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Explanations for varying opposition effects in sports performance

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Interacting Performances Theory (O’Donoghue, 2009a) is made up of 4 elements, one of which is that different players are influenced by the same opponent types in different ways. Further quantitative evidence has been provided to support this element of the theory (O’Donoghue, 2009b). However, the mechanisms by which the performances of different players are influenced by the same opponent types in different ways have not been explored. A theory should not only identify such patterns but also explain them. Therefore, the purpose of the current investigation was to interview 3 coaches of different individual game sports to discuss preparation for competition as well as tactics and strategy that are developed for matches.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the inductive content analysis approach described by Côté, Salmela and Baria (1993).

Performance between a player and the opponent was reported to be influenced by the relative strengths and weaknesses of the player and the opponent; these include physical, technical and mental strengths and weaknesses. The strengths and weaknesses of different players were reported to arise from genetic talent factors as well as long term and short term preparation for competition. Players also develop sport specific abilities by competing in the sport which has a training effect. Ultimately, a player will choose to play a match in a way that maximises their opportunity to use their own strengths, exploit opponent weaknesses, avoid their own weaknesses and avoid opponent strengths. The interview research has provided complementary evidence to support the performance analysis evidence for Interacting Performances Theory. However, there were limitations to the approach as the coaches were interviewed away from the performance coaching setting.

Future research allowing players or coaches to reconstruct how they prepared for competition, having retrospectively viewed performances and opponents would allow data to be gathered from coaches in a situation closer to that of the sports performance environment.

Key words: coaching, performance, opponents

