of seconds”.

During the actual performance, the focus is usually on what is going on so the athlete can read, recognize and react as fast as possible so he can get an edge over his competitors or score a goal before the scoring chance disappears. One of the participant interviewed (athlete 10) explained where his focus generally is and how it might change over the course of sailing race: “Straight out from the start, the focus is mostly on the opponents. You are still quite close. The most important thing is to keep your lane. It is all about you holding your lane and hopefully sailing past an opponent and getting more space. Then you start focusing on the wind again. [...] I have to recognize what kind of conditions there is. Then make a choice. Ok in this condition the wind is shifting that much, so the most important thing now would be to see where the wind is and try to adjust the plan very fast according to the wind. In some conditions, the wind is more stable and you don’t have to make those choices all the time so you can just focus on your speed. So you recognize this and change your focus to what is important at that moment. It is still hard. As time passes, it is easy for other thoughts to come into your mind. This can be *Damn these other guys are going a little bit faster than me. What are they doing? Why is it the case?* Of course, the other way is possible too: *I am going really fast. This is really good!* Then you can

start thinking about why you are going fast and maybe that's not helping you. Maybe you should just continue doing what you are doing instead. Maybe you should think about the wind instead. It is always a fight to keep the proper focus all the time. [...] Anything that does not make you sail faster, even if it is part of the race, is a distraction. It can be that you look at an opponent and see that he is going faster. This could be important information for you. It could be that he is in some better wind. Then you want to go where he is... Maybe he is doing something different with the trim. But during a race, you usually don't want to change your trim too much. If it was during training, then you would focus on what he is doing because you want to learn. But in a competition, you just do what you know you can do and you just don't think so much about it. So I guess all the time, you are just working on keeping the thoughts that don't matter out of your head."

These detailed testimonies about where their focus needs to be during a race shows the importance and the difficulty of always remaining focused on what can help a performance. In order to perform their best, it becomes imperative that the athlete is able to direct his or her focus on specific elements, but they must also be able to recognize when they should shift their focus according to the situation they are in.

Focus during breaks

Over the course of the interviews, many athletes discussed the importance of having their focus peak at the right time. The athletes also mentioned how difficult and tiring focusing can be, even if they feel that it comes naturally during their performances. Therefore, these athletes try to rest not only their bodies during breaks, but also to rest their focus. In order to do this, many of these athletes purposely try to rest their minds by "taking their mind off the task" and/or "just trying to relax". The goal is to lighten the intensity of their focus away from the task so they can bring it back to the maximum when the competition resumes. Some of the techniques reported

by the athletes to relax included: “joking around with teammates”, “listening to music” and “spending some time with family” (when possible).

These mental breaks or relaxation breaks become very important because, as athlete 7 said, “this is where you can f*** it up if you start thinking too much”. One of the athletes interviewed, athlete 2, reported being particularly vulnerable during those moments. She said:

“Those in between times are the worst parts for me. That’s when I start...that’s when the self-doubts creep in. If I did not have a good run in the qualification and I know that I really have to step it up in the finals, that’s when those self-doubts creep in. Or even if I did well in the qualification, I always think what if I don’t do as well in the finals. [...] I lose that focus and I start thinking about the *what if*. I have to really bring myself back (to my best focus) during those breaks”.

Asked if she could “bring herself back” to her best focus, she answered:

“ Generally I just don’t think about anything in particular. [...] Just get my mind off the skiing. And then go back out on the chair fresh and start thinking about those key points that my coach told me and really start all over again”

It is important to note that although the athletes want to take their mind off the competition so they can rest their focus, they also know when and how they will bring back their focus to where it was before the break. One of the participants (athlete 5) knew exactly what he would do during his break and how he will get ready to perform again:

“I always do the same thing, same process. I get off the ice, breathe and calm down. I really like to focus on colour when I breathe. It enters red and it comes out blue. You become warmer and

more relaxed. It really works! You become more relaxed, softer so you can forget about what just happened and move on to the next race. [...] You get out, relax, check the skates and decide to take care of them or not. [...] You often give your skates to the technician. Him and the coach take care of them. Then you just go messing around for about 10 minutes so you can take your mind off everything else. When things did not go well [...] and you still have a next race, you do the same things but you might be frustrated for two to three minutes. But you calm down and come back to the process. [...] If I have 30 minutes between the rounds, I don't need a general activation, nor to stretch, but I do a specific preparation. My trainer will come, I will make some jumps, or he holds me with a cable and I do sprints. [...] I get back to my pre-race focus. But there is also a talk with the coach to review the tactics. This is usually very close to the race. Just before the specific preparation.”

While all athletes interviewed in this study reported that they try to reduce the intensity of their focus when they need to, and a lot of them also mentioned that they use some of the time they have in their breaks to revisit the strategies and make some small adjustments. As athlete 10 said:

“You try to focus on the last race, evaluate the last race to maybe see if it was a good decision to go to the left. Did it pay off? If yes, maybe you want to do it again. You use the last race as a reference to make adjustments and prepare the next plan (for the next race)”

One of the participants playing in a team sport (athlete 12) reported doing something similar: “I focus on myself and what I did. What I did well or what I should do. [...] Most of the time I will also think about the shots I missed. Should I use another technique, aimed at another place?”

He also reported that he sometimes could think of good moves he made in order to increase his level of confidence. This is also something done by athlete 9 who said:

“It is easy to get distracted by the results of the last race. If you had a bad or a good race... It is easy to lose confidence and then the focus is to try to regain that confidence. To start from scratch and just try to pick up the most important information about the last race”.

To sum up, all the athletes interviewed for this study reported using breaks to rest not only physically but also mentally. A lot of the participants also devoted some of their focus to revisit and adjust strategies for the next performance. It is important to realise that even if the athlete takes a “focus break”, this is done for a purpose. It is done so their level of focus can be optimal during the actual performance. Therefore, it would be difficult and probably ill advised to classify those mental breaks as distractions since they occur in order to maximize the chances for the occurrence of an optimal focus when necessary.

Performing in front of a favourable crowd

Based on the information given by the athletes, performing in front of a favourable crowd has little to no effect on their focus. Most of the time, the athletes are able to focus on the same things they would normally focus on. The possible influence that a favourable crowd can have on their focus is more on the intensity of their focus. A lot of the athletes reported that playing in front of a home crowd makes it more fun, and increases their motivation, energy and confidence – when compared to playing in front of a neutral or negative crowd. As athlete 5 stated:

“ I have more energy, but it does not change my focus. I just have more fun and I skate better when I am having fun. [...] It brings me more pleasure on the ice but the concentration is the same”.

For some athletes, the extra boost of energy and motivation to perform well can facilitate their focus. Other athletes reported that playing at home just make things more comfortable for them as they are used to this environment. This gives them more confidence, which seems to facilitate their focus. Athlete 2 also reported that being in front of her family and friends helps to stay balanced and not think too much about the competition. She says: “When there are people I love and I know around, I just found it’s a happier atmosphere. And my mind won’t be completely like *oooooh* [...] I will be more balanced when I have people that I love around me”. On the other hand, performing in front of a favourable crowd can be “dangerous for your tactics” as the energy can carry you away and make you forget about the strategies that were planned. Athletes recognized that it is important to be ready for those situations. Athlete 11 summed up very well the influence that a favourable crowd can have:

“It is kind of a double edged sword. Because if I get a good start in the game, and I am in the right state of mind, this is the best for me! [...] It gives me a lot of satisfaction. I get a boost of confidence. [...] When it does not go my way, when my performance is poor, I tend to think about *oh why are they here? Why do they have to be here, have to see this?* It is a selfish or egocentric feeling, I think everyone is watching me, that this is all about me. But I mean there are other players on the field. But I don’t think about them, I think about how I am. It’s really like all the world is about me. [...] And I know it might not make any sense, but that’s just the way it is.”

To summarize, all athletes have recognized that playing in front of a home crowd is a good feeling. It has the potential to give them more pleasure, energy, confidence and make them feel more comfortable. Although this will not necessarily impact the things they are focusing on, it can facilitate the occurrence of an optimal focus. On the other hand, playing in front of an energetic and familiar crowd can also be a distraction or disadvantage for some athletes. It can make an athlete forget about the strategies that were planned before the game, race or performance. In situations where the performance is more difficult, it can also impact an athlete in a negative way by creating more anxiety and exaggerate his negative view on his play. Nonetheless, participants mentioned that most of the time, the crowd does not distract them or have a big impact on their best focus of best performance.

Performing in front of a hostile crowd

The athletes were also asked about the influence that playing in front of a hostile crowd could have on their focus. All of the participants reported that the impact was not significant. For the vast majority of them, it is a non-factor. When asked about the impact it could have, athlete 12 said: “Maybe it can have a little bit of an impact at the beginning, but later, with experience, it becomes a lot easier to just put that away and focus on yourself”. Some athletes reported that they like playing in front of a hostile crowd. One of them (athlete 6) said: “I might look around and think it’s pretty cool, but I am not like *Oooohhh my god there is a lot of people*. It is not really a factor”. Based on these athletes’ responses, a hostile crowd does not have a real impact on the focus of high-level athletes.

Focus with High Pressure

In situations where the pressure is high due to high stakes or intense competition, most athletes in this study felt that the level of pressure does have an influence on focus. Athlete 4 explained: “I think that generally my focus stays the same, or at least I hope it does. I am really focusing on trying to keep my focus in the same place”. When asked if the pressure affected his focus, athlete 4 responded:

“ Yeah I think so. Everything is magnified. [...] I try to remind myself that I should keep the same level of consistency. And that’s where my focus goes a little bit: *hey, you got to keep doing the same stuff*. [...] The fact that the pressure is high might challenge my focus. To manage this, I kind of focus on refocusing”.

A lot of athletes interviewed felt that when the pressure is high, although their focus might not be drastically changed, it certainly becomes more difficult to have an optimal focus. Athlete 11 explained: “You try not to be affected... but it does. [...] It becomes more difficult to focus. It is exactly the same, but there are so much more distractions...”. Participant 10 said: “Yes it does [affect my focus]. I don’t want it to, but it does. If it is going very well you might think *do not f*** this up* and other things like that.” Some negative thoughts that were experienced by a handball goalkeeper (athlete 12) were expressed as follow:

“I try to just focus on things I did earlier, but it is easier to be a little bit more stressed. [...] I try to focus on the same things, but at the same time it’s more difficult because my focus is more about *I need to make a save now* or *my coach thinks I need to save the ball now*. It also depends on my past performance during that game. If I played very good, I will be a little bit more relaxed because I know I am just playing well. If I just play ok or bad, I will be a little bit more

stressed and think that I really need to save the next ball. [...] I think it is because I have more thoughts in my head... More distractions”.

It is interesting to note that the impact of the pressure on the focus may be smaller when the athlete is more confident due to good recent performances. This perspective was also shared by athlete 7. When asked if she thinks more negatively when the pressure is high, she answered: “I have only experienced that when I lacked confidence. When I have been in a bad slump”.

Finally, some athletes mentioned that the intense pressure can actually influence their focus in a more positive way by giving them an extra boost of energy. One skier (athlete 7) mentioned: “I get more energy when the outcome is bigger. I have a bigger motivation to achieve success. [...] I am much more energized in my system”. Based on the idea that a higher level of energy might facilitate the focus of athlete (as it was advanced by some athletes in this study), this could mean that a higher level of pressure for some athletes could actually facilitate the intensity of focus in some situations.

Focus after a mistake

The athletes were also questioned about how making a mistake can influence their focus. Many of them said that their reaction would be greatly influenced by their level of confidence at the moment of the mistake. Generally, the athletes will be a lot more disturbed by a mistake if they do not feel confident. Their focus is a lot more effective when their level of confidence is high. Athlete 11 was able to describe in a very clear matter the different ways he could focus:

“When I am not in the zone [zone of confidence], of course it can throw me off when I do something bad or make a decision goes against me. During those moments, I will focus on the

people I know in the crowd who are watching. I would focus way too much on what the crowd thinks. I would focus on how much embarrassing it can be. It is different when I am in the zone. First of all, when I am in the zone, I do not care about what the crowd thinks. [...] When I miss, I don't care at all what they think about me and how I behave. I just play for my teammates and myself. I just think about my next chance ... the next move that I have to make. [...] I kind of have the feeling that it all comes down to confidence.... or what mental state I am in. When I am in the zone and I miss a shot, I will think *I am not going to let them see*. I will go back and focus on defence, so people will see that I am not influenced by it. [...] So I focus on that, not to show my emotions through my face. This is my first spontaneous reaction, and then I just go back on defence. [...] This is not easy to do if I am not there mentally “

Other athletes also mentioned that their first reaction after making a mistake would be to get emotional. But they are usually able to recognize that quickly and make the proper focus adjustment. One Olympic sailor explain it as follows:

“ First I get pissed. I know it is not ideal, but it is how I react. Sometimes, I also think that having a strong reaction is good so you get it out instead of holding it back. It can be for a very short time. But then the focus would be shifted to calm down. It is a long race, everybody makes mistakes, and it is basically about who will make the least amount of mistakes that will win. So it is like *Ok I am here now, I lost 5 places. There is nothing I can change. The only thing I can change is to go as fast as possible to the finishing line*. [...] You bring your focus back on the task”.

An Olympic skier (athlete 7) also had a similar pattern of focus after making a mistake:

“Sometime you say *F*** no! Now I have to go really fast*. [...] So you just have to get really into

it, because you know you are disadvantaged now and that you have to ski your best. [...] It is just an awareness that you did something that was not fast and now you have to go faster and maybe take more risks”.

To sum up, the impact that a mistake will have on an athlete seems to depend how big that mistake is and on that athlete's level of confidence. When confidence is low, it becomes easy to just stop focusing on the task and be overcome by negative thoughts. When the athletes confidence is high, making a mistake will still have an impact on the athlete's focus, but he or she will usually recover from that mistake. It seems that the first reaction to an error is usually emotional, but the best athletes will quickly recover from it and get their focus back on the task. This usually happens by adjusting the strategy so he or she can compensate for the mistake that has happened and get their focus back on track.

Focus during fatigue or pain

Most athletes said that overall fatigue seems to make focusing more difficult. When asked if being fatigued impacted on her focus, athlete 7 replied:

“Definitely my focus is lacking when I am tired. There were days on the World Cup circuit, like mid-season especially, when we have been on the road for so long, my legs will feel heavy. It's harder to get that best focus back on track during those times. But in the end, in order to perform well, you have to really just get back to what you usually do.”

Fatigue will have an impact on where the athletes' focus is placed. When the athletes feel tired during their performance, some of them said that they start focusing on ways to conserve energy. Athlete 2 reported: “I think when I am tired, I have to think of ways to conserve energy.

So a little bit of focus goes into that as well”. In situations where athlete face extreme fatigue during a performance but still have to keep going, which is often the case for athletes competing in sports such as CrossFit, their motivation and their desire to succeed become very important. A CrossFit athlete (athlete 1) explained:

“Near the end of the workout, when you see the end of it, very often you are in the red. You really are in trouble. During those moments, the only thing I think about is that *it’s almost over*. [...] You still have to focus on what you have to do, even when you are in the red. [...] I can count the repetitions in my head. And I tell myself *If I drop the bar, I won’t go to the Games! There is three left, if you drop the bar, there is no Games. Two left, if you drop the bar, you are not going to the Games...*”

Although fatigue can alter focus, it is injuries that appear to affect the athletes the most. For some athletes, injuries are “the worst”. They can become “big problems” or even “the end of the world” for some athletes. It can become a very big distraction, regardless of the efforts the athletes make. Some athletes reported being “bothered a lot” by injuries. Just like fatigue, injuries and pain make focusing much more difficult. Athlete 7 reported:

“You will start focusing on not hurting yourself instead of the race. [...] I definitely stop focusing on the race because my health is more important”. Athlete 9 said: “Injuries make focusing more difficult, but I still try to focus. In competition, if I feel pain or do not feel well, I will focus on the same things (my race). It is just that the strategies will change. The coach might tell me to push less. Try to be 2nd or 3rd during the race. Where I will want to be during the race, what I will do. This will change.”

For other athletes, although they recognize it (pain) can impact their focus, they don't feel it has a real effect on their game. Athlete 10 explained:

“In the heat of the moment, when you are fully focused, I don't think it matters so much. If you are fully focused, you don't feel the pain as much. But again, we are doing a long race. So the focus can go up and down sometimes. You can make a mistake, that adds up on top of the pain and makes it a little bit harder to get back to a good focus. It is just more difficult”

It seems that although pain and fatigue can bother the athletes, the extent to which it does depends a lot on the individual. It also seems that athletes have a certain amount of control on how those things will impact them. As athlete 11 said: “I can choose for myself if this is going to affect my performance”.

Focus when facing injustice

It is very common that athletes may feel that they face injustices. This can be due to questionable decisions from referees or judges and can also come from what athletes feel is an unfair advantage that the opponents might have. It can even come from the coaching staff if athletes feel they do not get treated the way they should be treated. All the participants in this study reported experiencing a feeling of injustice at some point during their athletic career. Those situations can be very frustrating for athletes and have the potential to impact their focus and performance. However the vast majority of the athletes in this study reported that those unfair situations have little to no impact on their performance focus. Most of them credited this ability to their experience and their belief in themselves. One handball player, athlete 11, explained:

“I remember games where I was sent off to the shower when I was 14 because I was behaving like a brat. [...] I always had a bad relation with the referees in the past. Every time something did not go my way, I would say things that you are not allowed to say. It influenced my game because I would just get thrown out of the game. I sometimes felt like the whole world was against me. [...] Luckily I have matured over the years. When I was 17-18, when I started playing with older players, I just realised that I could not behave like that, simply because I would have a hell of a time. On one team, there was a 32 years old guy, grown man, doctor, played on the national team. He would not hesitate to put me in my place. So now I am not that boy anymore. I feel I am not as bad as I was. The referees have become a non-factor for me now. I just think of them as someone who is there. He can't help it that he is not better. There is nothing I can do about it. So now I became very good at not focusing on the referees.”

Other athletes pointed out that their negative reactions improved with experience and maturity. Good preparation and confidence level would also help them having positive reactions. One athlete discovered that in order to deal with all the emotions he would face during competitions, the mental preparation was very important. Confidence level also had an impact on how the athletes reacted to different situations. When asked about how he reacts to a questionable decision from the referee, athlete 12 answered:

“It depends. When I play well and my confidence is good, I will be more relaxed. But if I am stressed from the start, and the referee makes a bad call, I get more angry and start thinking about that instead of the game. If you are not playing well, your thoughts will be more about everything else beside what you should be thinking about. When your confidence is good, you will keep the right focus and not care about everything else.”

Some athletes also mentioned that it is possible to use an unfair decision to your advantage if you can change your perspective. One athlete (3) said she interprets a disadvantageous judges decision as an opportunity to show her real worth. She commented: “I will get angry first. Then this will fire me up. I will want to show them that I was worth more than that! [...] You go through those thoughts, but once you get on top of the hill, the focus is on what I can control. I just get more aggressive. [...] The focus remains the same, it’s just that I put a little bit more extra effort.”

To summarize, it seems that perceived injustices or questionable decisions will usually not have a strong negative impact on the focus of high-level athletes. For some athletes those questionable decisions can even become a source of motivation that brings them back to their best performance focus.

Comparison of Performances

Participants in this study were asked to recall one their best performances and one of their worst performances. They were questioned about their behaviours, confidence level, emotions and focus before and at different times within their performances or events. The objective was to help them identify or compare differences in their best and worst performances to see if it was possible to identify any patterns related to performance regardless of the sport, experience or personality.

Behaviours

Looking for perfection

During their best and worst performances, the vast majority of athletes said that they tried to follow the same routine and have the same behaviours. Only two athletes explicitly said that

there were some uncharacteristic behaviours, especially during the preparation for the competition. When asked about his behaviours a few days before his worst performance, an Olympic speed skater (athlete 5) said:

“I checked my blades a lot more. I try not to do it, but I watch videos to try to see what I am doing wrong. See the things I could improve. Which is something that I never normally do (before races). I never watch videos during competitions because you don’t want to change anything. It’s supposed to be natural. I remember telling myself *Aaahhh maybe some videos won’t hurt. Maybe you should check your blades too...* [...] The morning of the competition I spent more time thinking about skating. I looked at the video of our last training. Something I don’t usually do. Check my blades...”

The testimony from this athlete is quite different from the one he gave about the preparation he did before his best performance. He said:

“The evening before the competition I watch action movies, mess around a bit with the boys. Might play some video games. Really not thinking about skating. Same for the morning. We are a very relaxed team. [...] Small group activation in the morning. Have a short run outside. Look around, see funny and weird stuff. We compete around 5 or 6 pm. I try to conserve my energy during the entire day. [...] Conserve your energy, eat what you like and just have fun.”

A professional lacrosse player (athlete 6) shared a similar experience about his preparation before his worst performance:

“I over analyzed going into the game, over prepared. I spent extra time shooting a certain shot with a guy on my team, and I don't usually do that. I don't usually spend time after practice working on something. That weekend I did. I told myself *I got do this, I have to get the shots. That's the shot you will use and beat him with.* And I think it did not help me at all!”

Nonetheless, as they recalled both performances, differences in all athletes' behaviours were noticeable. The differences may not be so much about *what* they are actually doing, as most athletes seemed to like having and following their routines, but *how* they were doing those things. The same Olympic skater explained his worst performance warm up the following way:

“Warm up was the same. There was nothing different. [...] I would say that I was trying to do everything perfectly instead of just doing a general warm up. But I was like *Did I stretch enough on the left? On the right? Am I ok? Did I stretch like I should?* I was trying little bit too much. [...] I did not do that at my last Olympic Games. I was more like *Let's go. Let's just do what I do.* I mean, if you had ask me what I was doing while I was doing it, I would have told you that I was doing the same as usual. But when I think about it now, since I had doubts, off course I wanted everything to be perfect. But perfection does not exist.”

The fact that this athlete only realised he did something different when thinking back about his performance might explain why so many athletes have said that they feel they were doing the same things during their best and worst performances. One thing that seems to have been different on many occasions for the athletes during their worst performances is the feeling that they had been forcing their preparation leading into the performance. In the two cases that were just covered, both of them were looking for perfection during their worst performance as opposed to just be relaxed and let things happen naturally.

As athlete 7 shared, this quest for perfection can come from the athlete himself or herself but it can also come from coaches. She recalled her first Olympic experience:

“The pre camp was probably a week long just before the competition. The male team was there too. I just remember that we had to do those races. And races and races and races. So many runs... I was so tired. It was so boring, all I did was slalom. I got stressed because they wanted to control my behaviour all the time. They don't listen to you when you are tired. They didn't care.

You ski so many runs. I just did slalom everyday! Slalom slalom slalom slalom slalom. [...] I was freaking out. I was like *aaaa I am so sick of these gates. They make us do so many runs.* [...] They wore me out so much in those 5 days. Gates gates gates gates.”

Those days before this athlete’s first Olympic race could not have been more different than the days before her second Olympic experience, which is where she had her best performance ever. She recalls those days there:

“On the first day we went to the mountain and it was horrible weather. It was snowing all the time and really foggy. I remember free skiing and be very angry because I could not see anything. [...] There were also a lot of security checks from the mountain to our hotel. The whole thing was so draining. [...] I went to see the head coach, who believed in me, because the coach wanted us to go there and train multiple days before the race, and I just told him *You know, I am ready and I don’t need that*”.

When asked about what she did during the next days, she answered:

“Pretty much just gain energy. I was in my own zone. [...] I just enjoyed my time. It was the same feeling I got a couple of times when I did very well. [...] I could just walk around the city, see the flowers. This was just so nice! [...] I did not practice during the week, I was just gaining energy because I knew I was ready and that’s what I needed. Everyday I went to the gym to walk and stretch. All the others athletes would stress out and lift weights. I just had that feeling that I was totally confident. I knew I was ready. That I did not need to train hard.”

Even during her last training run, she never forced things or wanted it to be perfect. She explained:

“The coaches were worried that my 1st training did not go well, but I did not even care. I did not think about that. [...] I trusted myself so much that I just tested the course. I knew I jumped too

short, but I also knew that when the race would be on, I would not jump too short. I had tested everything so I knew the speed. [...] I just wanted to practice. I knew the day was long.”

As opposed to her worst performance, where she had to practice hours and hours to the point to almost getting burned out, this skier did not look for perfection days before the competition. Her strong confidence seems to have allowed her to just prepare like she wanted to prepare, avoiding the pursuit of perfection just before a major event. A pursuit that seemed to be detrimental to her performance when it occurred just before a big competition.

Nonetheless, although she was not looking for perfection, her behaviours during her best performance were certainly directed towards her goal and on what she had to focus on to achieve it. Everything she did during that week was oriented towards what would become the best performance of her life. She shared a few examples:

“[The day before the race] I was watching a lot of movies just to get my mind neutralized. Just bad American movies, something easy. Another thing was that a lot of people had sent me messages. But I did not respond. You can feel bad if you don’t respond, but I was so focused on the competition that I was able not to feel bad. I was focused. In a way, I was able to do that for the 1st time in my life, because I am very polite. So if people ask, I am really fast to respond”

She kept talking as she related the last two days before the competition where she had faked that she was sick so she did not have to be involved with people that she did not want to: “I did not want to talk to anyone besides my best friend from college and my other friend that came from Europe to see me. [...] I was so focused on what I had to do to get ready. I knew I could not be social and talk a lot because I needed to be inside my head. Think about the course and get my confidence level up. Get ready basically. [...] I just wanted to be undisturbed. I just did my own thing. Which I never do because I am a very social person. That’s why I had to fake

being sick. Because I don't like people saying that I am boring... I am easily convinced to go somewhere else.”

She summarized her behaviours as follows:

“ Everything I did, I did it with a purpose. [...] Never in my life I have been able not to have that feeling of guilt because you focus only on your sport. That's the only time in my 20 years career that I was able to be selfish or just do what was best for my performance. Not going out with friends, or not going to the opening ceremony, not answering emails and texts, telling the girls to shut up because I wanted to go to bed early, eat when I wanted to... I was totally selfish; everything was about me and my performance. Choosing that room and the other had to go into another room where she was disturbed by noises. I mean, it's horribly selfish actions, and I am not that kind of person, but for those 2 weeks, I was able to be that person and I did perform well.”

The testimony coming from this athlete was particularly interesting since every single thing she did coming up to the race was oriented on her primary task. When she needed to get her mind off skiing, she did. When it was time to visualize the course and boost her confidence, she did. She only did what she felt was best for her to achieve her goal without unnecessarily looking for perfection at all cost.

During one of her worst performances, the majority of her behaviours were directed towards a past relationship she wanted to fix. Although most of the participants were not drastically so off task during their worst behaviour, there were several examples of worst performances where the focus was not oriented in the right direction. One example came from a handball player (athlete 12). Usually calm, he had trouble with a referee this time. He recalled:

“I got really angry at the referee because they were really bad. But the referee often tends to be “bad” when you are not playing that well yourself. I think I took a lot of anger out at the referee...”

This might not look like a significant behaviour, but it was certainly not directed toward the task at hand. The same could be said about other examples already discussed where athletes were focused on looking for perfection. In their search for perfection, they might have forgotten about what they needed to do or focus on at that exact moment. In the case of the skater previously discussed, instead of just relaxing and not thinking about skating the night before the competition (as he usually did and had success with this method), he watched videos and looked for perfection. Instead of doing what he needed to do at that precise moment, resting both his body and mind, he did something different that was not directly related to helping him excel at that task at that specific moment.

Loud vs. Quiet

For many athletes there were major differences in how they interacted with the people around them during their best and worst performances. During their best performances, many athletes reported that they were very vocal. They talked to friends, family and teammates. Some of them also cheered at the crowd. Although a few athletes mentioned that at certain times they decided to stop talking to some people in order to focus only on what they had to do and get ready for the competition, the vast majority reported being quite social leading into their best performances. This was true before competition, during breaks and even sometime during the competition itself. Here are a few testimonies on this subject:

“I talked to more people than usual because I knew more people and because I was not with the same girls than usual. This time, all my friends from the development team were there. [...] It was nice to see them.” – Athlete 3

“After my two first saves, I cheered at the bench. And people at the bench were standing up and cheering at me too. We were playing away, but we had maybe 50 supporters. They were cheering too. I was screaming at them, they were screaming at me. Everyone was just happy.” – Athlete 12

“When I am really in game mode, I am a lot louder. I talk, I scream to boost moral. But I am not always like that. Sometimes I can go back in my shell. I would not say it’s a good thing because we need to pump each other up. Usually I have a good feeling when I am at this level of intensity during warm up. And I was like that on that day”. – Athlete 11

“I was not quite as robotic as usual. Like finish my run, go inside, eat, come back out... It was more like *ok, I am going to go watch the girls then head back and have lunch with my mom*. It was more fun I guess”. – Athlete 2

It is interesting to see that many of the athletes reported interacting and having fun with the people that were around them, and they did this at different moment of the competitions. However, during their worst performances, many of the athletes stated that they went more quiet and were a lot less social. For example, the very social athlete 7 shared her experience on the morning of the competition:

“I remember I did go skiing by myself in the morning. [...] I was on my own. I did not talk to my team or coaches. [...] I was not very social on that day... Most of the time I can talk to people.”

When asked about his reaction when he figured out that he was having one of his worst performances, athlete 11 responded: “I think I went more quiet. Too quiet... I felt like it was my fault. I was just letting my teammates down. It was more like that than an outburst.” In general, during their worst performances, the participants reported being a lot less social than they usually are. On the other hand, in cases where the performance was quite long, like a lacrosse or handball game for example, the behaviours might be due to the realisation that they were not playing so well. As athlete 12 pointed out; “I think it is harder to cheer when you are down by 6 or 7 goals...”. Nonetheless, during their worst performances, almost all participants were a lot less vocal and less social than during their best performances.

Patient and calm vs. hesitant and tense

The behaviours of the athletes were also different during their actual performances. Although the actions they took while competing were very similar, some differences in the way they executed them may have played a major influence in the results. During best performances, many of the participants have described their behaviours as *calm, patient, relaxed* and *confident*. This seems to have the potential to make a big impact on the performance. A handball goalie (athlete 12) shared his view on how he was behaving during his best performance: “I was less hesitant. When my confidence is good, I can just stand and wait longer. I react a lot faster. I was a bit more patient. It’s very important to be patient as a goalie, because if I am going over here on one foot, I can’t go back. I think that when I have confidence, I will be much more patience and have a better balance. I will also wait more. When I feel good about myself I know I can wait for the shots.”

Athlete 5, who usually struggled to remain calm and composed when in trouble, recalled his experience during his best performance:

“There was only one lap left. I was 3rd, behind two Chinese skaters. They had the crowd behind them [they were in China]. I remained a 100% calm. And like I told you, in those situations, I have a tendency to do stupid things. [...] I was extremely good at staying calm, and this was because I was more confident!”

On the other end of the spectrum, during worst performances, many athletes mentioned that they were more prone to panic, be more hesitant and stiffer. The same handball goalie explained his behaviour during his worst performance:

“My coach told me that if I am getting nervous, I get more stiff. My movements are stiffer and not as relax as they should be. [...] If I think back about it, maybe I was a little bit stressed. That stress made me stiff or not relax. I was not the way I should have been in terms of positioning and balance.”

This goalie was not the only athlete who recognized differences in the way he behaved while performing. The same skater, who remained so calm during his best performance, experienced a totally different behaviour when racing during his worst performance. He said: “When I stepped on the ice, I smiled less. A bit more stiff. I was still smiling [something he always does] but the breathing was more difficult. [...] During the race, I had kind of a small slip and I just went *Holy s**t! I need to do something!* And I just forced it. [...] I tried to do an unprepared passing, lost all my speed and got passed inside by a skater who is not even good. I literally took myself out of an easy race because I panicked. I was lacking confidence. [...] If I slip, and I am 100% confident, nothing changes and I just keep going. But if you have doubts, and you slip, you will be like *Ah see! I knew it was not going well! I just slipped.*”

As one can see with the testimonies of these athletes, small differences in their focus and behaviours during the performance have the potential to have a real impact. These two athletes were able to identify precisely what they could have done differently from one performance to

another. Many of the participants also experienced some differences between their worst and best performances in terms of their behaviour while performing.

Emotions

Participants in this study were asked about how they felt during their best and worst performances. The athletes experienced different emotions during their best and worst performances. However, it is interesting to note that although some of the same emotions were present in both performances, the way the athletes' reacted to those emotions were different.

Pleasant and Fun vs. Bad feelings

All these athletes experienced many positive feelings during their best performances. Many of them reported being excited and having fun before the game or performance even started. Athlete 5 commented that his best performance occurred after an incident that placed him in a bad position for the final:

“I started to look forward to the next race again. I went from frustration, thinking that the next race will be garbage or useless to - *Ah no, I will be able to learn and it will be fun.* [...] I was having as much fun as usual, but I was more relaxed. It was more fun, more amusing. It was simply more fun, like if I was about to do something silly”

All of the athletes interviewed reported having a lot of fun during their best performances. Some athletes also reported having some fun before their worst performances, but overall the participants viewed their worst performances as a very unpleasant experience. Most athletes said that before their worst performances they were already having less fun than usual. For example, athlete 5 explained that going in that worst performance competition: “I was having less fun. But at that time I thought I was having as much fun as usual. I was convinced I was having fun. But when I think back about it, I was not”.

Athlete 7 summarized her feelings before her worst performance as follows: “I just felt the most emotionally drained and upset. The worst I have ever felt in an event...”. Although these athletes recalled their worst performances as being a very negative experience, it is interesting to note that many of them also recognized that some parts of their day or preparation had been positive. Those positive parts were simply not occurring in the actual performance. Athlete 7 recalled: “I was more excited to see some friends. I was happy they were there to watch me. It was exciting. But for some reasons, I did not want to race. [...] I had fun after the race”.

Excitement

For the vast majority of the athletes, the biggest difference between their best and worst performances was the way they approached it. For almost all athletes, when they were excited about the performance, that performance would become one of their best ever. Athlete 2 recalled:

“A few days before the competition, I was really excited to get back to competition! [...] I was in a good space mentally coming back from a break. I was really excited just to go out there, ski, have fun and do my job. I was in a happy/excited mood. And it just carried through the entire weekend of competition.”

Other athletes also shared the same excitement going into their best games. One lacrosse player (athlete 4) had even circled the date on his calendar of what would become one of his personal best performances. He explained:

“I had circled the date for that game we played against my former team. So I was pretty excited about it. [...] I knew that day was coming. I was looking forward to it. I was like *Oh great! Next week it's this game*”.

On the flip side, many athletes did not feel the same going into their worst performances. A lot of the participants reported that they were almost dreading going into that game or performance. Athlete 3 shared her experience:

“I was going there a bit backward. I was not feeling good... Asking myself why was I even there. I was trying to be happy like *Damn! You should be happy, you have a spot at the World Cup*. But I was not happy.”

One particularly interesting case was an Olympic skier (athlete 7) who was about to compete in her first Olympics ever. She shared what she was feeling at that moment; “I can’t remember being excited about the race at all”. Even when she was trying to get ready to perform on the biggest possible sport scene on our planet, she reported not to feeling anything. She explained:

“I did not really want to be there because I had just broken up with my boyfriend. I remember standing at the start and feeling no enthusiasm. [...] I remember very very well standing in the starting gate, looking down and feel *nothing at all*... I was not bored or anything, I just did not want to race or be there. I should have been psyched. But I did not care. I did not feel anxious at all. Not even numb because you can get numb if you are nervous. I was not numb or nervous. I just did not want to be there. I just wanted to get out of the situation. [...] I sort of gave up half way. I mean I got late [on one gate], but I probably could have made it. And I did not get upset when I skied out because I was not in the *race mindset*. [...] And when I skied out, I felt *Nothing. At. All*. [...] When the race was over, I felt relieved. Even if I did bad...had a bad race... I felt relieved that it was over and that I could go to college now”.

To sum up, the vast majority of the athletes did feel a sense of positive excitement and were looking forward to their games or performances when they had their best games, races or best performances. Overall, they did not have the same positive feelings towards their

performances when they experienced their worst ones. Although some athletes reported that they were somewhat looking forward to their games, races or events in their worst performances before it started, a lot of them were either apprehensive about the performance or simply did not really want to be there.

Degree of nervousness and stress

Many athletes felt a sense of excitement, nervousness and/or stress before their best and worst performances. The major difference between best and worst performances appears to be in the way athletes focused and connected before and within the performance. Although many high performance athletes mentioned that it helps to be relaxed and not too nervous, some athletes experienced those feelings at different points in time during their best performances. The important thing is that they remain composed and guide those emotions in positive ways.

Athlete 3 shared her feelings during her best performance:

“I was stressed but I was looking forward to compete. [...] I was stressed but I was still happy. I was feeling good.... but I was still really stressed. [...] When I was warming up on top of the mountain, I was stressed and I wanted it to be over... But once I was in the starting gate, I was excited to go!”

Athlete 7 also reported using stress to her advantage for her best performance. She explained:

“I was freaking out. I was so nervous! It really was a mixed feeling between being calm, enjoying my time there and being so nervous. [...] But I love being stressed! Stress is good if you overcome it. It’s awesome after that! [...] But when I am in the course, I am not stressed at all. When I am in my element, I am not stressed. It is before and after. [...] The heat after the qualification, I think I was just so nervous. I probably peed three times before the run! [...] It was very strange... crazy nervousness. It really was a special atmosphere. [...] I was nervous for

the entire day. But maybe the nervousness went away a little bit after each round. But the closer you get to the final, the less time you have. You are more focused. I could not really notice so much that feeling [nervousness]. Like during the break I was really nervous. But then you need to fix and prepare so much stuff. I felt a bit rushed for sure. I was stressed since I did not really have a lot of time to fix everything between rounds. So it was more stress due to all the things I needed to do ...and not the fact I was in final. When I watch the video I can't believe how nervous I was. I can't believe I was able to deal with all that pressure.”

It is clear that although some athletes experienced a lot of nervousness and stress during their best performances, they were able to deal with it very well. It did not negatively affect their performances. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for their worst performances. Although some athletes did not report experiencing more or less nervousness or stress than usual, others have admitted to feeling more stress, nervousness, anxiety and worries, which was uncommon for many of them.

In case of athlete 2, her coaches purposely tried to create a feeling of stress in an athlete who is never stressed when competing in her sport. She said:

“The night before the competition, the coaches had an individual meeting with me and they asked me if I knew what result I should get in order to make the Olympic team and if I wanted them to tell me exactly what I needed. I said that I had a good idea about it but I did not really want to know because it would just pile in the pressure even more. Like if I needed to be top 3, it would have been impossible. But at least if I did not know I would feel better. So I did not want to ask [about what result I needed to get]. But they told me that they needed me to get more stressed in the starting gate. I responded that it was not who I am. I am usually the person who makes a joke and has a good balance with my focus. So that really threw me off my game”

This athlete felt stressed and nervous during her worst performance, something that she was not used to. Other athletes said that they tend to always be stressed or nervous a little bit before every competition. As athlete 1 pointed out, some nervousness and stress can indeed “drive the performance”, but it is not always the case. This same athlete explained that sometime nervousness can only be due to the fact that you apprehend a performance because “you know it will hurt” and that there is a big chance that you will not have a good result. This sort of negative stress, nervousness, and negative worries, seemed to be a precursor of bad performances.

Confidence during performances

The vast majority of the participants said they experienced very strong feelings of confidence during their best performances. Powerful statements such as: “In my entire life, I never felt more confident than I did on that day” reveals a lot on how they felt. Most of the athletes also believed that confidence was one of the most, if not the most influential factor for their best performances. When asked about why she had such a good performance, athlete 2 replied:

“I think it’s because it was the most confident I felt in myself in competition ever before. [...] I felt confident in my abilities to put down a good run when the time came, and I knew I could do it. So when competition moved around, I had no self-doubts, which is pretty rare for myself. I was just excited to go out there and ski and put down a run. I was just having fun. The entire weekend was a blast. I think confidence played a huge role”.

Approximately half of the athletes interviewed believed that a lack of confidence played a significant role in their worst performances. Athlete 3 said:

“I think my lack of confidence really affected how I performed because if I would have been confident, I would have known what I needed to do and my focus would have been better. It

would have played hand in hand. I would not have been worried about the outcome if I had been more confident in my abilities to just go ski a good run. Confidence would have helped a lot”

Other athletes reported that their confidence level did not have a real impact on their performances since “it was where it was supposed to be”. Nonetheless, whether it is for their best or worst performances, athletes tended to recognize that confidence was an important aspect of their performances.

Factors influencing confidence during performances

In an attempt to get a better understanding of the athletes’ experiences, the participants were questioned about what could have impacted their confidence level on the day of the competition. During worst performances, the main factors influencing the athletes’ confidence were previous performances and their coaches. Support from coaches, or lack of it, seemed to have played a very important role for one young skier (athlete 3). She explained:

“I entered the weekend being relatively confident. But my training did not go well so it hurt my confidence. I was not receiving any feedback. I did not feel supported. So it went down. By the time we got to the day of competition, it was pretty low. [...] I was not feeling that things were that terrible during training, but I did not receive any feedback or support from my coaches... So my confidence just crashed. [...] It just killed me, everything went down.”

On the opposite side, during her best performance, this athlete (3) gave a lot of credit to one of her coaches who boosted her confidence level. She also felt that this helped her a lot in performing the way she did. She recalled her experience:

“My coach was able to put me in state where I was calm and so confident in my abilities. I knew it would go well. I was so confident that things would go well that I would not have been able to not be confident in my own abilities. It was like *Ok if you say it will go well, things will go well*. And it just kept improving as the competition advanced. It helped me a lot!”

Another skier (athlete 2) also saw her confidence impacted by her coaches during her worst performances. She entered the weekend of competition with a fairly low confidence level: “It was lower than usual because the training before had not gone well. The World Cup before had not gone well. It was just a downward spiral. I felt especially down since nothing was going my way.” After a better training session the day prior the competition, she experienced an increase in her confidence level. Unfortunately, later that day, she had a meeting with her coaches that hurt her confidence:

“I was feeling ok. Maybe 5 out of 10. Then my coaches talked to me and hit me with something I did not expect about my level of arousal before competition. I was like *woooooowww*. I started to doubt myself even more and lost all of my confidence because I was thinking that maybe I had been doing something wrong all along... I don't know, my confidence just dropped completely”

During her best performance, the same skier's confidence was also influenced by external sources, but this time in a positive way. When asked about what might have influenced her confidence level on that day, she answered: “Probably the results that I got throughout the day and also the feedback I had from my coaches and the support I had from the people around me”. It is interesting to note that although those two athletes have identified the support from their coaches as an important factor influencing their confidence level, their past performances also seemed to have played a role. This is something that was shared by many athletes. Many athletes reported that during their best performances, they felt that their “good start in the game” or “the fact that everything was going according to how they planned” were big factors of influence for their confidence level. However, a testimony from one particular athlete might indicate that it is not the actual past performances that will influence confidence, but the perception of those performances. An Olympic skater (athlete 5) explained how he felt during his worst performance:

“The previous year went well. The season was going well too. But during the entire season, even if I was having good times and results, I was thinking that something was off. [...] That there was something missing since the important fall I suffered [a fall that lead to a concussion]. Something was missing... The day before my worst performance, I did my best time at training. My best two laps ever! But I was still *Damn! I do not feel well... Something is missing.*”

Confidence seems to be influenced by many factors. For the participants of this study, past performances and support were the two most mentioned sources, regardless of the type of performance.

Evolution

One thing that is particularly interesting to observe is the progression of the confidence level of the athletes during both of their performances. Mainly because of the way they played, but also because of the support they received, most of the athletes experienced an important increase of confidence during their best performances. One handball player (athlete 11) shared his experience:

“Early in the game, I got a penalty shot and I scored. I remember telling myself that this was a good start. That I was getting there. I had another penalty shot and I scored again. The ball just kept rolling after that. [...] My confidence level was very high. Maybe not from the start, but in the 1st half, and especially during the second, it was sky high! I felt I could conquer the world. It was the result of previous actions in the game.”

This testimony is one of the many examples given by different athletes on how their confidence progressed during the competition. Some athletes have even reported experiencing a progression not only on the day of the competition, but also weeks before it! Coming back from a bad injury weeks before the Olympics, athlete 7 explained her experience:

“We started from scratch and tried to get my confidence back. Once my skills improved, the confidence in my neck [which has been injured] and body improved and that I realised that I could perform at the Olympics, I think my overall confidence improved too. The further we got in the training program, the more confident I became. But I still did not believe that I could win a medal. I got frustrated when people would push me because I did not want them to do it since I did not believe that I could do it. It is by doing a meta-cognitive process, thinking about my own thoughts, that I realized that I was scared and that I needed help. So I went to see a military mental trainer. He got me back into it. I always had a killer instinct and a lot of confidence. I just needed to find the path again. It was not like he needed to magically transform me. It was probably easy for him. Because I had been there before, I did it before. So he mostly used my past performances to boost my confidence and it worked.”

Throughout the day of the competition, her confidence kept improving. She recalled: “I was the fastest or the second fastest in the 1st section of the course. That really boosted my confidence because it is so important. From there I just got more and more confident. [...] I had very good qualification results. It was like a confirmation of all the things I had been working on. A confirmation that today I was on fire. Like *Wow! I was awesome in the starting section. No one can beat me on that start.* And you just continue building on it.”

As some athletes have pointed out, although it helps to enter a competition with strong confidence, confidence can sometimes just increase as the performance goes on. Athlete 11 shared his thoughts on the subject. When asked if he thinks he played well because he was confident or if he became confident because he played well, he answered: “During my best performance, I started with pretty low confidence. But like I said it rose pretty fast. So I think it is reciprocal. If you play good, you will get confident and the opposite can happen too.” Based on the testimonies received from the participants, this reciprocal relationship also exists when

playing poorly. A handball goalkeeper (athlete 12) shared his experience during his worst performance:

“I was playing on a junior team when I was used to play on a higher level. So I felt really confident going into that game. [...] I don't think I was overconfident. [...] So I started with really good confidence. But when we got down by 6, you don't feel so good about yourself or the team, so the confidence starts to get worse.”

Other athletes have also experienced a decrease in their confidence level as their worst performance was happening. Athlete 1 said: “ Maybe I had the same confidence I had during my best performance, but I quickly realised that I would finish last. As soon as the race started, I knew I would not be able to catch anybody. The guys started fast. So I think I lost confidence quickly... [...] During the first part of the event, it was not so bad. We were all about the same. But when people started running for the second part, this is where I dropped.”

To sum up, it seems that regardless of the performance an athlete will have, his or her level of confidence can significantly change as the performance happens. This can be positive, but also negative.

Influence during the performances

Since confidence seems to have played such a big role for many athletes, the participants were questioned on how they think confidence might have impacted their performances. It is interesting to note that most of the athletes were able to identify why they think confidence played a role in their performances. Some athletes felt that confidence had a general influence on their performances. For others, it was much more precise. A professional lacrosse player (athlete 6) gave one general explanation. He said that during his best performance, the fact that he was confident allowed him to play at his full potential even if he felt “miserable before the game”. He said:

“As soon as the game started, the confidence kicked in. I felt I was the best player on the floor, and if I know I am the best player on the floor, I am going to play like it. It does not always end up like that. But at least I will give myself the chance to play like that”.

For this athlete, being confident allowed him to unveil his full potential during a game he entered without any expectations due to a terrible physical state. For another athlete, the confidence he had during his best performance allowed him to use all his arsenal of skills. This handball player (athlete 11) shared his experience:

“I think that especially during the 2nd half, my performance was really the result of my confidence at that time. I started doing things I would have not dare to do if I did not have that confidence. It is not like I tried to do things nobody had ever tried before. I did not try to reinvent handball. But I did some things that I would normally not do. I am born left handed but I can also use my right hand. This is really rare. But I don't use it enough. I should use it more often. But I never think about using it unless I am totally confident.”

Confidence allowed this handball player to perform at his best by allowing him to use difficult and unusual shots. For other athletes, confidence during their best performance simply allowed them to play without hesitations. This way, they could profit from every opportunities they would get. Athlete 4, another lacrosse player, explained what happened during his performance:

“Sometimes you hesitate. This game [his best], I was not hesitating. Confidence makes you play without hesitation. Sometimes, the lack of confidence makes you question yourself and it affects your play. That day I just played with no hesitation, and things just fell into place. [...] It is such a quick game that when you catch the ball, and that half a second where you hesitate, it can give time to the defense man to take you out of an opportunity to score.”

In some cases, confidence also seems to help an athlete to remain calm in front of difficulty and when the pressure is high. This Olympic speed skater (athlete 5) shared his thoughts on how confidence helped him during his best performance:

“My confidence level had certainly a big impact on my performance. I really was into my process, that’s why I had such a good performance. I was able to follow the game plan, even in a tough situation. I knew that my process and game plan worked well. So I told myself that this is what I needed to follow, so just let’s go! If I had not been that confident, I would have probably panicked. But I knew that this strategy brought me success during the season. I did it during past competitions and even if this time I was further in the pack during that race, I knew that this strategy had already allowed me to get on the podium 3 times that year. I told myself *Don’t change anything. It’s not because you are in trouble that you need to do something silly. Just keep doing the same thing.* If my confidence would not have been that high, I would not have been able to remain calm. [...] Like I said previously, I tend to panic in those situations. But since I really was confident, it made it much easier for me to remain calm.”

The role that confidence played in remaining calm for this specific athlete was also highlighted during his worst performance. In this case, the confidence was not there enough to help him stay calm and posed when he found himself in difficulty. He explained:

“My level of confidence had an enormous impact on my performance. The fact that I was more stressed made me expand more energy. I was stiffer, more nervous. It creates more chance to slide when the ice is soft because you are more tensed instead of absorbing the energy. And it certainly played a role in my slide. [...] If I had been calmer, like during my best performance, I would not have reacted. I would have acted! I would have remained calm, gained more speed, go larger... Instead I just threw myself there in order to try to pass another skater. I tried to pass him right after he passed me. I didn’t do any preparation. I wanted to pass him on the other side

right away. He blocked me and I needed to break. Otherwise I would have been disqualified. So I braked while I was entering the turn. And then another skater passed me on the outside”

As it can be seen, in the case of this athlete, confidence seems to have had a clear impact on both of his performances. Another skater (athlete 8) experienced a very similar situation during his best and worst performances. During his worst performance, he needed to beat a specific opponent and finish at a specific rank so he could advance to a better division, a goal he had for a long time. During the final, he started pretty well but as he admitted, he “literally choked” and “fell on the ice when there was no reason to fall”. That gave his opponent the win without any real opposition. He explained how he feels his level of confidence impacted his performance:

“The fact that I was not confident did not have much of an impact on my performance during the first races because there was no pressure. It made a bigger impact when the stakes got bigger near the end. There it played a big role. It's really in critical moments that it makes a difference.”

However, during his best performance, his level of confidence was much higher and he felt it made a big difference. He explained:

“I think I was 2nd, and another skater started a sprint too early. Maybe because he was too stressed. And I told myself that he just fell in the trap. So I speeded up but I remained calm and chill. And I knew he would not have enough energy to keep going that way. And I was right because he just took himself out of the race. I did not even need to accelerate to pass him. And the fact that I was confident allowed me to wait to start the sprint. That put pressure on the others because I always remained calm, in control and confident. And since he started the sprint, I could just place myself behind him and pass him after. If I did not have that confidence I would not have been able to have the nerve to remain calm. [...] The funny thing about those

performances is that the guy who started the sprint too early during this performance was the same person who put the pressure that made me fall during my worst performance”.

Based on the testimonies, it could be assumed that confidence can have an important influence regardless of the type of performance. However, a few participants did not feel that confidence played such of a big role during their worst performances. When asked if he felt that his confidence had a big impact on his worst performance, athlete 11 had this to say:

“The fact that I started the game so poorly had nothing to do with my confidence because it was where it needed to be. But when everything fell apart, I guess it had something to do with it. But at the beginning, it was simply missed shots. It happens. Maybe I would have needed to shoot a bit harder or more precisely. It can be many of those things. But to answer your question, it affected my performance later during the game”.

Athlete 7 also shared the idea that confidence did not play a major role during her worst performance. For her, it was motivation, not confidence, that was the main reason for her failure to perform well. She explained:

“I remember I felt that I was good. I was confident. It’s just that I did not care. It is very strange because sometimes it is connected. But I do remember feeling confident. [...] I don’t think it is because I thought I was not going to do well that I skied out. It was because I did not decide in my mind that I would finish the course no matter what”.

To summarize, all the participants felt that confidence had a role to play in their best performances, and the vast majority of them believe it was one of the most influential factors. On the other hand, it seems that the influence of confidence during bad performances may not be as clear or strong. Nonetheless, it looks like high-level athletes feel that confidence can certainly have a significant impact on their performances.

Focus during performances

The focus and thoughts of the participants during their best and worst performances were thoroughly investigated. Their responses clearly indicated that the focus they had during their best and worst performances were different on many levels. The following section presents details about the focus athletes had during their best and worst performances.

Positive vs. Negative

All athletes reported that their focus was characterized by a strong positivity during their best performances. They were able to see things from a good or positive perspective and were not affected or distracted by potentially negative aspects of the competition. Athlete 7 recalled her positive focus:

“I would spend a lot of energy thinking about all the great things I have done. I was boosting my own confidence. Thinking a lot about the medal I had already won and the fact that I perform well when the competition is important. After I made the cut for the final round, I think I just felt like *wow! I can get a medal!* I did not think that *maybe I cannot get a medal!* I am good at positive thinking.”

Even when things became more difficult during their best performances, the vast majority of these high performance athletes were able to switch their focus from a negative one to a more positive one. Athlete 5 remembered very well the moment that he changed his focus. After getting frustrated from an uncontrollable event that placed him in a difficult position for the final, he started focusing on the more positive aspects of the situation. He explained:

“I started by focusing on the fact that I was pissed, that it might hurt my ranking and that the final will be really difficult. Then, after the coach had talked to me, that’s where my focus changed to thinking that this was a good opportunity to remain calm. I was working on remaining calm during races, so I told myself that this was a great opportunity to practice remaining calm and that

the result was not important. I also realised that although I was competing against the best in the world and that it was a big challenge, I would still have fun.”

The majority of the participants in this study were not able to consistently switch their focus from negative to positive during their worst performances. The focus associated with worst performances tended to be more negative than positive. Athlete 2 described it in the following way. During most of the day, her focus was mainly negative. The only time that she was able to think more positively was when she spent some time with her dad. Unfortunately, right after she left her dad, her focus got even more negative as she was stuck in a room alone with her direct opponent for a spot at the next Olympic Games. She explained:

“When I was with my dad, I was thinking more positively, more on track. But it changed when I got back to my room. [...] It was not a good situation. It was quiet and dark... It really wasn't ideal. There was no one to take my mind off what I was thinking. I was stuck there, sort of surrounded by my thoughts. It was overwhelming. That was probably the lowest part of my day. [...] That's where I should have let my negative focus go a little bit, but it was a negative focus instead.”

During the biggest competition of his career, one participant (athlete 1) was not looking forward to a particular event. This type of event was his weakness and therefore he did not have much hope for a good result. Going into the event, he recognized that although he tried to focus on the positives and the things he could control, his focus was more negative than usual. He said:

“I was focusing more on the fact that this will suck, but I also knew that there were some things that I could do in order to diminish the pain. [...] I wanted to avoid a disaster. [...] Sometimes I was just thinking how horrible it was. [...] I was thinking about the pain that would come. At the same time I was trying to remind myself that I was in California, that it was beautiful weather, that my family was there. I was trying to find some positives, but I was mostly thinking

about the pain. How bad it will suck. And during the event I was mainly thinking about how much it sucks. [...] The main thought was just that it will suck. That's the only thing you are thinking about, because you have no hope to win the event.”

Based on these athletes' recollections of their best and worst performances, a clear difference existed between their focus when they were performing their best and performing their worst.

Object of focus

One consistent factor among all participants in term of their focus during their best performances was the object of their focus. All athletes mentioned that when they performed their best, they were able to focus mainly on the task at hand. During their best performances, these athletes were able to focus fully on the things they needed to do at a specific time. This was very important for all of them. Athlete 7 shared her thoughts and experiences:

“You already skied the course before, so you know it. But during the inspection, you have to notice if there are small differences; the conditions, is it slower or faster, how are the jumps, it is possible to pass there or there. Really being able to recognize that. And that's why you need to really focus. When you are focusing on that, you cannot really focus on other things. That's the thing with focus, if you are in the moment, you can't really think about your friends or anything outside of what you are doing. You are just there. And I think this is why I did well on that day. My focus was exceptionally on task that day. I have never been that focused before in my life. [...] I had a plan about what I would exactly do. I was fully there. Being in the moment and focusing on what I had to do in that specific moment. It was like *Ok breakfast is done, then the bus, then going on top, inspecting, then getting down and think about the course, what I will do, talk to my teammates, take the lift, focusing on warming up*. It really was on the task...on what I needed to do.”

She also explained that her focus did not change during the entire day, even when she was getting closer to her goal:

“I feel like I was in the same bubble the entire time. Of course winning the heats definitely gave a boost, but once I was in the starting gate, it was the same focus. I had to focus that way! It did not change, except that you know that you are doing well. But you cannot let that influence you. Otherwise you would lose focus. [...] The focus was insane. When I was at the starting gate in the quarter final, I was only thinking about that start. I did not think about the next run. [...] That was all I thought and it was working very well.”

This athlete was not the only athlete who reported focusing only on what would help her performance. In fact, the vast majority of the athletes had a very similar focus during their best performances. One very interesting case was the one with athlete 12, the handball goalkeeper, who was not supposed to play in a game that ended up becoming his personal best game ever. Even if he was not the starter, he placed his focus on the things that would help his team perform well. He said:

“I was focusing on everyone else. Making sure they were ready and that they would play well. Making sure they had a good energy level. [...] When you are on the bench, you have to think about the other guys and help them perform. I was focusing on the things the team had to do to perform well. You have to think about that when you are not playing.”

The interesting thing about the focus the athletes had during their best performances is that not only were they able to avoid distractions and direct their focus on their performances, the focus was rarely directed towards the outcome. Athlete 10 recalled his focus and shared his thoughts on the danger of focusing on the outcome:

“The focus was really high. I think it matters for making the correct decisions. I managed to think about the task and not about the end result. And I think that matters a lot! It is easy to think about the end result, and it is also easy to despair if you are not doing so good.”

Athlete 5 had similar thoughts about focusing on the task as opposed to the outcome. He explained his focus during his best performance as follows:

“It was an opportunity to learn something. I saw it as an opportunity to make high-speed passings and to remain calm. The fact that I was not in an easy situation for the final forced me to not concentrate on the result since it was almost impossible. When I focus on the result, this is where I tend to panic. I might try to pass another skater even if I am not in a good position to do so. When that happens, it meant that you were thinking about the result. You are not thinking on how you will do things. And during my best performance, I was not focusing on the result because it seemed impossible. So instead you focus on learning. You try to get as much as you can.”

It is interesting to note that this particular mindset and focus allowed him to win this final race of a World Cup even when his starting position made it almost impossible. For many athletes, the key to their focus was not to think about the possible outcome. However, some athletes did focus on the outcome at a certain point. This was the case for athlete 2 who shared the focus she had just before going into the final round of the competition:

“I was like *I already achieved my goal* and was thinking *what if I did a podium today*. It was definitely something that was on my mind. I was excited to be in that position. I feel that nothing could go wrong. I mean even if I came 6th, it is still one of my best results. Nothing was bothering me. I had nothing to lose.”

This athlete was not the only one to focus on the outcome at a certain point during her best performance. Although most of their focus was on what they needed to do and how they

would do it, it seems that some athletes believed that positively focusing on the outcome at a certain time could be beneficial, to a certain extent, for their performances. That being said, it seems that focusing too much on the outcome can be dangerous and detrimental to performances, especially if the focus is or becomes negative. Too much of an outcome focus was common among many participants during their worst performances. The same skier who focused a little bit on the outcome during her best performance, athlete 2, described her focus seconds before her worst performance:

“When I was at the gate, I tried to put things in perspective and say the phrase I always say before going down *What’s the worst that can happen, I will see tomorrow...* But at the same time I was like *I really need to make the super final if I want to make the Olympic team*. I wasn’t thinking so much about what I had to do at that moment. It was more like *what if I don’t do what I have to do*. I was more focused on the end goal rather than the process which I should have done.”

Just like athlete 2, most of the athletes interviewed recognized that they might have focused too much on the outcome or the end goal during their worst performances. It was the case for one speed skater, athlete 5, who experienced this type of focus not only during his worst performance, but also during a big part of the season preceding his performance. Although he was focusing on the same things that had brought him success in the past, a small difference existed. He explained:

“During the entire season, I was telling myself that I should improve and do something better instead of simply doing it. [...] The day of the performance, everything was normal. Except that everything pointed towards that I was thinking too much about the result. I wanted everything to be perfect so I could win. It was always the same pattern: *What was I doing differently last year [his personal best year of competition]? I feel it was better last year...* I was not in my natural routine. I was more like *I need to think* instead of just letting things happen. [...] I think I

focused too much on the *I need to do that* instead of just doing it. It was not *I am doing it*, it was *I need to do it*. I try to avoid using this language. The *I need* instead of the *I will*. It's like on the starting line. I usually repeat to myself *gun gun gun*. Well this time I was more like *I need to think about the gun* instead of just thinking *gun gun gun*. It was the *I need* that was the problem.”

This last testimony demonstrates that although an athlete can focus on the same things, small differences can make a significant impact on the final results. Interestingly, for many athletes the object of focus during their worst performances was not drastically different from other competitions. The vast majority of the participants reported that during their worst performances, they felt they focused on the same things they would normally do. In fact, only athlete 7 said that her focus was rarely oriented towards her performance. Instead, she mainly focused on personal issues. When asked if she felt her focus was in the right place, she answered:

“Nooooooo! Definitely not! I was concerned about my ex boyfriend. It definitely was not oriented towards my performance. My focus was off track. Totally off track! It was the focus that was the problem, not the confidence. [...] The focus was not there. I was able to force myself to focus, but I was not focusing 100%. My focus was somewhere else. I could have focused on this green pen here [pointing a pen on the table during the interview] and not on the race. I was focusing on everything else besides the race.”

This last example of focus during a bad performance was probably one of the most obvious in terms of differences between the focus athletes had during their best and worst performances. Nonetheless, the common factor among all athletes was that during their best performances, they all felt that their focus was directed towards things that would help them perform their best. On the opposite side, during their worst performances, their focus was more

often directed towards elements that would not help their performances or even negatively affect the athletes' performances.

Spectrum of focus

A lot of the athletes interviewed described their focus as something similar to Moran's (2012) idea of a beam of light. The idea that an individual can direct his or her focus on specific elements just like he or she would do with a beam of light was in some way very similar to how many of these athletes described their focus. The participants' focus could range from very narrow to very broad. In general, it seems that the focus during these athletes' best performances tended to be narrower than their focus during their worst performances. In an attempt to simplify things and help them focus, many athletes tried to narrow their attention to the things that would help them the most at a specific time in their race, game or event. Athlete 2 recalled her focus when she was at the gate, seconds before going down for one of her best runs ever:

“In the gate, it really boiled down to 2 or 3 key words and just reminding myself to stay calm. [...] I think the fact that I focus on those key points helps to keep things in a manageable size. I was focused enough to not worry about a whole bunch of things. It was just those little key points. It really helped me to simplify things and know what I had to do. So it became very clear what I needed to do. [...] I don't always know what I need to do. Like if it's a difficult course and I am struggling with one aspect, I will be more unsure and my focus won't be completely there. It surely has something to do with my confidence. It might go hand in hand. [...] The day of my best performance, because I was confident in my abilities, my focus was narrow and I did not have to think about a bunch of other things. It was an optimal focus.”

Other athletes also shared this desire to simplify things when competing. Athlete 5 actually said that this is something they try to improve with the help of the team's sport

psychologist. During his best performance, he claimed that his focus was very narrow and simple. He explained:

“That’s an objective I work with my sport psychologist. The focus needs to be simple because the situation is complex. When you are on the line, you just think about the gun. It’s easy. During my best performance it was easier. I had no expectation. It was simpler.”

On the opposite side, many athletes reported that their focus was not as simple and narrow during their worst performances. One good example was given by the same skier who was able to narrow her focus to three key words during her best performance (athlete 2). She recalled: “My mind was all over the place that weekend. My thoughts were not in a straight line like they were during my best performance. I was thinking *What if I don’t make the Olympics? What if I do? What if I don’t put this run down? What if my teammate does not go to the Olympic because she hurt a knee?* Everything was up in the air. I did not know what to think. It was weird... It was not stable. I was not comfortable with my thoughts. [...] My focus was all over the place. It was not narrowed to those key points. My focus was not in an optimal zone.”

Other athletes also seemed to have difficulties narrowing their focus during their worst performances. Instead of simply focusing on doing the small things that will help them perform, many of the participants focused more on their desires to do well, a broad concept in itself. As it was the case for one handball player (athlete 11), an athlete might start focusing on the necessity to improve things or to perform well instead of narrowing his attention on the small things that can actually improve his play:

“I was thinking more *I have to play well* instead of what I have to do to play well. [...] I was thinking more quantitative instead of qualitative. [...] At the start of the game, my focus was where it needed to be. But gradually, after missing several shots, I was thinking more *Now you have to pull yourself together!*”

As it can be seen by the personal stories of these high performance athletes' best and worst performances, the focus of these high-level athletes during their best performances was narrower, more fully connected and more precise than during worst performances.

Intensity and balance

Many athletes reported experiencing an intense fully connected focus during their best performances. That being said, they were also able to ease their focus during appropriate time. Athlete 5 explained: "The night before [the race] I try to focus on anything else. And if I am not able to do so, I just force myself. I will watch a movie or read a book." Then when it was time to perform, he described his focus as: "More intense. It was stronger since it was important. It really needed to work". The other athletes in this study also reported experiencing a strong fully connected focus during their best performances. For example, athlete 7 said she was so focused that it even affected her appetite: "I was so focused that I was not even hungry. One of the trainers had to come and give me something to eat and drink. I was totally in my own world". She chose to isolate herself from the rest of the athletes. She explained her decision as follows: "I did not want to get disturbed because I knew I was in a good mental place. I knew I was in the zone. I knew there is always a danger of falling out of the zone. Then you start losing energy or focus and it is hard to get back in. So it was better to stay there and try not to change anything. Just be there."

Although she isolated herself in order to remain in "her zone", she also used this break to ease her focus a bit by calling one close friend that was not present at the Olympic Games. Many of the high-level athletes interviewed reported using the breaks they had to rest their focus in order to have better performance later. This was something the vast majority of them did before their best performances.

Athlete 5, who usually is very relaxed off the ice, recalled the night and morning before his worst performance: “That morning I was able to let go because I was doing stuff with others. The problem was that when I was alone in my room before going to sleep I would be thinking too much.”

It is interesting to note that only one of the participants felt that her focus lacked intensity during her worst performance. Most of the athletes mentioned that the problem with their focus during their worst performances was not a lack of intensity, but the fact that they had difficulty finding a good balance.

Influence during the performances

Although all of the participants recognized the importance of focus in their athletic performance, most of them had difficulty explaining exactly how their focus might have impacted their best and worst performances. Only a few were able to identify what impact their focus had on their performances. Athlete 12 recalled the influence his focus had on his best performance:

“I was not thinking that much because ... It was more natural. I was just doing my first reaction. I would just do what I thought was right. I was not thinking about if I should do this or that. I was not second-guess myself. [...] I know that when I have a good focus and good confidence, I will play well. That means that I will be standing and waiting longer for the shots to come.”

One professional lacrosse player (athlete 4) experienced something similar. He explained how he felt his focus influenced his play during his best performance in the following way:

“I would just go with it. What I would see, I would just react to that play. That's what you want. You want to react to what his happening. Instead of thinking that I have to do this or that, it's more *ok, this is what is happening, I know what to do in this scenario*. It's not thinking about it. It's just my body knows what to do. So you let your body go.... as opposed to thinking that you

have to beat this guy a certain way. I might be in the middle of doing something, but you recognize a better opportunity so you just do it.”

This feeling of being able to just act and react naturally was something shared by many athletes during their best performances. They associated this kind of connected focus to their best performance levels. Some athletes also identified how their focus had an influence on their worst performances. For example, athlete 5 felt that the focus he had during his worst performance, was a focus oriented towards perfection, which did not let him forget about the qualification round he just had. Although he still qualified for the next round, he was not able to properly get ready for the next one. He explained:

“Instead of thinking *yes! I passed. Let's get ready for the next round now*, I remained concentrated on the fact that a poor skater was able to follow me. Like *what happened? Why is it the case? That's not normal*. I stayed in the past. Something that I usually do not do. Even if the last race did not go well, I usually just laugh because I passed [to the next round] even if it did not go well”

Athlete 11 had a similar experience: “I was not able to forget about the past mistakes I had done”. Yet, getting stuck in the past was not the only impact focus had during athletes' worst performances. Athlete 7 was able to identify precisely where her focus might have impacted her performance during a competition where she skied out of the gates. Asked if she felt her focus impacted her performance, she answered:

“When I focus on the race, I try to remember the course and being aware of the terrible condition. After my performance [worst], I remember thinking that I should have known that the conditions were so bad, that it would feel bad in the pitch. Because I panicked when I felt the snow disappear under my feet. [...] You can't know for sure, but I think that maybe if I had a perfect focus, like I had during my best performance, maybe I would have just lose two seconds. But

everyone else lost four seconds. So maybe I would have finish 7th in that round. So maybe it would have been better. [...] In this specific situation, yes I think that my focus or determination, because the two are connected, might have played a role. Because I think you focus to program your thought process in order to behave or perform a certain way. Like never giving up or being aggressive.”

Most of the participants felt that the differences in their focus during their best and worst performances had something to do with the drastically different results they obtained on those days. It is interesting to note that most of the time, only small differences existed between the focus the athletes had during best and worst performances. Nonetheless, those small differences in focus appear to have had a big impact on their performances at the end of the day. This suggests that focus is a important factor of influence in high-level athletic performances.

The Connection between Confidence, Focus and Performance

All the high-level athletes interviewed in this study reported that they believe a link exists between confidence and focus and that those two factors had a significant influence on their own athletic performances. Athletes’ statements supporting this link included: “confidence and focus go hand in hand”, “I think it’s all interconnected [focus and confidence]”, “confidence and focus interact with each other a lot.” Their comments on the link between confidence and focus were incentives to take a deeper look at this possible relationship.

The influence of focus on confidence

The influence that focus can have on confidence was investigated in this study. Athletes were not necessarily clear on the impact that focus can have on confidence. When asked about the possibility of boosting confidence with an optimal focus, athlete 2 answered: “I think so, but it would be really hard to work on that. [...] If I have an optimal focus, maybe it could improve my confidence ... but it would be hard. It would be a conscious effort”. However, when she

realized that doing a conscious effort to boost confidence might actually distract her focus from the task at hand and therefore have a negative impact, she said: “Yeah it could negatively impact my focus... Yeah now that I think about it, I don’t know if I could actually use that optimal focus to improve my confidence level. I think it would be really hard...”. Athlete 7 believed that an optimal focus can have a positive, but subtle influence on confidence during competition. She explained:

“I think focus can impact confidence because during my best performance, my focus gave me confidence because I knew I was in a crazy state of mind, that I was so focused. [...] At the time it happens, you don’t really think about it. But unconsciously you are a bit aware of it. You feel it a little bit”.

Talking about some friends she knows that lack confidence, she explained:

“Maybe they want to avoid failure or are just afraid of it. They should instead focus on the possible positive outcomes. [...] If they would focus on the *what if they make it* and all the positive things, like *I know I can do this or that*, that would influence their confidence. [...] So the things they focus on can impact their confidence.”

Even if a positive focus can help confidence, the potential influence it could have was not obvious for all of the participants. On the other hand, the influence that confidence can have on focus was much more obvious for these high-level athletes.

The influence of confidence on focus

Athletes were asked if they feel that confidence has a stronger influence on focus than focus can have on confidence. All seemed to be in agreement that confidence appears to have a much bigger influence. When questioned on the subject, the majority of the athletes responded positively without any doubts. Athlete 12 said: “It is much easier to have the right focus if my

confidence is good. My confidence level helps my focus.” When asked about what would be the most important thing regarding focus, he answered:

“I think confidence. If you have good confidence, your focus will be there in the way you want it to be. [...] If you have good confidence, I think your focus will always be on the task you are supposed to be doing. Maybe you need confidence to have that focus... It might depend on the person, but for me, I need confidence to get that focus. [...] I think it might still be possible to be fully focused when not confident but it would be much harder.”

Other participants also felt that it would be impossible for them to have an optimal focus without confidence. When asked if it was possible, athlete 7 quickly responded: “It would not be possible for me! I don’t think so... without confidence I would focus on things that suck. I wouldn’t focus on the right things. It wouldn’t be good. Confidence allows me to have a good focus.”

So if confidence is important for focus, the next step would be to try to understand how confidence influences focus. For some athletes, confidence let them narrow their focus to what they needed to do to succeed. Athlete 2 expressed this in the following way:

“When I am confident, my focus is narrow and compact. It’s not all over the place. When I am not confident in myself, I feel like I have a lot of areas I need to focus on. [...] [Without confidence] I will be unsure and my focus won’t be there completely”.

This feeling of knowing what to focus on when you feel confident was shared by many athletes. Athlete 7 explained as follows:

“It is easier to focus when you are confident because you know what you have to focus on. You don’t doubt yourself, that’s the thing. The times I kind of doubted myself and was not confident, I might have been stressed and did two inspections instead of just one. I would also be unsure about what I would do in a particular section of the course. When you are confident, you are also

confident in the things you have practiced or the things you are focusing on. So I think confidence is definitely an important factor! [...] [Recalling a performance she was very confident this athlete said -] I felt like I knew the course. I knew what I would do. I knew I had to focus on the distance between the legs, because I had the fastest time in qualification but I lost some speed because my legs were not far enough. Everything just clicked and I knew what I would do. [...] When you are confident, there are less doubts, less distractions.”

Athlete 7 also suggested that confidence might have an important, but indirect influence on focus. For her, the key to optimal focus was her motivation and degree of energy. She believed that confidence will give her more energy due to an increase of motivation. Based on her beliefs, this would improve her chances for an optimal focus. She explained:

“If I have confidence, that means that I believe that I will do well in certain situations. This will trigger a lot of good effects in my limbic system. I will be thinking about all the positive things: Like self-praise or praise from my family, standing on the podium at the medal ceremony, being in the newspaper, having a feeling of mastery, being happy... All the positives....and that activates my system. It activates my motivation and gives me energy towards my goal.... which helps my focus and helps me doing well in really tough situations. [...] I think the system does not get activated if you don't believe it is possible, if you don't believe in the positive outcomes. [...] I think you have to really believe it to be willing to put all the energy to focus at that level [optimal]. But if deep down you don't really believe that you can succeed, you won't put the energy in. Why would you?!? It is so tiring and painful! With the nice outcomes, it is cool to be there. But the amount of energy I need to have my best focus... Like seriously I think I was tired for maybe almost a year! [after the competition she experienced the best focus she ever had] [...] But you need the two factors [confidence and motivation] to have an optimal focus. Because if you don't really really want something, you are not going to put in the effort it needs to be that

focused. Focus hurts! It's like thinking, it's though!"

This insightful testimony opens the door to an interesting existence of a potential complex relationship between confidence, motivation and focus. Nonetheless, even if this athlete highlighted the importance of motivation, she, just like the majority of the athletes, said that she believed confidence was probably the most influential factor influencing focus. However confidence may not always have a positive impact on focus. Athlete 7 actually issued a warning about the danger of being overly confident. She said:

"Maybe it is possible to become too much confident and you feel that you don't need to think about the course. If you think you know the course too well, it's not good. I know alpine skiers have been saying that you can't trust yourself too much. You need to have some respect for the course. And it's the same with ski cross. You always have to remain respectful of the course. It is a risk. If you get too much confident then maybe you become unfocused. So yes I think confidence can influence focus in a negative way sometimes. It's all about that balance."

In summary, all the participants did mention at some point during their interviews that a relationship between confidence and focus does exist. Based on these athletes' comments, it appears that confidence has a very strong influence on focus, while focus might have a less powerful influence on confidence. Athlete 10 gave an interesting summary of what he believes might be the relationship between these two factors. He said:

"Maybe you need to be confident to have a very good focus. I think it is easier to be more focused when you are confident. And the same time, it might be the other way too. If you are very focused, then you might also become more confident. At least you don't think too much about something else. So focus kind of protects your confidence. If you are not focused it is easy to get thoughts in that could negatively affect your confidence."

The relationship with performance

The main purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of the influence that focus and confidence can have on performance. In an attempt to accomplish this goal, the participants were asked to share their opinions, experiences and perspectives on this subject. The majority of the participants believed that focus has a direct influence on performance and that confidence is also a critical factor influencing performance. Most participants felt that both confidence and a fully connected focus were essential for consistent best high-level performances. The relationship between confidence, focus and performance was generally viewed as confidence influencing focus, and focus influencing performance. When asked about the impact confidence had on her best performance, athlete 7 replied:

“I would not have been able to make it [win an Olympic silver medal] without confidence. For sure no! If I would have been a little bit less confident, I would have not been so focused. I would not have been the fastest in the starting section and I would not have won the heats. You have to be so alert... so focused. The start is so important in ski cross. If you are not turning all your attention to this specific signal that you are waiting for, and know that you can just react to it, then it might make a big difference. The difference between winning a medal or not...”

When asked about the impact that focus can have on performance, she kept emphasizing the importance of having the right focus:

“There is no way I would have been able to have my best performance without focus. If I am not 100% just focused on what I need to focus on when skiing, like the snow, the bumps, the course, what is happening behind me, if my focus is on a guy in the crowd with a red hat, or trying to see if my brother is there, there is no way I can perform well. I have never performed well without focus... or confidence... .. sometimes I think it is more possible to perform well without confidence... But only if you are able to focus on the right things. I have seen friends that

thought they would not do well, but ended up doing well because they focused properly. But I have not seen that at the very top level.”

Other athletes also expressed their belief that focus is crucial for performance. One handball player (athlete 11) was very clear on how important he believes the ability to have an optimal focus is so he can read, recognize and react. He explained his optimal focus (a focus he had during his best performance) and how important it can be:

“I try to anticipate what the opponent will do, where he is going to pass. I might have to help my teammates in defence too. Decide to tackle the guy or stand there and let him deal with it. So recognize and react. It's all a matter of being really concentrated on what will happen next. Because it is just inches that will make a difference. A blink of an eye. Sometimes it happens so fast. Milliseconds not focused, and you don't succeed. You need to concentrate on the tasks. Almost every time, that kind of focus will result in the best performances!”

Although confidence was not mentioned in this previous quote, this athlete, like many others, also recognized that obtaining this type of best connected focus is a lot easier when feeling confident. Nonetheless, although confidence might help the attainment of good performances, some athletes did not see it as absolutely necessary. When asked about which of the two factors [focus or confidence] she would choose if she had to only choose one to help her perform, athlete 7 replied without hesitation:

“Focus! I mean, you need a certain amount of confidence for sure, but if you don't let your confidence influence your ability to focus on the right things, and you are able to get into the automatic processes, then confidence does not really interact that much with performance. Confidence can help performance, but it's not like if it's necessary. The problems happen if you think *I can't do it* when you are actually doing it. But if you are focused, you won't think *I can't do it* while doing it, since you are focusing on the task at hand. At least this is what I believe.

But I definitely think that most of the time, people who are more confident are typically those who can do it, because they take the chance to do it. They have that attitude towards what they are doing. If you are confident, it might be easier to focus well. Because when you think you can do it, you can focus on doing the job. *Ok I want to do that 720 degree jump*, then you are focusing on what you need to do to do it. Getting enough spin for example. But if you lack confidence, you won't go in there at 100%. [...] If you have confidence, there is a bigger chance that you go into your competition with a full focus and determination. That you are going to make that 720-degree figure. With no doubts, you will go for it. Confidence helps because if you have a lower level of confidence, you can decide to do a 540-degree figure instead. So I think there is a link somewhere between confidence and performance. [...] I think confidence, focus and performance are all connected.”

This idea of interconnection was also suggested by athlete 8 who recalled his worst experience and the link that existed between confidence, focus and performance during that day. He realised that during his worst performance, the fact that he was not confident made him more prone to doubt. Those doubts negatively affected his focus during the race. This led him to focus on other reasons to possibly doubt even more instead of focusing on what he had to do in order to perform well. The fact that he focused on doubts negatively impacted his confidence level, which then made his focus even worse. It quickly became a vicious circle that left no place for a focus directed fully towards the performance. Although at different extremes, this vision of the relationship between focus, confidence and performance is similar to the idea proposed by athlete 10; that focus can serve as a protector for confidence.

The most experienced participants (athlete 7), who also happen to have research experience in sport psychology, tried to provide a possible explanation for the potential complex relationship between confidence, focus and performance. She even suggested a model: “I think

that confidence impacts focus, so maybe focus is the mediator. Maybe you need confidence as a moderator to get into your best focus, and focus is the mediator that will impact your performance.” This suggestion is in line with what many athletes have said about confidence, focus and performance. All those suggestions point toward the notion that a complex relationship exists between confidence, focus and performance.

Chapter V: Discussion

Confidence

The definition of confidence for all athletes in this study was related to the certainty of their abilities. This athletes’ view of confidence was similar to both Alfred Bandura’s (1977) definition of self-efficacy (i.e. belief about the efficacy with which one can perform a specific task) and Robin Vealey’s definition sport-confidence definition (i.e. “the degree of certainty individuals possess about their ability to be successful in sport” (Vealey, 1986, p. 222). Athletes were also asked to share their thoughts on possible differences that might exist between confidence in their sport and confidence outside of it. These athletes felt that both types of confidence were important, but their confidence level during a competition was most important for their performances. Some athletes also stressed the importance of being confident “at *that* specific time, in *that* course, on *that* day in *that* heat with those other people”. This type of confidence was also described as being more intense and unstable than the confidence an athlete would have outside of his or her sport.

One important component of confidence that was discussed in the literature is the sources of confidence. Based on Vealey’s (1986,1998) conceptual model (see figure 1),

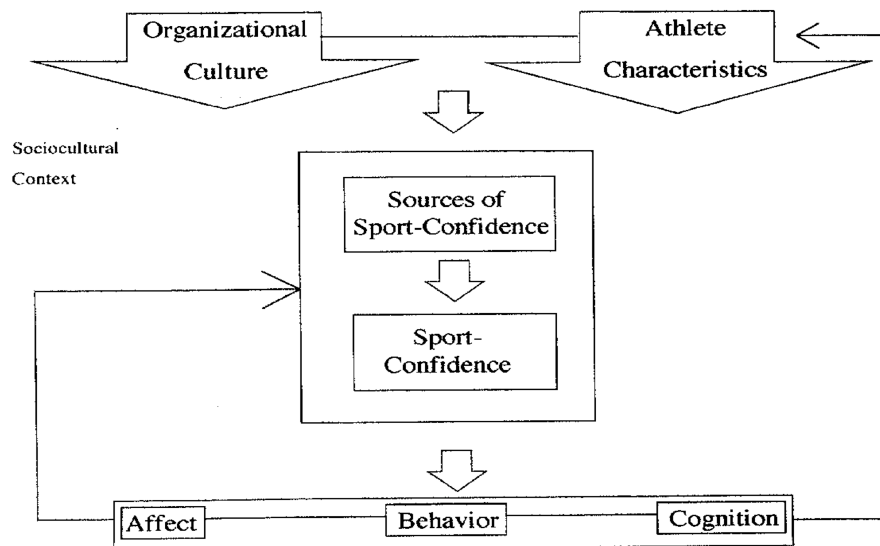


Figure 1—Conceptual framework of sport-confidence.

sources of confidence can have a direct impact on the actual sport-confidence. Participants in this current research were asked about what gives them confidence. The sources of confidence that were highlighted in this study are similar to those obtained in other studies that have looked at confidence. Using the conceptual framework they created about sport-confidence, Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman and Giacobbi (1998) came up with 9 different sources of sport-confidence: mastery, demonstration of ability, mental and physical preparation, self-representation, social support, coach's leadership, vicarious experience, environmental comfort and situational favourableness. Most of the sources presented by Vealey and colleagues were also found among the testimonies given by the participants of this study.

It is interesting that only one athlete mentioned vicarious experience as a source of sport confidence. This athlete was the one with the least high-level sport experience of our sample. This might suggest that although vicarious experiences may be a source of confidence (as presented in Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1977)), the higher the performance level is, the less impact it has on confidence. This suggestion supports work of Hays, Thomas, Maynard and

Bawden (2007) who investigated sources of confidence among 14 high-level athletes. Out of the 9 sources of confidence found, vicarious experience was not one of them. Performance accomplishment, preparation, coaching, innate factors, social support, experience, competitive advantage, self-awareness and trust were the sources mentioned by the athletes they interviewed. These findings are very similar to the sources of confidence given by the participants of this study. This might be due to the fact that the population of high performance athletes used in this study was more similar to the one used by Hays and colleagues than the population of college and high-school athletes used by Vealey and colleagues. This might suggest that the sources of confidence may be different for high-level athletes when compared to lower level athletes.

The sources of confidence mentioned by the athletes were similar to what was found in previous studies, especially those using high-level or elite athletes (Adegbesan, O., 2007; Hays et al., 2007). Also in support of previous literature, past performances appear to be the most frequent and powerful source of confidence for the athletes interviewed in this study (Bandura, 1977; Hays et al., 2007; Vealey et al., 1998). Although participants mentioned several different sources of confidence in the general confidence section of the interviews, only support (from others) and past performances were mentioned as key factors that influence athletes' best and worst performances. When athletes reported an increase in their confidence level during a performance or on the day of the performance, those changes were mainly due to good past performances and/or by support from coaches or teammates.

The high-level athletes participating in this study were also asked about the roles and impacts that confidence can have on a general level. These athletes identified confidence as a very important if not the most important psychological factor of all. This supports the findings of past research (Cox et al., 2010; Hays et al., 2009). Participants in this study mentioned that confidence impacts their behaviours, emotions and cognitions. This is also in line with Vealey's

conceptual model. Athletes in this study reported that confidence can impact their behaviours over a long period of time (e.g. attempting to reach the highest level of a very competitive sport even if they start at an older age, adopting a style of play that will allow the expression of an athlete's full potential even when competing at the highest level). Confidence can also influence their actions on a specific day, game, or performance (e.g. being more patient, placing themselves in a certain position on the field, using special moves).

Athletes also believe that their level of confidence will influence their emotions during a performance. When confident, athletes said they felt calmer, experience more enjoyment and were generally more relaxed. They reported the opposite when lacking confidence. The positive and negative affects expressed by athletes during respective high and low levels of confidence are in accordance with what has been previously found (Hays et al., 2009; Vealey, 2001). Finally, participants believe confidence to have an influence on cognitions as well. Athletes claimed that high levels of confidence will reduce hesitations during a performance and can also help reducing distractions. On the other hand, low levels of confidence tend to result in athletes having more doubts, more hesitations and being more prone to distractions. These findings are very similar to those obtained by Hays and colleagues (2009) in a similar study.

Best Performance

Every athlete interviewed has experienced a strong feeling of confidence during his or her best performance. This is in accordance with previous literature on the subject (Craft et al., 2003; Cox et al., 2010; Hays et al., 2009; Taylor, 1987; Woodman & Hardy, 2003). That being said, some of them did not enter the competition with high level of confidence. Their confidence level kept improving as the competition went on. Early performances during the event and support from coaches and teammates were mentioned as principal positive factors of influence. As predicted by Vealey's conceptual framework (1986, 1998) and other research such as Hays and

colleagues (2009), confidence impacted behaviours, cognitions and emotions. Based on the testimonies obtained, confidence allowed the athletes to unveil their full potential during their best performances. Whether it is by leading the athlete to get more involved in the game and place him or her in position to perform at his or her best, or by letting him or her use all his or her arsenal of moves or abilities, confidence had a positive impact on behaviours during best performances. Confidence also helped some athletes to be more patient and less hesitant in their actions during the competition. Those findings were similar to what Hays and colleagues (2009) previously found. Finally, many participants also mentioned that being confident before a competition made them more relaxed and influenced them in conserving energy instead of wasting it.

On an emotional level, confidence seems to have help athletes remain calm and composed during their best performances. Many of those best performances happened during important competitions, where the pressure and level of stress was high. Confidence likely had a big impact on how the athletes dealt with the high stakes and pressure of the competition. This would support Jones and Hanton (2001) findings that confidence might moderate the interpretation of anxiety. Instead of leading to panic or unpleasant emotions, confidence have eased the feelings of stress and anxiety that some athletes have reported during their best performance. Their interpretation of their stress and anxiety may have been more positive due to the feeling of confidence. This would also bring support to Hays and colleagues (2009) findings.

Finally, confidence also had an impact on the athletes' cognitions during their best performances. It is believed that confidence reduced hesitation and protected the athletes from unwanted distractions. The high-level athletes interviewed by Hays and colleagues (2009) reported something similar when their confidence level was at its highest. For some athletes, confidence also positively impacted motivation during best performances.

Worst Performance

Most of the athletes interviewed experienced low level of confidence during their worst performances. Some of them actually mentioned that an absence of confidence had a big impact on their performances. However, this was not the case for all athletes. Three of the 12 high-level athletes that participated in this study did not feel that confidence had a significant influence on them during their worst performance. This might appear to go against what many researchers has been found in previous studies, that low confidence is associated with poor performance. However, our study looked at the worst performances athletes have had and not the performance they had when their level of confidence was particularly low. This is a big difference from what other studies have done related to this subject. Although feeling low in confidence might lead to bad performances (Hays et al., 2009), worst performances might not necessarily always be linked to bad confidence. In Hays and colleagues' study (2009), two of their 14 participants reported having good performances even when their level of confidence was low. That being said, the influence of bad performances on high-level athletes confidence seems to exist. Many of the athletes interviewed in this study reported having experienced a significant reduction in their confidence level during their worst performances. This was especially true for athletes competing in sports where the game or race can last a considerable amount of time, as opposed to other athletes competing in a sport where the actual performance lasts only a few minutes or even less. This influence of performance on confidence was also present in Hays and colleagues's (2009) research. Nonetheless, the results obtain in the present study cast doubts on a potential direct relationship between confidence and performance. Yet, confidence seems to have an influence on other factors that might lead to better performances in the end.

Participants of this study reported that confidence had an influence on their behaviours, emotions and cognitions during their worst performances. Many athletes reported that their low

levels of confidence led them to engage in behaviours they don't usually do. Over preparation (e.g. spending extra time practicing a specific movement at the training site or just before the competition begins), or spending extra time looking at the equipment, watching more videos and/or overanalyzing previous performances and strategies were all behaviours experienced by many athletes during their worst performances. Athletes believed that doing these extra behaviours was due to their lack of confidence. During the actual performance, many of these same athletes reported that they felt stiffer, were less patient and tended to engage in unprepared and ill-advised actions.

Low levels of confidence during worst performances was also associated with an increase of stress among certain athletes in addition to a tendency to panic more easily. In accordance with previous research (Hays et al., 2009; Vealey et al., 2001), low levels of confidence were also associated with less enjoyment. Finally, bad confidence also had an impact on the participants' cognitions during their worst performances. The low levels of confidence experienced during those performances led many athletes to an increase in self-doubts.

Focus

The athletes in this study described focus as being able to concentrate exclusively on a specific task or object for an extended duration of time. This definition of focus was similar to how focus was defined in other studies (Bernier et al., 2011; Moran, 2012). The participants' optimal focus, focus that would lead to the best chance of success, was described as automatic and almost unconscious. This supports the proposition that motor performance will benefit from automatic reactions (Moran, 2012; Wulf, 2007). Athletes also define optimal focus as centering all their attention on one thing or a few things that will maximize the performance at a specific time. This focus requires being fully connected to the present. During their performances, athletes need to rapidly switch their focus to different elements that are critical to their

performances at that very specific moment. An optimal focus allowed athletes to *read* the situation, *recognize* what to do and *react* without hesitation. Such focus would be best described as an external one. This finding brings support to the idea that motor performance can benefit from an external focus (Bredin et al., 2013; Ille et al., 2013; Lohse et al., 2014; Moran, 2012; Wulf, 2007).

A closer look at the optimal focus described by the athletes in this study suggests that not only is it more external and can quickly switch attention from one object to another, but the width of the spectrum can also change. Supporting Moran's (2012) idea of narrow and broad focus, optimal focus would be narrow enough to focus only on the performance. This would result in athletes not placing any of their attention on outside distractions. However, their focus within the performance will change from broad to narrow and vice versa depending on the situation faced. In the *reading* part, the focus needs to be broad enough to be able to gather all the necessary information about the actual situation (e.g. a quarterback reading the field in order to find an open receiver while evaluating the defensive's pressure that is coming at him). Then the focus will become narrower in order to *recognize* what to do (e.g. the quarterback recognizing that a specific receiver is open and now placing his attention on him). Finally, during the acting or *reacting* part, the focus will tend to become even narrower (e.g. the quarterback aiming his throw at a specific place in order to give his receiver the best chance to catch the ball and avoid the interception). It is all a question of adjusting the focus to what action is necessary for the best possible performance.

Other factors that could influence focus were also investigated. Preparation, level of energy, motivation, distractions, emotions, balance (e.g. being too focused or not focused enough and having a well balanced life) and knowledge of personal optimal focus were all factors believed to influence focus. Among those factors, preparation seemed to be the most important

for the high-level athletes participating in this study. Good preparation help reducing distractions, influence emotions in positive ways and also facilitate the automaticity of the focus.

Athletes participating in this study were asked about their usual focus during specific moments of the competition. Although individual focus was specific to each athlete, a focusing pattern was observable. For example, before a competition, athletes usually wanted to keep a light focus, meaning they wanted to remain relax and have some fun while still having the competition in mind. They will try to focus on positive preparation for the performance. Whether it is the equipment, the athlete's body, the athlete's mindset or reviewing the game plan, athletes will attempt to prepare for those things in light way. Their objective is to be well prepared but not having their focus to peak too soon. It is during the actual performance that athletes need to bring out their optimal focus to have their best chance of good performance. This is where athletes will narrow their focus. It will become more automatic and directed towards the task at hand. This is where they attempt to read, recognize and react to the situations they are facing. During breaks, their focus will become less intense and athletes will try to rest their minds and their bodies. Focus will then be placed on adjustments that may need to be made in order to improve the performance.

Participants were asked to discuss the influence that the crowd might have on their focus. Whether it is in front of a hostile or favourable audience, high-level athletes claimed that it had little to no influence on their focus. This is in accordance with what Alves (2013) found with elite soccer players. Participants in the actual study often mentioned experience as the main reason why the impact was so small.

When facing high-pressure situations, many athletes admitted that their focus could change. Perceived pressure makes it more difficult for athletes to obtain an optimal focus. Some athletes reported that if they focus on negative things, they might start to overanalyze things,

which results in a less than best focus. This is why most athletes try to focus on making sure they respect their best focus. Confidence was mentioned as a factor that helps moderate the potential impact of pressure on focus. However, in some instances, high pressure can actually energize the athletes as well as his or her focus. This usually happens when athletes have a positive attitude and have the necessary confidence.

Even the best athletes can make mistakes and can therefore be affected by those. Participants felt that confidence can play an important role in mediating the influence that mistakes can have on focus. When their confidence is low, athletes may focus too much on their mistakes, even long after they happened. Instead of focusing on the present and the actions required to perform at their best right now, athletes might keep their focus stuck on those past mistakes. This was also found among elite soccer players in Alves' study (2013). Athletes with a higher level of confidence said that it was much easier to quickly stop focusing on the error made and redirect their focus back on the task at hand. However, even when confident, mistakes will usually create an emotional response that might monopolize the attention of the athletes for a short time. Confidence seems to make it easier for athletes to deal with this response and quickly get back to a focus oriented towards the performance. The results obtained in this research support Alves' (2013) findings with elite soccer players.

Performing at the highest level comes with exposure to injuries, pain and fatigue. The influence that those factors will have on the participants' focus was investigated. It was proposed that pain and fatigue would make it more difficult for athletes to achieve their best focus. Some athletes mentioned that their focus was profoundly disturbed by fatigue, pain and injuries, while other mentioned it had little effect. Pain and fatigue might lead an athlete to focus more on adjusting his or her actions towards saving more energy or avoiding the pain as much as possible.

Finally, athletes were also asked about the influence that a feeling of injustice might have

on their focus. It seems that for these high-level athletes, injustice had little to none influence on their focus. This is similar to what Alves (2013) found with elite soccer players. Participants in the present study believed that experience, confidence and preparation might help diminishing the impact that injustice might otherwise have on focus.

Best performance

The focus during best performances was described as being especially positive. This is in accordance with what Orlick and Partington (1988) have found in their extensive research with Olympic athletes. For some athletes in this thesis study, their best performance coincided with their more intense and best focus. This gives support to previous research that found attentional focus to be related to motor performance (Bredin et al., 2013; Ille et al., 2013; Lohse et al., 2014; Moran, 2012; Orlick & Partington, 1988; Wulf, 2007). When performing their best, the high-level athletes' focus was directed towards the task at hand. Rarely was their focus placed on the outcome of the performance and if it was, the focus was always positive. Yet, most of the participants in this current thesis study reported not thinking at all about the outcome during their best performances. Based on the social psychological framework (Botucher, 2008) and Moran (2012), thinking about the outcome, especially when negative, might present an internal distraction that would disturb the desired focus and eventually hurt the performance.

The focus during best performances tended to be described as narrow, clear and simple. As athlete 5 mentioned: "the focus needs to be simple because the situation is complex". Moran (2012) provided a possible explanation. While discussing the relationship between attention and performance, Moran suggested that focusing on a single thought at a time could be beneficial for performance. The narrow, clear and simple focus that was experienced by the participants of this study during their best performances brings support to Moran's proposition.

The focus present in the athletes' best performances allowed them to "let their body go". Several athletes mentioned that their movements were more natural and automatic because of the focus they had during their best performances. This brings support to the idea that a focus that leads to automatic reactions will be associated with good performances (Ille et al., 2013; Moran, 2012; Wulf, 2007). Focus was also found to be more external than internal during most of those best performances. When performing, athletes were able to maintain a focus that would lead them to read, recognize and react to the situation they were facing. This is also in accordance with what was found by other researchers (Bredin et al., 2013; Moran, 2012; Wulf, 2007).

Worst performance

During their worst performances, in addition to be negative, athletes' focus was characterized by a strong emphasis on the outcome of the performance. Moreover, the focus was often accompanied with a feeling of obligation. For example, instead of focusing on the starting signal, the focus might have been placed on the necessity of focusing on the starting signal. This might seem like a very small difference, but in a high competitive context, focusing on the necessity of a task instead of the task itself might possibly reduce the speed and automaticity of the movements, thus hurting the performance.

The focus was also a lot more subject to distractions than it was in other performances. Based on the social psychological framework (Boutcher, 2008), the athletes' bad performances might be explained by the increased presence of distractions. One of the most mentioned distractions during worst performance was the presence of doubts. Not only did those doubts lead to more hesitations during preparation, it also impacted the athletes during the actual performances. It was believed that those doubts came from a lack of confidence. Those doubts may have interfered with the athletes focus in such a way that they could not properly focus on the task and therefore were not able to read, recognize and react properly. For instance, some

athletes were not able to recognize that a certain situation would have required being more patient. The contrary is also possible as doubts may have lead an athlete to hesitate too much and fail to use the opportunity that was presented to her or him. The fact that distractions and less automatic reactions were present during worst performances provides support to past research (Bredin et al., 2013; Ille et al., 2013; Moran, 2012; Orlick & Partington, 1988; Wulf, 2007).

The focus during worst performances was often described as complicated and broad. It was said to be “all over the place”. This is the exact opposite of the focus present in the athletes’ best performances. Consequently, many athletes had difficulty focusing on one thing at a time and also keeping their focus on the task at hand. This is in accordance with what Moran (2012) had suggested about the importance of focusing on one object at the time. Athletes also reported that their focus was not as well balanced as it was during best performances. Many athletes were not able to rest or relax their focus when it was time to do so. Many of them overanalyzed certain aspects of the competition during times when they would normally rest their minds. Following Moran’s (2012) spotlight analogy, the athletes’ spotlight was too concentrated on things that were irrelevant and not concentrated enough on things that were crucial to their best performances.

Finally, their focus during worst performances made the athletes feel less present in their performance. While some of them were stuck in the past, others were projecting themselves too far into the future. This is in line with Orlick and Partington (1988) who found that a fully connected focus is critically important for high level athletic performance. The fact that athletes tended to have difficulty taking their focus away from their mistakes could also be considered as an internal distraction based on Moran (2012).

Other differences during best and worst performances

Although the main goal of the study was to investigate confidence and focus in high-level athletic performances, other interesting findings came along the way. One of them was the

difference in the emotions and behaviours during both best and worst performances. Before their best performance started, athletes generally felt positive emotions. This was the opposite of what they felt before their worst performances. During best performances, athletes behaved in relaxed way and also tended to be more social and vocal as compared to their worst performances.

Before their best performances, many athletes reported feeling the excitement and enjoyment of going into a competition. Going into their worst performances, many athletes reported feeling negative emotions. This supports the previous work of Orlick and Partington (1988) as well as Hays and colleagues (2009).

Athletes reported experiencing stress and anxiety during both of their performances. Although it did not seem that there was a significant difference between the performances in term of the intensity of the stress or anxiety, the effect of stress was different. During their best performances, even if stress and anxiety were high for some participants, athletes were able to deal well with those feelings. However, during worst performances, stress and anxiety led to worries. In their meta-analysis, Cox et al. (2010) found that confidence and freedom from worry were predictors of subjective performance. This might explain why the presence of worries was associated with athletes' worst performances in this study. It is also possible that focus had something to do with the relationship between worries and bad performances. Woodman and Hardy (2003) suggested that the negative relationship between cognitive anxiety and performance might be due to the cognitive resources (necessary in order to fully focus) that are allocated to worrying thoughts. Since athletes could not devote their entire focus potential to the task at hand, being occupied with the worries they are facing, their performance were negatively impacted.

Moreover, the presence of worries during worst performance and the absence of them during best performance might be related to the level of confidence experienced by athletes during those performances. In their qualitative study with high-level athletes, Hanton, Mellalieu

and Hall (2004) found self-confidence to be a protector from debilitating thoughts caused by competitive anxiety. In their study, athletes reported to interpret anxiety symptoms in a positive way when confident. The opposite was true when lacking confidence. Based on what participants reported in this actual study and what past researchers have found, it could be reasonable to suggest that when low on confidence, anxiety and stress might lead to worries and negative cognitions. That should result in a non-optimal focus, which will negatively impact performance. On the other hand, when confidence is high, anxiety and stress will not create negative thoughts and therefore won't interfere with the occurrence of an optimal focus, which will give athletes a better chance for successful performances. This might explain why during best performances, athletes reported to generally feel confident, not worried and to have a very good focus. It can also explain why worst performances were generally associated with low level of confidence, presence of doubts, worries, and a non-optimal focus.

The connection between Confidence, Focus and Performance

As athletes shared their stories about their best and worst performances, it became increasingly clear that a link existed between confidence, focus and performance. Based on the testimonies obtained from high-level athletes and past literature, an argument can be made that a complex relationship exists between those 3 factors. First of all, focus seems to have an influence on confidence and performance. Although it might be difficult to do so during the performance, it seems possible to influence confidence using focus before the actual performance. For example, since past performances are such a strong source of confidence (Bandura, 1977; Hays et al., 2007; Vealey et al., 1998), focusing on positive past performances might help increase confidence. On the other hand, some athletes believed that focusing on possible failures (fear of failure) might hurt confidence. This possible influence would be in line with Vealey's (1986, 1998) framework that advanced that cognitions can influence confidence.

Some participants also proposed that focus might serve as a protector for debilitating thoughts that might eventually hurt confidence. Although not specifically link to confidence, Hanton et al. (2004) had similar findings in their study with high-level athletes. They found that athletes might use strategies such as positive self-talk, thought stopping and mental rehearsal in order to protect themselves against debilitating interpretations of competitive anxiety. This possible influence of positive and fully connected focus on confidence is also clearly presented in all of Orlick's books including his most recent book (Orlick, 2015, 5th edition of *In Pursuit of Excellence*). That being said, in order to clarify and confirm the influence that focus can have on confidence, more attention and research are needed.

The possible influence that confidence has on focus seems to be even more probable, visible and powerful than the influence that focus can have on confidence. The high-level athletes participating in this study seemed to firmly believe that confidence had a very powerful impact on their focus. It was reported several times that in order to obtain an optimal focus, confidence was necessary. Athletes believe that confidence allow their focus to get narrower which help them to perform their best. That feeling of confidence also helped athletes to have a feeling of knowing what to do and what to focus on. This results in a clearer focus that help them stay focused on the task at hand. Confidence also seems to increase positive thinking while reducing doubts and worries. It also help protect them from focusing on possible distractions such as negative emotions. In summary, confidence seems to facilitate the obtainment of an optimal focus.

These findings are in accordance with what Hays et al. (2009) advanced about the positive effect that confidence might have. They found confidence level to be linked with the retention of effective competition focus. When confidence was high, the focus was effective, and vice-versa. The findings presented in this study also supports the work of Bandura and Wood's (1989) who

claimed that less confident people will tend to focus ineffectively due to distractions while confident individuals will stay focused on the task at hand.

Finally, it was also proposed that confidence could influence focus through its impact on motivation. Confidence, or self-efficacy, is believed to be closely related to motivation (Bandura, 1977). As proposed by the most experienced participant in this study (who incidentally is studying motivation in sport at the Ph.D level), motivation might provide the energy required to focus at the optimal level. This proposition is supported by past researches on motivation. Motivation, especially intrinsic, is believed to be “the primary source of energy for human behaviour” (Kilpatrick, Hebert & Bartholomew, 2005, p. 93). As suggested by the athlete, a strong level of confidence might impact positively motivation, which would in turn create the energy necessary for an optimal focus. In contrast, a lack of confidence would result in a lack of motivation, which would then negatively impact the level of energy, thus making it very difficult to obtain a fully optimal focus. Although such suggestions require more research in order to be validated, the argument seems plausible.

So what is the link between confidence, focus and performance? Based on the experiences of the high-level athletes interviewed in this study and by exploring what has been found in previous research, it is possible to suggest a model. It is suggested that confidence will facilitate the occurrence of an optimal focus, which will then maximize the chances of good or best performances (see figure 2). A high level of confidence will result in fewer doubts, less hesitations and a stronger resistance to distractions. It will also lead to a better control of

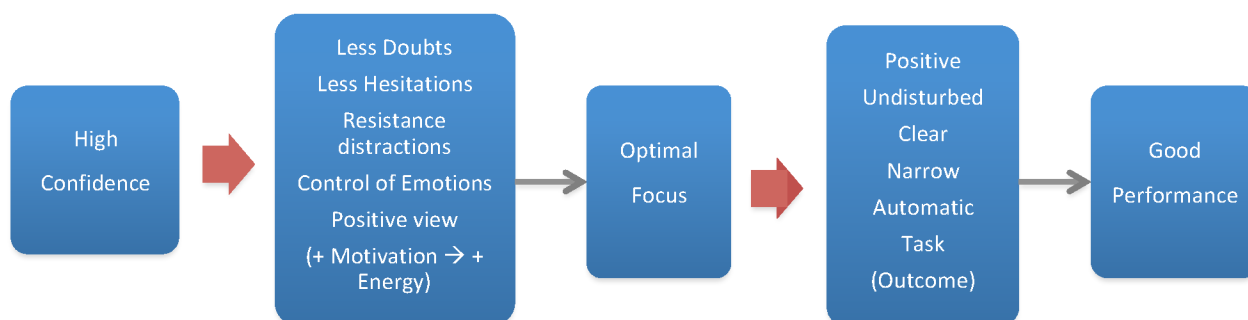


Figure 2 – Positive model

emotions, a more positive view or perspective and possibly a higher level of motivation, which could result in more energy available for the focus. Everything that comes with a high level of confidence will give a better chance for the focus to be undisturbed, clear, narrow and automatic. The focus will also be mainly directed towards the task at hand and rarely on the outcome. Based on the participants' testimonies, those are the characteristics of an optimal focus. With such focus, athletes should then be able to read, recognize and react to the situations they face without hesitation - which will give them a greater chance of succeeding. In the eventuality of good performances, it should be expected that the confidence level would rise since the most powerful source of confidence is believed to be past performances.

Figure 3 shows that on the opposite side, when confidence is low, athletes might experience more doubts, worries, hesitations, negative emotions in addition to having more difficulty controlling their emotions and in some cases, a lack of energy due to a decrease in motivation. It then reduces the chances for the occurrence of an optimal focus. Chances are that the focus will be described as negative, disturbed, broad, unclear and unnatural as well as being mainly oriented towards the outcome. With such focus, the odds of obtaining a great performance become very small. In addition, if bad performances do occur, this can negatively impact confidence. Moreover, if the focus is bad, it might lose his ability to protect the athlete's confidence level.

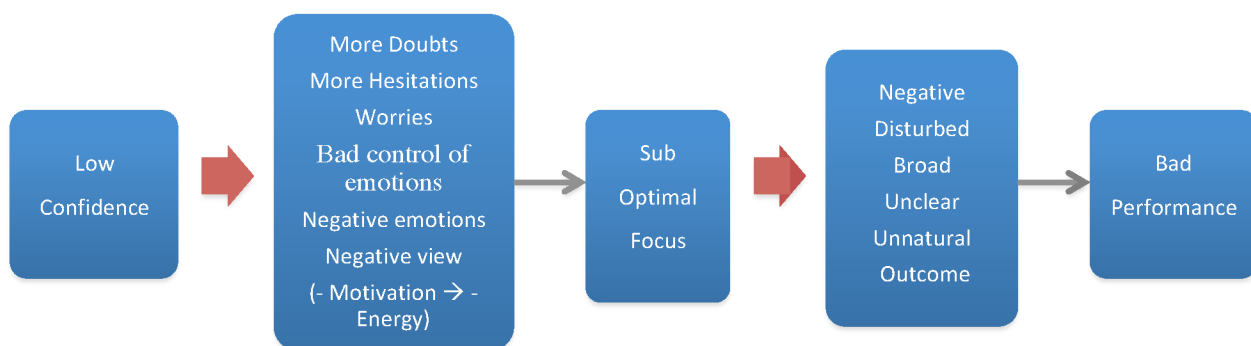


Figure 3 – Negative model

So what can coaches, athletes and practitioners learn from those models? First of all, it shows the importance of understanding that confidence, focus and performance greatly interact with each other. They are all directly or indirectly connected. Therefore, an athlete who would want to improve his or her chances for a great performance should first try to improve his or her confidence level. In order to do so, it becomes important to understand what sources of confidence are the most powerful for this athlete. Chances are that past performances will be the strongest source. Therefore, revisiting great past performances can help an athlete boost his or her confidence level. If the confidence level of the athlete is high, the consequences of such confidence should help the athlete obtaining his or her optimal focus. Although personal to each individual, an athlete should seek a focus that is clear, narrow, positive, automatic and mainly directed towards the task at hand and rarely on the outcome. With such focus, an athlete gives himself the best chances for great performances. If one lesson can be learned from the suggested models, is that in order to improve athletic performance, one should work on his focus. But in order to have the best possible focus, one should work on his confidence level. That being said, it is important to remember that those models have yet to be tested and validated. The exploratory nature of this study only allows suggestions. Definitive conclusions can only be claim with more in depth research.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Strengths and limitations

An important limitation of this study comes from the method of data collection. Athletes were asked to recall their best and worst performances and the influence that focus and confidence had on them. Although those performances were memorable and often very vivid in the athletes' mind, they remain recollection of past events. That means that they are a subjective

in their nature and are subject to time distortion. Even if an attempt to diminish the effect of time was done by asking detailed descriptions of the performance, by sometime even challenging the athletes' testimonies and also by using only active athletes or semi-retired athletes as participant, the accuracy of the data cannot be perfect. Nonetheless, such limitation is common among studies using a retrospective design (Hays et al., 2009). This is a sacrifice that researchers must be ready to do in order to obtain detailed and profound data. Moreover, based on the constructionism perspective that was used in this study as epistemological standpoint, those detailed recollections (even if not perfectly exact) are seen as valid and representative of what really happened.

Another limitation regarding the way data were collected is that they are only coming from interviews. Therefore, the analysis and conclusions of this study rely solely on what was shared by the athletes. The athletes did their best in their attempt to share the best possible memories of their best and worst performances. Other methods of data collection (e.g. field observation) would have helped validate the athletes' testimonies. However, it is difficult or impossible to know what people are focusing on and how confident they are by simply watching them perform.

One potential limitation of this study comes from interviewing athletes from different countries. Participants who spoke French and English were able to do their interviews in their first language since the researcher is fluent in both French and English. However, athletes from Norway had to do their interviews in their second language (English) since the researcher does not speak Norwegian. Although all of them had a very good English and were used to English, doing an interview about complex cognitive processes in a language that is not your own might pose a problem. By not doing the interview in their own language, some athletes might have not been able to truly share their experience in details and with the exact words that would best

described what they lived. However, all of the Norwegian participants were still very fluent in English and were able to express themselves very clearly.

Only one researcher executed the data collection and the analysis. Although this assured greater consistency and familiarity with the data, the fact that only one individual was responsible for conducting the interviews, transcription, translation and analysis might have influenced the interpretation of the data. It is possible that the researcher may have become “over familiar” with the data and might have not considered some other additional interesting information. Although an attempt was made to remain true to the constitutive/transcendental phenomenological approach and stay free from pre-existing bias by using techniques such as bracketing interview and member checking, it is possible that the absence of an external reviewer on the data might have affected the validity of the conclusions. The participation of individuals not present during the interviews in the analytical process might have allowed for a triangular consensus, thus adding validity to the interpretations. However, this was an unrealistic goal to do in the context of a Master’s thesis and with the large amount of data collected. This is something that other researchers should consider when doing studies similar detailed interview studies.

This study has limitations as do almost all studies, but it also has many strengths that are worth mentioning. First of all, the high performance level of the athlete population used in this study is certainly an interesting component of the research. Probably due to the difficulty of accessing active high-level athletes, there is not a lot research with this population in the literature. High-level athletes possess an extensive knowledge about sports, competitions and factors influencing performance that are very difficult to match. Their experiences are not common and they can provide insights that can be very useful in understanding psychological factors that influence high level performance.

Moreover, the sample used is a strength of this study. Twelve high level athletes/participants who had international and/or professional experience with different backgrounds added to the strength of this study. Participants included eight males and four females, representing 7 different sports. This included both team and individual sports. Their performance outcomes were determined by judges, times and/or final scores. A stronger presence of endurance sports might have improved the transferability of the findings. However, it is still believed that the diversity of the sample helped bring a holistic view to this phenomenon, which was one of the objectives of the study.

This study also had an international component as a result of interviewing athletes from Canada and Norway. Norwegian and Canadian athletes were very similar in many respects. They both shared similar experiences, similar views on sport, focus, confidence and performance. Although Canada and Norway are two Western Nordic countries, several differences exist between the two nations. The size of the country and the population, the social values, the structure of the sport system, the language, the history; those are all differences that exist between the two countries. However, the athletes were very similar and no major differences were noticed between the participants' testimonies. The international component of this study adds to the generalization of the research's findings. This might suggest that confidence and focus and their influences on performance in different sport contexts are the same regardless of where an athlete comes from. Future studies should investigate similarities and differences with high performance athletes in different countries or cultures.

The qualitative nature of this study, in addition to filling a gap in the sports literature, provided in depth information about a complex phenomenon. Through the many hours of interviews, athletes were able to truly share their views and experiences. They certainly provided insights that would not have been possible with other types of research. Moreover, the number

and length of interviews (ranging from 110 minutes to nearly 5.5 hours), is definitely a strength of the study and provided a better chance to gain a deep and holistic understanding of a complex phenomenon. Furthermore, some athletes were interviewed multiple times. This allowed them to rectify or add information about their previous interview sessions, thus improving the quality and details of the data.

Finally, although many studies have looked at confidence and focus in sports and their relationship to performance, to our knowledge this is the first study that explored both factors at the same time. As was shown, a complex interdependent relationship appears to exist between focus, confidence and performance in sport. Due to the complex influences that confidence and focus have on each other, other factors and performance, it is believed that additional investigations of both factors simultaneously will provide a better and more complete understanding of the phenomenon. Confidence and focus are very interconnected, so future research should continue to explore the link between these factors in sport performance and other high performance pursuits.

Findings

The purpose of the study was to gain an in depth understanding of the roles that two psychological factors, confidence and focus, play in high-level athletes' performances and to answer the question: What is the influence of confidence and focus in high-level athletes' performances? Detailed testimonies of 12 high-level athletes, from Canada and Norway, both men and women, with different sporting background were used in order to achieve the research objectives. The results obtained were compared to the existing literature on the subject. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it is impossible to make a definitive claim. However, it is suggested that confidence, through its influence on emotions, behaviours and cognitions can

facilitate or impede the occurrence of an optimal focus, which will then have a direct impact on performance.

As predicted by Vealey's (1986, 1998) sport confidence conceptual model, confidence had an influence on emotions, behaviours and cognitions during participants' best and worst performances. During best performances, when the confidence level was high, it was believed that emotions were positively influenced by confidence. Feeling confident also made the athletes more relax, more patient and less hesitant in their behaviours, while at the same time freeing them to use all their arsenal of movements. Finally, during best performances, high confidence influenced the athletes' cognitions by reducing their level of doubts and increasing their positive motivation. During most athletes' worst performances, their confidence level was low. Their lack of confidence made the athletes more worried, less relaxed, more engaged in unproductive behaviours, showed signs of panic and also increased their doubts.

During the athletes' best performances, their focus was oriented towards the task at hand. It was described as well balanced, narrow, simple and clear. This allowed the athletes to read, recognize and react to the situations, which freed them to take the most effective actions in the most effective way. This certainly helped the athletes to achieve the greatest performance of their career. However, during the athletes' worst performances, their focus seemed to have been too much centered on the outcomes. It was also described as complicated, broad and unbalanced which made them take ineffective actions or at the very least, made them do it in a sub-optimal manner. This less than best focus might explain why they performed poorly.

Based on the analyses of the roles that confidence and focus played during high-level athletes' best and worst performances, and the existing literature, a model was suggested. In this model, high level of confidence will facilitate the occurrence of an optimal focus and low level of confidence will impede it. Optimal focus will have a positive influence on performance and a

bad focus will have the opposite effect. Therefore, although both of them play important roles in high-level athletic performances, for better or worse, confidence seems to have an indirect influence on performance while focus as a direct one.

The findings of this study have implications for athletes, practitioners, coaches and researchers. When trying to improve athletic performances through psychological factors, athletes, coaches and sport psychologists should consider working with both confidence and focus. Putting all the attention on developing only one factor will not be as effective as combining the two since they are so interconnected. Researchers should also consider both factors when studying their roles in relation to athletic performances. This study was an exploratory one, and future research is needed to expand these findings and provide additional validation. Future research, both qualitative and quantitative, can certainly help to gain a more definitive understanding of the roles and influences that confidence and focus play in high-level athletic performance. It would also be interesting to explore the same topic with a lower performance level population or within different contexts. Our hope is that this study will trigger the interest of experts in the applied sport and performance enhancement field to further understand the complex and important relationship that seems to exist between confidence, focus and performance.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide *Confidence and Focus*

Section 1 – Confidence

1) Can you explain to me what confidence means to you?

Probes:

-Is it a general thing or can it be specific to certain situations?

-What roles does it play in your life in general and in your sport?

2) Can you give me some specific examples of the types of things you are confident about?

Probes:

-Do some factors have a greater impact on performance than others?

-Does this differ across situations in sport/competitive calendar?

Section 2 – Focus

1) What does it mean to be focused to you? Could you give me an example?

Probe:

-Can you describe me what is it like to be fully focus to you? And vice versa

2) Going into more details, what are your thoughts and focus when:

- About to begin the game

- During the breaks (half time, between rounds, periods etc...)

- You play in front of a hostile crowd

- You play in front of a favourable crowd

- When the pressure is high

-When you are on the bench

-When you feel there is an injustice (unfair decision from the official, unfair advantage)

- When you feel in pain, tired or injured
- When you are in good position to win
- When you are in a bad position to win

3) What do you think is the most important thing regarding concentration and focus for high-level athletes?

Section 3 – Best performance

I would like now if you could try to remember as vividly as possible one of your best ever games, races, events or performances.

1) Spontaneously, why do you think you had the performance you had on that day?

Probe:

- Was there anything different that day that could explain your performance?

2) How would you describe your behaviour during that competition?

- Before, during, after?
- Was there a main factor influencing your behaviour?

3) Please describe me any thought that you remember experiencing on the day of the competition?

- Before and during
- Was there a main factor influencing your thoughts?

4) How were you feeling on the day of competition?

- Before and during
- Was there a main factor influencing your emotions

5) How would you described your level of confidence during the competition

Probes:

- Day or days prior to the competition?
- Moments before the competition?

-During the competition?

6) How would you rate your Confidence level going into that game, race, event or performance on a scale from 1 to 10? (1 being a very low level of confidence, 10 being a very high level of confidence, and 5 being somewhere in-between).

7) What were you thinking about or focused on going into that game, race, event or performance (before you actually started performing)?

-Was your focus any different than usual?

8) What were you focusing on during the event?

-Was it any different than usual?

9) Did you or your coach use any strategies to remain or get back focused during the competition?

- At what point did you decided to use that strategy? What made you believe that it was appropriate to use it?

-Was it effective?

10) Did you or your coach use any strategies to protect or increase your confidence level during the competition?

- At what point did you decided to use that strategy? What made you believe that it was appropriate to use it?

-Was it effective?

11) To what extent do you think confidence impacted you performance on that day?

-How?

12) To what extent do you think your focus impacted you performance on that day?

-How?

13) Did some factors, it can be anything, affected your performance more than others?

Section 4 – Worst Performance

I would like now if you could try to remember as vividly as possible one of your worst games, races, events or performances.

1) Spontaneously, why do you think you had the performance you had on that day?

Probe:

-Was there anything different that day that could explain your performance?

2) How would you describe your behaviour during that competition?

- Before, during, after?

- Was there a main factor influencing your behaviour?

3) Please describe me any thought that you remember experiencing on the day of the competition?

-Before and during

- Was there a main factor influencing your thoughts?

4) How were you feeling on the day of competition?

-Before and during

-Was there a main factor influencing your emotions

5) How would you described your level of confidence during the competition

Probes:

-Day or days prior to the competition?

-Moments before the competition?

-During the competition?

6) How would you rate your Confidence level going into that game, race, event or performance on a scale from 1 to 10? (1 being a very low level of confidence, 10 being a very high level of confidence, and 5 being somewhere in-between).

7) What were you thinking about or focused on going into that game, race, event or performance (before you actually started performing)?

-Was your focus any different than usual?

8) What were you focusing on during the event?

-Was it any different than usual?

9) Did you or your coach use any strategies to remain or get back focused during the competition?

- At what point did you decided to use that strategy? What made you believe that it was appropriate to use it?

-Was it effective?

10) Did you or your coach use any strategies to protect or increase your confidence level during the competition?

- At what point did you decided to use that strategy? What made you believe that it was appropriate to use it?

-Was it effective?

11) To what extent do you think confidence impacted you performance on that day?

-How?

12) To what extent do you think your focus impacted you performance on that day?

-How?

13) Did some factors, it can be anything, affected your performance more than others?

Section 5 – Conclusion

Before we conclude this interview

- 1) Do you think there are areas I failed to cover regarding confidence and focus that you feel would be important to discuss?
- 2) Do you think I influenced your answer in any way?
- 3) Do you think the interview could be improved in any way?
- 4) Finally is there anything you want to add or ask me before we finish the interview?

Thank you very much for your time!

Appendix B

Interview Guide *Confidence and Focus* (French version)**Pre-Interview section:**

- Accueil, introduction et réponse aux possibles questions.
- Years of experience

Section 1 – Confiance

1) Expliquez-moi ce que la confiance signifie pour vous?

Sondes:

- Est-ce une chose générale ou bien peut-elle être spécifique à certaines situations?
- Quels rôles est-ce que la confiance joue dans votre vie en général et dans votre sport?

2) Pouvez-vous me donner des exemples spécifiques de chose qui vous rendent confiant?

Sondes:

- Y a-t-il des facteurs plus importants que d'autres en terme d'influence sur les performances?
- Est-ce que cela change selon les des situations ou du calendrier sportif?

Section 2 – Focus

1) Qu'est-ce que « être focalisé » veut dire pour vous? Pouvez-vous me donner des exemples?

Sonde:

- Pouvez-vous me décrire ce que signifie d'être pleinement focalisé pour vous?
- Et ce que c'est que de ne pas l'être du tout?

2) En allant plus en profondeur, à quoi pensez-vous et à quoi focusez-vous:

- Au moment de commencer la partie?
- Lors des pauses (mi-temps, entre périodes, rondes, etc...) ?
- Lorsque vous jouez devant une foule hostile ?
- Lorsque vous jouez devant une foule favorable ?
- Quand la pression est intense?
- Lorsque vous êtes sur le banc ?
- Quand vous sentez qu'il y a injustice (mauvaise décision des officiels, avantage injuste) ?

- Lorsque vous ressentez de la douleur, de la fatigue, ou que vous avez une blessure?
- Lorsque vous êtes en bonne position pour gagner ?
- Lorsque vous êtes en mauvaise position pour gagner ?

3) Selon vous, quelle est la chose la plus importante concernant la concentration et le focus pour les athlètes de haut niveau?

Section 3 –Meilleure performance

J'aimerais maintenant que vous tentiez de vous rappeler du mieux possible l'une de vos meilleures performances à vie.

1) Spontanément, pourquoi croyez-vous que vous avez eu la performance que vous avez eue cette journée-là?

Sonde:

- Est-ce que quelque chose d'anormal est arrivé ce jour-là qui pourrait expliquer votre performance?

2) Comment décrieriez-vous votre comportement lors de la compétition?

- Avant, pendant, après?
- Y avait-il un facteur particulier qui aurait influencé votre comportement?

3) Décrivez-moi les pensées que vous vous rappelez avoir eues lors de la journée de cette compétition.

- Avant et pendant
- Y avait-il un facteur particulier qui aurait influencé vos pensées?

4) Comment vous sentiez vous le jour de la cette compétition?

- Avant et pendant
- Y avait-il un facteur particulier qui aurait pu influencer vos émotions?

5) Comment décrieriez-vous votre niveau de confiance durant la compétition?

Sondes:

- Le ou les jours avant la compétition ?
- Tout juste avant la compétition ?
- Pendant la compétition?

6) Sur une échelle de 1 à 10, comment évalueriez-vous votre niveau de confiance vous dirigeant vers la compétition (1 étant très faible et 10 maximum)

7) À quoi pensiez-vous ou focusiez-vous en vous dirigeant vers la compétition (avant que cela débute)

-Est-ce que votre focus était différent de l'habitude?

8) Sur quoi était votre focus lors de la compétition?

-Était-ce différent de l'habitude?

9) Est-ce que vous ou votre entraîneur avez utilisé des stratégies pour que vous restiez ou regagniez votre focus lors de la compétition?

- À quel moment avez-vous décidé d'utiliser ces stratégies? Pourquoi avez-vous décidé de le faire à ce moment?

-Est-ce que cela a fonctionné?

10) Est-ce que vous ou votre entraîneur avez utilisé des stratégies pour protéger ou améliorer votre niveau de confiance durant la compétition.

- À quel moment avez-vous décidé d'utiliser ces stratégies? Pourquoi avez-vous décidé de le faire à ce moment?

-Est-ce que cela a fonctionné?

11) À quel point est-ce que votre niveau de confiance a eu un impact sur votre performance ce jour-là?

-Comment?

12) À quel point croyez-vous que votre focus a eu un impact sur votre performance ce jour-là?

-Comment?

13) Est-ce que d'autres facteurs, cela peut être n'importe quoi, ont affecté votre performance plus que d'autres?

Section 4 –Pire performance

J'aimerais maintenant que vous tentiez de vous rappeler du mieux possible l'une de vos meilleures performances à vie.

1) Spontanément, pourquoi croyez-vous que vous avez eu la performance que vous avez eue cette journée-là?

Sonde:

-Est-ce que quelque chose d'anormal est arrivé ce jour-là qui pourrait expliquer votre performance?

2) Comment décrieriez-vous votre comportement lors de la compétition?

- Avant, pendant, après?

- Y avait-il un facteur particulier qui aurait influencé votre comportement?

3) Décrivez-moi les pensées que vous vous rappelez avoir eues lors de la journée de cette compétition.

-Avant et pendant

-Y avait-il un facteur particulier qui aurait influencé vos pensées?

4) Comment vous sentiez vous le jour de la cette compétition?

- Avant et pendant

- Y avait-il un facteur particulier qui aurait pu influencer vos émotions?

5) Comment décrieriez-vous votre niveau de confiance durant la compétition?

Sondes:

-Le ou les jours avant la compétition ?

-Tout juste avant la compétition ?

-Pendant la compétition?

6) Sur une échelle de 1 à 10, comment évalueriez-vous votre niveau de confiance vous dirigeant vers la compétition (1 étant très faible et 10 maximum)

7) À quoi pensiez-vous ou focusiez-vous en vous dirigeant vers la compétition (avant que cela débute)

-Est-ce que votre focus était différent de l'habitude?

8) Sur quoi était votre focus lors de la compétition?

-Était-ce différent de l'habitude?

9) Est-ce que vous ou votre entraîneur avez utilisé des stratégies pour que vous restiez ou regagniez votre focus lors de la compétition?

- À quel moment avez-vous décidé d'utiliser ces stratégies? Pourquoi avez-vous décidé de le faire à ce moment?

-Est-ce que cela a fonctionné?

10) Est-ce que vous ou votre entraîneur avez utilisé des stratégies pour protéger ou améliorer votre niveau de confiance durant la compétition.

- À quel moment avez-vous décidé d'utiliser ces stratégies? Pourquoi avez-vous décidé de le faire à ce moment?

-Est-ce que cela a fonctionné?

11) À quel point est-ce que votre niveau de confiance a eu un impact sur votre performance ce jour-là?

-Comment?

12) À quel point croyez-vous que votre focus a eu un impact sur votre performance ce jour-là?

-Comment?

13) Est-ce que d'autres facteurs, cela peut être n'importe quoi, ont affecté votre performance plus que d'autres?

Section 5 – Conclusion

Avant de conclure l'entrevue

1) Y a-t-il des aspects importants concernant la confiance et le focus que je n'aurais pas couverts lors de l'entrevue et que vous croyez important de discuter?

2) Finalement, y a-t-il quelque chose que vous voudriez me demander ou ajouter avant de terminer l'entrevue?

Merci pour votre temps!

Appendix C

Annonce

Dans le but d'acquérir une meilleure compréhension des rôles que jouent le focus et la confiance dans les performances athlétiques, nous aimerions interviewer des athlètes (âgés de 18 ans et plus) à propos de leur expérience avec la confiance et le focus.

La sélection des participants sera basée sur le principe du « premier arrivé, premier servi ».

Si vous êtes intéressé à participer à cette étude, qui consiste d'une entrevue d'une durée variant entre 45 et 90 minutes, veuillez s'il-vous-plait répondre par courriel au ou appeler au . Nous nous ferons un plaisir de répondre à toute vos questions. Nous pourrions également profiter de l'occasion pour fixer un rendez-vous en vue de votre entrevue.

Respectueusement,

Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec
Chercheur principal

Dr. Terry Orlick
Superviseur

Appendix D

Note to athletes

In order to get a better understanding of the role that focus and confidence hold on athletic performance, we would like to interview athletes such as yourself. We are interested in your personal experience during your best and worst performances and how you feel your confidence and focus might have impacted those performances. The selection of participants will be established on a "first come, first served" basis. The participants must be 18 years or older. If you are interested in participating in this study consisting of one single interview (lasting between 45 to 90 minutes), please send an email at. We will be able answer all of your questions and make the necessary arrangements in order to interview you on this important topic

Respectfully,

Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec (Main researcher)

Dr. Terry Orlick (Supervisor)

Appendix E

Lettre d'information

Mon nom est Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec. Je suis un étudiant à la maîtrise en psychologie sportive à l'université d'Ottawa. Je travaille présentement sous la direction du Dr. Terry Orlick. Je conduis une recherche sur les rôles qu'ont le focus et la confiance dans les performances athlétique. Je vous contacte par courriel puisque vous avez répondu positivement à l'annonce décrivant le but de l'étude qui a été affichée à votre centre d'entraînement ou que vous avez également pu recevoir via vos entraîneurs.

Nous croyons que votre connaissance et expérience acquises grâce à vos années de compétitions peuvent grandement nous aider à mieux comprendre les rôles qu'ont le focus et la confiance dans les performances sportives. Si vous acceptez de participer à l'entrevue, on vous demandera de répondre à une trentaine de questions concernant le rôle que peuvent jouer votre focus ainsi que votre confiance dans vos performances. L'entrevue devrait durer entre 45 et 90 minutes selon vos réponses.

Votre participation à l'étude est complètement volontaire et vous pouvez refuser de répondre aux questions si elles vous mettent mal à l'aise. Nous espérons que vous considérez notre demande, puisque votre expertise et expérience dans le domaine peuvent certainement faire avancer considérablement notre recherche. Les conclusions tirées de cette étude pourront aider les athlètes comme vous dans leur préparation psychologique ainsi que dans leurs performances athlétiques.

En vous remerciant pour votre considération,

Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec
Chercheur principal

Dr. Terry Orlick
Superviseur

Appendix F

Letter of information sent to athletes after they responded to the advertisement

My name is Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec and I am a Masters Degree student in sport psychology in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. I am working under the supervision of Dr. Terry Orlick. I am currently conducting a research project on the role that focus and confidence may play in athletes' performance. You are receiving this email because you responded positively to the advertisement outlining the purpose of the study that was posted on the bulletin board in your training center or that you may have received from your coaches.

We believe that your knowledge and experience acquired through your years of competition could certainly help us better understand the role that focus and confidence plays in sport performances. If you agree to participate in this interview, you will be asked to respond to approximately 30 questions specifically related to the role of focus and confidence in sport performance. The interview should take about 45 to 90 minutes depending on the length of your answers. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can choose to answer only the questions that you feel comfortable answering. We hope that you will seriously consider our request, as your expertise and experience in this domain can certainly expand on the depth of our knowledge related to the role that focus and confidence play in successful performance pursuits. Conclusions drawn from this study also have the potential to help developing athletes with their psychological preparation and the quality of their performances.

We are looking forward to hearing from you about you possibility participating in an interview and thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec (Graduate Student conducting the Interviews)

Terry Orlick, PhD (Supervisor)

Appendix G

Le rôle du focus et de la confiance dans les meilleures et pires performances athlétiques.

Vous êtes invité à participer à une étude sur le rôle qu'ont le focus et la confiance dans les meilleures et pires performances athlétiques. La recherche fait partie de la thèse de maîtrise du chercheur principal, Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec. Elle est sous la supervision du Dr. Terry Orlick.

Invitation à participer: Le but de l'étude est de fournir une meilleure compréhension du rôle qu'ont certains facteurs psychologiques, notamment le focus et la confiance, dans les meilleures et dans les pires performances sportives.

Participation: Il vous sera demandé de prendre part à une entrevue ouverte d'environ 30 questions. L'entrevue devrait durer entre 45 et 90 minutes selon les réponses que vous fournirez. Lors de l'entrevue, il vous sera demandé de réfléchir sur l'une de vos meilleures et l'une de vos plus décevantes performances. Nous vous demanderons par la suite de répondre à des questions concernant votre expérience avec la confiance et le focus lors de ces événements. Vous aurez également l'opportunité de réviser vos données une fois l'analyse complétée.

Risques: Il n'y a pas de risques prévisibles. Il existe toutefois une très petite probabilité que vous ressentiez un inconfort émotionnel puisqu'il vous sera demandé de revenir sur une performance décevante. Toutefois, les risques ne sont pas plus grands que ceux encourus dans la vie de tous les jours. Dans l'éventualité peu probable que vous ressentiez un inconfort émotionnel, les questions sensibles seront évitées et vous n'aurez donc pas à y répondre.

Bénéfices: Nous croyons qu'en participant à cette étude vous pouvez acquérir une meilleure connaissance du rôle qu'ont le focus et la confiance sur vos performances. Revisiter vos performances passées peut vous faire réaliser ce qui vous a aidé et ce qui vous a nuit dans celles-ci et ainsi améliorer votre préparation dans le futur.

Confidentialité et anonymat: Pour raison d'analyse, les entrevues seront audio enregistrées. Sachez que cette recherche est anonyme et que votre confidentialité est très importante pour nous. C'est pour cela que seulement vous, le chercheur principal ainsi que son superviseur serez au courant de ce qui aura été dit dans l'entrevue. Pour assurer votre anonymat, des pseudonymes seront utilisés lors du rapport final. Les enregistrements audio seront gardés de manière sécuritaire dans un ordinateur protégé par mot de passe.

Conservation des données: Une fois l'étude complétée, les données seront conservées sur une clé USB cryptée, placée dans le bureau fermé à clé du superviseur, et ce pour une période de cinq ans. Une fois la période de conservation terminée, les données seront détruites de manière sécuritaire.

Participation volontaire: Bien que votre participation soit encouragée, elle demeure complètement volontaire. Si vous décidez d'y participer, il est important que vous sachiez que vous aurez l'opportunité de quitter l'étude à tout moment. Même une fois l'entrevue complétée, il sera possible de se retirer de l'étude en contactant le chercheur principal. Les données fournies seront alors retirées de l'étude et détruites.

Si vous acceptez de participer à cette étude, veuillez s'il vous plaît, signer ce formulaire de consentement. Il existe deux copies de ce formulaire de consentement. L'une d'elle vous sera remise.

Si vous avez des questions, vous pouvez contacter le chercheur principal à ou par téléphone au (450) XXX-XXXX. Vous pouvez également contacter Dr. Terry Orlick à l'adresse suivante : torlick@uottawa.ca.

Cette étude suit les exigences du bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de l'Université d'Ottawa. Pour tout renseignement sur les aspects éthiques de cette recherche, on peut s'adresser au Responsable de l'éthique en recherche, Université d'Ottawa, Pavillon Tabaret, 550, rue Cumberland, bureau 154, (613) 562-5387 ou ethics@uottawa.ca.

Acceptation: J'accepte de participer à cette recherche menée par Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec de l'École des Sciences de l'Activité Physique de la faculté des Sciences de la Santé à l'Université d'Ottawa, laquelle recherche est supervisée par Dr. Terry Orlick.

Signature: Date:.....

Nom: Initiales.....

Signature du chercheur:

Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec
Étudiant à la maîtrise à l'Université d'Ottawa
125, University Private, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON. Montpetit: 372B
Tel: (450)XXX-XXXX
Courriel:

Dr. Terry Orlick
Superviseur et Professeur à l'Université d'Ottawa
125, University Private, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON. Montpetit: 355
Tel: (613) 562-5800 ext: XXXX
Courriel: torlick@uottawa.ca

Appendix H

The Role of Focus and Confidence in Best and Worst Athletic Performances.

You are invited to participate in a study about the role that focus and confidence play in athletic performance. The research is part of the researcher (Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec) Master's thesis at University of Ottawa and is under the supervision of Dr. Terry Orlick.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the present study is to provide a better understanding of the role that certain psychological factors, namely confidence and focus, have on best and disappointing sport performances.

Participation: You will be asked to take part in an open interview consisting of approximately 30 questions. The interview should last between 45 to 90 minutes depending on the answers you will provide. During the interview, you will be asked to think about one of your best and one of your most disappointing performances. You will then be asked questions regarding your experience with confidence and focus during those events. You will also have the opportunity to review your data once the analysis completed.

Risks: There are no foreseeable risks. A very small chance of emotional discomfort does exist, as you will be asked to talk about a disappointing performance. However, the risks are not greater than those encountered in daily life. In the unlikely event that you do feel emotional discomfort, sensitive questions will be skipped and you will not have to answer them.

Benefits: We believe that by participating in this study, you can gain a better knowledge of the role that focus and confidence play in your performances. Looking back at your past performances can help you realize what helped and hampered your performances.

Confidentiality and anonymity: For analytical purpose, the interview will be audio recorded. Know that this research is anonymous and your confidentiality is very important to us. Therefore, only you, the researcher and his supervisor will be aware of what has been said during the interview. In order to ensure anonymity, pseudonyms will be used in the final report. The audio recording will be safely kept in a computer protected by a password.

Conservation of data: The data will be conserved on an encrypted memory stick placed in the supervisor's locked office for a period of five years. After the conservation period, all data will be securely destroyed.

Voluntary Participation: Although your participation in this study is encouraged, it remains totally voluntary. If you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you know that you will have the option to quit the research at any moment you want. Even after the interview, it will be possible to withdraw from the study by contacting the main researcher. The data you have provided will then be destroyed and removed from the research.

If you decided to participate in this study, please sign this consent form. There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is yours to keep.

If you have any questions, you can contact the researcher at or by phone at 450-XXX-XXXX. You can also reach Dr. Terry Orlick at torlick@uottawa.ca.

This research follows the requirements of the research ethic board at the University of Ottawa. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, (613) 562-5387, ethics@uottawa.ca.

Acceptance: I agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Alexis Gagnon-Dolbec of the School of Human Kinetics in the faculty of Health Science at the University of Ottawa which research is under the supervision of Dr. Terry Orlick.

Signed: Date:

Print name: Initials.....

Researcher signature:

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