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Development of a Psychological Skills Training Program for Young Athletes with a Disability – Phase 1 Focus Groups

Krista Chandler
chandler@uwindsor.ca

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Elite para-athletes often have more opportunity than amateur athletes, and it is challenging for youth athletes with a disability to progress to competitive levels without the same resources (Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012). Furthermore, systematically and intentionally teaching psychological skills can provide youth athletes with disabilities the resources that have been shown to be so effective for a host of other populations. However, the skills included in psychological skills training (PST) programs are often solely driven by researchers and not the athletes and coaches themselves, thus possibly neglecting the specific needs of the population. Therefore, prior to the delivery of any PST program it is vital to consider the psychological skills that coaches of athletes with disabilities and the athletes themselves deem as important. The primary purpose of the current research was to qualitatively investigate what psychological skills coaches of athletes with a disability and the athletes with disabilities deem as most important to athlete success. Having athletes and coaches identify crucial psychological skills will assist researchers in developing a PST program for youth athletes with a disability. A secondary purpose of the current study was to investigate how to best deliver those psychological skills online. Receiving feedback on how athletes would best engage in an online program will help guide the development of an effective online PST program. Coaches and athletes reported arousal regulation, imagery and self-talk as key psychological skills. They also felt that interactive online activities as well as anecdotal information from other athletes with a disability were effective methods to deliver the PST program. This qualitative assessment will provide information to effectively address the gaps that currently exist in PST intervention research for athletes with disabilities.