

The World Championships in Basel, Switzerland, for the men and Lethbridge, Canada, for the women are approaching and a curling connoisseur reflecting on the performances of men's and women's teams from different countries at previous Worlds asked me if there were any differences in how men and women approached and coped with competition pressure. We told them we would investigate the question and with the aid of research literature we found differences between the genders in their coping response to competition.

How do women and men cope with competitive pressure?

According to research findings, in general, highly- skilled female athletes approach competition with a positive mindset and proactive behaviors like problem solving, feedback seeking, solution finding using effective communication skills. Highly-skilled female athletes find ways to engage with the pressure and deal with the cause of the stress directly; and engage in more emotional and social support coping strategies than their male counterparts who prefer a more rational, socially- detached treatment of competitive pressure. Men have been found to suppress their emotions and not use social support (coaches, teammates and friends) to inform or enhance their performance when they are experiencing competitive stress, e.g. willingly use a coach for feedback purposes. Female athletes, on the other hand, have been found to use the venting as a unhelpful coping strategy.

Research shows that competitive female athletes prefer a positive supportive social environment and their dominant coping responses in competition are emotionally focused not problem- and solution-focused. Men, on the other hand, are likely to be problem/solution-focused and typically neglect the social connection with teammates and others.

What does this mean to coaches, teammates and friends of competitive curlers?

Research suggests that competitive female athletes should engage in more problem-focused coping and men should engage in emotional-focused coping strategies so that athletes have more tools in their toolboxes to cope with the perceived threat that competitive pressure brings. Coaches should increase their awareness of the differences in coping capability of adolescent and teenage curlers as both male and female curlers will use more unhelpful emotional responses early in their competitive careers. Additionally, coaches should be very careful in the way that feedback is provided to younger curlers. Coaches should avoid harsh criticism, negative appraisal and unhelpful feedback. Instead, they should provide specific performance improvement and positive coping. This recommendation has been found across ages, experience and gender to have a negative impact on athletic performance. But, women have been found to be more influenced by negative appraisal and criticism from someone in their social circle during competition like a coach, friend or teammate.

Team effects

From a mental game perspective these insights offer us some intriguing concepts:

1. A team that is too emotionally focused and too emotionally sensitive is likely to be shaken in competition when presented with on- and off-ice problems that it will not deal with and does not have the personal or social qualities and skills to cope with. This means that teams should learn how to cope on an individual, sub-unit and team level. This means training their mental game and approaching the inevitable competitive stress, not avoiding it.
2. A team that is problem and solution focused, but neglects the social cohesion risks alienating team members that prefer a balance of task and social focus. A typical response in this situation is a curler seeking more social balance or withdrawal from a situation that does not meet their

social needs. A male team can anticipate this by ensuring that focus is given to the social connectedness in the roles, communication and use of coaches and the like around the team to enhance performance.

3. A team that is too much task or too strongly socially oriented risks cracking under pressure, which is more likely because they do not have a balance of coping skills for the pressure situations they find themselves in.

What now?

Teams and their coaches should assess how their gendered team handles pressure; and identify what triggers negative and positive individual and team responses to competitive pressure. Next, they should develop a team improvement approach and develop individual and team coping capabilities building off their strengths and developing their weaknesses. What we know is that men and women curling teams are different in how they cope with competitive pressure. Being mindful of this will help team builders, coaches and teammates develop their most effective ways of coping with pressure.

Readers notes

Readers should note that this is a general interpretation of primary research conducted on gender differences in a variety of sports. Readers are invited to read my blog at www.learn2peak.wordpress.com for a more formal discussion of this topic, including the tools and techniques that help both genders prepare for competition.

Prospective Research Notification

In Fall 2012 I will be recruiting front-end specialists to participate in an investigation about the effectiveness of mental skills training to improve control and consistency over critical front end performances in competition.