

Teaching experience with virtual environments in sports psychology, before and during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Introduction: The objective of the study is to present a teaching experience in the field of sport psychology through virtual environments in a Colombian university during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, the work of sports psychological intervention of evaluation and intervention was developed that under the reasons of forty were carried out in two stages, face-to-face and virtual. Psychological instruments were applied in order to evaluate the levels of motivation and precompetitive anxiety; finally, virtual talks and conferences were held for athletes and coaches. Among the main results, high participation and adherence to lectures and virtual intervention work was obtained in student athletes from the Technological University of Pereira.

Keywords: education; college student; sport; psychology; technology.

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Resumen

Introducción: El objetivo del estudio es presentar una experiencia docente en el campo de la psicología del deporte mediante entornos virtuales en una universidad colombiana, antes y durante la pandemia COVID-19. En tal sentido, se desarrolló el trabajo de intervención psicológica deportiva de evaluación e intervención que, durante la cuarentena, se realizaron en dos etapas, presencial y virtual. Se aplicaron instrumentos psicológicos, con la finalidad de evaluar los niveles de motivación y ansiedad precompetitiva; finalmente se realizaron charlas y conferencias virtuales para deportistas y entrenadores. Dentro de los principales resultados se obtuvo una elevada participación y adherencia a las conferencias y al trabajo de intervención virtual en los estudiantes atletas de la Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira.

Palabras Clave: educación; estudiante universitario; deporte; psicología; tecnología.

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Introduction

Within sport psychology there is an extensive line of research focused on youth (Fry et al., 2020) and specifically on college sport (Bissett & Tamminen, 2020; Kucharski et al., 2018; Trujillo & Reyes-Bossio, 2019). It is evident that there are several psychological stressors unique to student-athletes, which must be examined in the light of the dual career they pursue (Reyes-Bossio, 2020a). All of these lead to experience negative psychological variables linked to the demands of university sports (e.g., injuries, pressure to achieve athletic success, interpersonal conflict with teammates or coaches, demands on time and schedules, among others) (Sudano et al., 2016).

Consequently, student-athletes face high demands that have an impact on their low subjective well-being, due to their dual role as students and athletes. Therefore, university students need to balance countless demands and challenges, both academic and athletic (Cho et al., 2020), which are evidenced in the overload resulting from the time invested in training, commuting, competing, traveling, among others (Brown, 2014).

Additionally, in the first quarter of 2020, sports around the world (including university sport) took a sharp turn with imminent closures (Gallego et al., 2020; Gautret et al., 2020) due to the risk of contagion among athletes associated with the transmission of respiratory and infectious diseases in sports venues (Lin & Decker, 2010; Parnell et al., 2020). This context has led to scenarios of stress, anxiety, emotional sensitivity, low perception of well-being, and various difficulties related to mental health (Henriksen et al., 2019; da Silva et al., 2021; Urzúa et al., 2020), a result of the situation of confinement and uncertainty associated with greater negative feelings (Lades et al., 2020) and its implications related to physical activity (Alarcón & Hall, 2021).

In addition to the above, student-athletes are not exempt from the risk of dropping out. On this aspect, the Colombian education system, like many others, is afflicted by various problems, student dropout being one of the main difficulties. Generally, young university students see as failure

the fact of entering the system and not graduating. This situation allows to clearly observe the problem that affects the country's education system, since it fails to guarantee completion and does not maintain all the students who enter it, thus limiting higher education coverage and delaying availability of qualified human capital (Misas, 2004; Ramírez-Gutiérrez et al., 2020).

Hence, the field of sport psychology has paid special attention to the support of university athletes from the social, academic, and sport performance perspective, focusing on a sustainable comprehensive work (Reyes-Bossio, 2020a). With the premise that athletes can face the situation of confinement in a better way by focusing on short, medium, and long term objectives, their sports career has been reframed, giving meaning to their possible future outcomes (Schinke et al., 2020).

Thus, this article aims to present a teaching experience in the field of sport psychology through virtual environments in a Colombian university during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

Description of the Sports Entity

Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira (UTP) is a higher education institution located in the city of Pereira (Colombia), which has a population of approximately 18,000 students, 10 schools, and 35 undergraduate programs. Additionally, the UTP is an institution accredited as an entity of cultural expression and heritage of the region, with an official sectional character.

In this context, the sports procedure of the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira is governed by the regulations of the Colombian Association of Universities (ASCUN) sports area. The formative process in sports is fundamental for the UTP because it complements academic training, as well as the aim for added values, such as discipline, responsibility, companionship, solidarity, commitment, among others. Likewise, it takes into account the multiple benefits that physical activity generates, highlighting the physical and

mental benefits for individuals, providing balance for their own well-being, the ability to excel, challenges, and leadership.

Therefore, the UTP currently has 22 competitive sports teams. The selected sports teams participate in the ASCUN competitive round, which consists of a first phase called Local University Games, in which the departments (states) of Huila, Caquetá, Cundinamarca, Chocó, Risaralda, Quindío, Tolima, and Caldas participate. After this qualifier stage, the best teams go on to the second phase called the National University Games, in which the best athletes in the country compete. In the last version of these games, held in the city of Barranquilla in the month of September 2019, the UTP had the participation of 128 athletes in 14 sports modalities, achieving positive results. Additionally, in the international competitions, UTP athletes have historically participated in South American, Central American, Pan American, world, and university tournaments.

Description of Activities

The present work experience took place prior to and during COVID-19 confinement (World Health Organization, 2020). Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira and its selected athletes had to adapt to this change and new normality (Liu et al., 2020; Shultz et al., 2020; Y. Yang et al., 2020). As such, this work experience underwent some changes in its initial planning and was adapted to meet institutional needs and comply with social isolation. The tasks carried out were divided into three stages: (i) preparation, (ii) observation, and (iii) intervention. These are presented in detail below.

Preparation

The preparation period (stage prior to confinement) included the first three weeks. During this period, meetings were held with the sports team of the Vice-Rectorate of University Welfare, including the coaches of the different UTP teams. From these initial meetings, the difficulties of the teams and the particular cases of athletes were identified firsthand, thus allowing the analysis and diagnosis of the needs of UTP athletes. Among the needs that were manifested in this diagnosis, the variable pre- competition

anxiety (Arenas-Granada et al., 2016; Pons et al., 2016; H. Yang et al... 2020) is evidenced as the most important variable to work on with the sports teams, whereas for particular cases, the lack of motivation (Garcia-Mas et al., 2011; Starzak & Sas-Nowosielski, 2019) and the need to establish goals and objectives (Castro-Sánchez et al., 2018; Reyes-Bossio, 2009) stand out. It is because of the above that the work plan is designed with the aim of addressing issues related to these variables with the taekwondo and athletics teams.

Observation

Observation has historically been a methodology used to study the habitual behavior of athletes. Established on the use of visual perception as a key element of behavior, it allows the emotional states of the athlete or trainer to be recorded, becoming a new flexible structure that considers the scientific procedure based on data collected from the perceptible reality for possible further analysis (Anguera & Hernández-Mendo, 2014).

Consequently, this observational stage had two moments: the first one before the quarantine and the second one at the beginning of the quarantine. The observation phase began with the introduction of the sport psychologist in different meeting and introduction spaces to the athletes of the taekwondo and athletics teams. In this context, two weeks were used to attend training sessions in order to observe the athletes and their interaction on the field (Martin et al., 2017; Torres-Ramírez et al., 2014). However, due to the aforementioned situation of confinement, a second stage of indirect observation was conducted (Bo et al., 2020; Di Fronso et al., 2020; Schinke, Papaioannou, Henriksen et al., 2020), where planning and observation meetings were held with the coaches with the aim of carrying out activities to support student-athletes or the university community on issues related to sport psychology in the pandemic stage.

Intervención

The intervention process also had two marked stages: one before confinement and the other during confinement. The intervention before confinement began by establishing goals and

objectives with each of the selected athletes in athletics and taekwondo in order to know their projection for this year in terms of competition. The most important event was the preparation for the University Local Games held in April and May 2020 (which were cancelled due to COVID in March 2020). For this, a series of interviews to the athletes were carried out with the intention of knowing their goals for the competition, which showed that most of the student-athletes were focused on qualifying and subsequently winning medals in the National University Games. In this sense, the interview collected as much information as possible related to different areas of sports activity, highlighting their sports history, economic resources, personal relationships, time organization, rest, nutrition, previous injuries, sports results, goals, relationships with teammates, training, and competition (González, 2010).

Subsequently, tests were applied in the field of sport psychology to measure levels of pre competition anxiety and motivation in UTP athletes, understanding precompetitive anxiety as an emotional reaction of apprehension and tension before sport competition situations, in which a set of combined elements of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and knowledge in the sports field are evaluated or measured (Olmedilla et al., 2019; Ong & Chua, 2021). In parallel, motivation in sports is understood as a key element to achieve commitment and adherence to sports, since it is the most important and immediate determinant of human behavior and is mediated by the direction and intensity of the effort itself (Aguirre-Loaiza & González, 2014; Weinberg & Gould, 2010).

The tests used were the following: Revised Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2R), which measures three factors: somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and self-confidence; and the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS), which measures three factors: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation. These tests allowed the collection of relevant information that would help in the implementation of the virtual sessions.

Likewise, after the application of the tests and their subsequent analysis, it was shown that self-confidence is the variable that best scores for athletes in athletics and taekwondo. Regarding

somatic anxiety, the taekwondo team scored higher, and, in contrast, for cognitive anxiety, the athletics team scored higher. On the other hand, regarding the motivation variable, it was determined that the athletics team was more related to intrinsic motivation (e.g., fun, pleasure, and satisfaction from sports; improvement of sports activities), whereas the taekwondo team is more related to extrinsic motivation (e.g., recognition, trophies, economic benefits, academic scholarships, environmental reinforcement).

Although the data would have allowed us to know the situation of the athletes with regard to the variables evaluated, unfortunately, at the time when the interventions based on the protocols by Trujillo and Reyes-Bossio (2019) focused on the work related to anxiety management and motivation of the athletes were going to be carried out, the UTP, by national requirements, determined the closure of the university, including any sports activity within the premises of the educational institution.

In this context, the second stage of intervention took place, and the UTP sports team decided to continue the activities with the different teams virtually (Dijkstra et al., 2020) for the rest of the semester, requiring the sports psychologist to accompany activities aimed at the university community. It is for this reason that, in practice, a series of conferences on topics related to sports psychology for the UTP community began with the support and promotion of joint activities with the Colombian Association of Psychologists (COLP-SIC), the Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia (UCC), and the program in Sports and Recreation Science of the UTP (see Table 1).

Consequently, a virtual survey (Google Forms) is developed to determine the impact of the activities carried out in the sports community of the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira and the levels of satisfaction with the conferences. The results of the survey show that the majority of the participants were university students who are part of the different UTP teams. However, it is determined that recommending this type of virtual activities to other athletes or colleagues is very likely. In this sense, the level of satisfaction that the participants had with the

Table 1*Lectures on Sport Psychology during Quarantine*

| Conference Title | Date |
|---|---------------|
| Information in times of crisis: Contributions from some fields of psychology. (COLPSIC) | 11-April-2020 |
| Sport psychology: a look into cognition and sport performance. (UCC) | 21-April-2020 |
| Psychology in children's sport: keys to good treatment of the child athletes. (UTP) | 24-April-2020 |
| Challenges and recommendations for university athletes in confinement. (UTP) | 27-April-2020 |
| Sport psychology. (UTP) | 04-May-2020 |
| Psychological support for athletes in confinement. (UTP-Sanctuary) | 15-May-2020 |
| Psychological preparation for the return to competition: accompaniment of UTP athletes. (UTP) | 26-May-2020 |

conference is significant, but the time allotted for the discussions concerning the answers to the participants' questions should be improved. Additionally, the use of WhatsApp is highlighted as a leading tool for communication to advertise this type of conference and its affinity with sports events (Ahmed et al., 2020; Tamir, 2020).

In this sense, and taking into account what the main objective for attending this type of conference was, respondents stated that acquiring sport psychology tools was the most important, followed by the objective of learning about sport psychology and discovering content about sport psychology (Raabe et al., 2019).

Finally, regarding the qualitative aspect, the participants, when asked what they liked the most about the sport psychology conferences, answered: "the content in general was important," "the thematic content of the lectures, explaining the importance in these pandemic times and how to progressively return to practice." Finally, when asked what topics they would like to see covered at future conferences, respondents answered, "strategies that can improve concentration and anxiety before a competition" and "more tools to apply in pandemic and post-pandemic contexts."

After the conferences, and in view of the fact

that social networks are an increasingly larger space for interpersonal and mass communication (Dietrich et al., 2012; Romney & Johnson, 2020), the Instagram page @psicodeporte is created. The purpose is to be closer to the university community and, especially, to the different UTP sports teams, interacting and posting relevant information on sport psychology to accompany them during confinement through the new technologies. This is also understood as the ability to innovate and reach the target population, which are mostly adolescents and young adults (García del Castillo et al., 2020; Papalia et al., 2012).

Likewise, constant meetings with coaches were held in order to learn about specific cases of UTP athletes. These meetings allowed us to learn about the strategies that coaches have been implementing with their athletes and to identify the intervention needs for support from the sport psychology perspective (Aguirre-Loaiza et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2020; Taku & Arai, 2020). From these inputs, the conferences and meetings presented above are born (see Table 1).

Discussion

The main objective of the study is to present a work experience in the field of sport psychology

in university settings before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus to establish lines of work that allow to strengthen the processes in the field of sport psychology in virtual university environments.

The experience resulting from the sport psychologist's professional practice in these pandemic context has led to a process of sustained adaptation on the part of students, athletes, professors, and sport science professionals. Thus, virtual processes such as remote working, videoconferencing, remote studying, online sports practices, among other virtual modalities have become a way of life in the current context for many athletes and students who must increasingly learn more about them and integrate them into their sports and academic work schemes (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Feito, 2020; Reyes-Bossio, in press).

This interaction based on virtual tools has become a skill that currently cross-sections academic structures significantly, generating an exponential production of knowledge (Barbosa-Granados & Amariles, 2019). They support the educational processes and are highly motivating for student-athletes. Therefore, the work of the sport psychologist will be closely related to the new technologies, allowing to offer programs aimed at individualized and group training of athletes (Weinberg et al., 2012). In that sense, this work experience has been able to integrate academic, professional, sports, and social competencies so that student-athletes can remain focused on their athletic-academic objectives and do not lose the initial focus on achieving their goals.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the ethical and deontological basis of the practice of sport psychology (Colegio Colombiano de Psicólogos, 2016; Etzel & Skvarla, 2017; Quartiroli et al., 2020) is key at this stage of confinement. In view of that, the appropriate use of telepsychology (Perrin et al., 2020) is at the service of athletes (Reid et al., 2015) for their holistic well-being. However, technological progress has also had consequences and risks for user privacy. Therefore, the security and privacy of the data of the athletes with whom we work must be guaranteed, because without privacy and confidentiality, the work done with the users (student-athletes) may not be effective

(Lustgarten et al., 2020; Stoll et al., 2020).

This will allow us to rethink the work of the sport psychologist within the competitive environment in a pandemic and post-pandemic context, contributing with their knowledge to athletes' performance in the face of health protocols, management of social isolation, withdrawal from the sports career, motivation, self-care, physical health, and mental health (Barbosa-Granados & Urrea, 2018), constantly aiming for sports and academic excellence (Schinke et al., 2020).

Additionally, in the long term, researchers and university teams must address mental health in a context of uncertainty that the "new normal" generates in the long term in student-athletes with a specific focus on the financial, competitive, academic, and social issues (Håkansson et al., 2020). In this sense, it is necessary to work on the athletic identity of university athletes in a context of confinement that is still maintained in Colombia and that has affected the university competition season. This can be reinforced with coping strategies and management of emotional aspects (Costa et al., 2020).

However, at the time of presenting the experiences observed, it is necessary to consider the limitations, which varied because there was no previous work experience during periods of confinement. This became a great challenge for interdisciplinary work with the different UTP teams in terms of sport psychology field work. However, the ability to adapt and the interest on the part of the sports team of the UTP's Vice-Rectorate of Social Responsibility and University Welfare (VRSBU) allowed this work experience to be carried out and thus, generate impact within the university community. Access to university athletes, the support of coaches, and the adequacy of the assigned spaces were achieved.

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