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Original article

The sports coach facing the challenge of COVID-19: critical analysis for professional sustainability

El entrenador deportivo ante el reto de la COVID-19: análisis crítico por la sostenibilidad profesional

O treinador desportivo perante o desafio da COVID-19: análise crítica para a sustentabilidade profissional

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has become an unprecedented, unpredictable and ominous situation. Its impact on the population became negative and on sportsmen and women, the circumstances of their actions came together. The objective of this research was to propose to the sports coach options to face the challenge of the COVID-19. The empirical methods used were the interview and the documentary review; the first one was applied to 13 coaches in charge of high performance athletes from different sports disciplines and the second one, with a review to 17 articles and books obtained from the Redalyc Scientific Information System. To this information, a critical analysis was made in two components of the COVID-19 as a challenge for the sports coach and the COVID-19 as a challenge for sportsmen and women and its psychological impact. This allowed to understand that the pandemic could be a problem, but, at the same time, it could be an



opportunity, with which the proposal of options to face the challenge of the COVID-19 could be based. The conclusion is that the crisis should also serve to learn and be better prepared for similar situations in the future, where sustainability rests on the capacities that sports professionals develop, always in the interest of optimizing sports training.

Keywords: Sports training in COVID-19; professional sustainability.

RESUMEN

La pandemia por la COVID-19 devino en una situación inédita, impredecible y aciaga. Su impacto en la población se hizo negativo y en los deportistas, se aunaron las circunstancias propias de su hacer. El objetivo de esta investigación fue proponer al entrenador deportivo opciones para enfrentar el desafío de la COVID-19. Los métodos empíricos utilizados fueron la entrevista y la revisión documental; la primera se aplicó a 13 entrenadores encargados de deportistas de alto rendimiento de diferentes disciplinas deportivas y la segunda, con una revisión a 17 artículos y libros obtenidos del Sistema de Información Científica Redalyc. A esta información, se le realizó un análisis crítico en dos componentes de la COVID-19 como reto para el entrenador deportivo y la COVID-19 como reto para deportistas y su impacto psicológico. Esto permitió entender que la pandemia pudiera ser un problema, pero, a la vez, pudiera ser una oportunidad, con la que se puede fundamentar la propuesta opciones para enfrentar el desafío de la COVID-19. Se concluye que la crisis también debe servir para aprender y estar mejor preparados para futuras situaciones similares, donde la sostenibilidad reposa en las capacidades que los profesionales deportivos desarrollan, siempre en aras de la optimización del entrenamiento deportivo.

Palabras clave: Entrenamiento deportivo en la COVID-19; Sostenibilidad profesional.

RESUMO

A pandemia da COVID-19 tornou-se uma situação sem precedentes, imprevisível e sinistra. O seu impacto sobre a população tornou-se negativo e sobre os desportistas, as circunstâncias do seu trabalho foram combinadas. O objetivo desta investigação era propor ao treinador desportivo opções para enfrentar o desafio da COVID-19. Os métodos empíricos utilizados foram a entrevista e a revisão documental; o primeiro foi aplicado a 13 treinadores responsáveis por atletas de alto rendimento de diferentes disciplinas desportivas e o segundo, com uma revisão a 17 artigos e livros obtidos a partir do Sistema de Informação Científica Redalyc. A esta informação, foi feita uma análise crítica em duas componentes da COVID-19 como um desafio para o treinador desportivo e a COVID-19 como um desafio para os atletas e o seu impacto psicológico. Isto permitiu-nos compreender que a pandemia poderia ser um problema, mas, ao mesmo tempo, poderia ser uma oportunidade, com a qual a proposta de opções para enfrentar o desafio da COVID-19 se poderia fundamentar. A conclusão é que a crise também deve servir para aprender e estar melhor preparado para situações semelhantes no futuro, onde a sustentabilidade assenta nas capacidades que os profissionais do desporto desenvolvem, sempre com o interesse de otimizar o treinamento desportivo.

Palavras-chave: Treinamento desportivo na COVID-19; Sustentabilidade profissional.



INTRODUCTION

Since December 2019, information about an infectious disease has been disseminated in Asian territory. It was first notified in Wuhan and the World Health Organization [WHO] ratified it under the nomination of a new coronavirus, called COVID-19 that quickly became a pandemic and affected the world population (World Health Organization, 2020). Public health policies were not long in coming in order to minimize the risk of contagion and mortality rate. As a result, social distancing from declared quarantine, physical isolation, interruption of inter-human activities, and consequent interruption of normal life routine were the hallmarks of the months from March 2020 onwards.

For all the professionals, the new labor circumstance imposed by the COVID-19 became a challenge to face and overcome. On occasion, coaches and athletes experienced situations of distance, interruption of sports training plans and physical activity itself, and confinement to their homes. The psychological effects of the quarantine were not long in coming. Psychologists and public health specialists (De la Serna, 2020) carried out research on the psychological impact on the population and found symptoms such as: feeling of loss of freedom, irritability due to the absence of physical contact with family or friends, despair due to the loss of life routine and uncertainty due to the extension of the quarantine.

García (2020) described this situation well when he said that "the issue of the coronavirus has changed our lives. Soccer is stopped, there are no competitions, no transfers, no relegations, no titles and today the activity is massively stopped" (1m, 5s); World Health Organization (2020). It also mentions that all sports programs, training, gymnasiums and, in total, all physical activities have been radically reduced by the pandemic issue. Pinto, Dunstan, Owen, Bonfá and Gualano (2020) state that isolation and social distancing have been imposed to avoid contagion.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2009, determined that social needs and the emergence of global challenges called for the development of professional skills to achieve action in the world of today and tomorrow, from a perspective of constant adaptation, updating and even anticipation. In this same idea, Piedra (2020) argues that, in order to overcome the pandemic, they must adapt to the circumstances, opening to the possibility of social networks to achieve this goal, as tutorials or videos that direct and motivate the practice of physical exercises, in the field of physical activity and sports training.

Within the framework of training, the sports coach is a competent professional who has the function of directing a planned psycho-pedagogical process to develop the maximum potential of sportsmen and women, and the current experience of the pandemic is a challenge put on the way to encourage him/her to act (Capote Lavandero, *et al.*, 2017). In this context, the coach, faced with the problems of COVID-19, has the responsibility to overcome new challenges that no university prepared him for and must respond immediately to sports training suspended by the pandemic.

With this in mind, Posso Pacheco, Otañez Enríquez, Paz Viteri, Ortiz Bravo and Núñez Sotomayor (2020) affirm that information and communication technologies must be used to the fullest extent by sports actors, so that they can serve as an indispensable resource in the development of physical activity and sports training plans and projects, thus contributing to the continuity of sports normality.



The objective of this article was to propose options to the sports coach to face the challenge of the COVID-19 as a propositive contribution towards the valuation of the professional profile of the sports coach, with multidimensional competences, in sustainable development for which he is prepared to think and act before the incidence of crisis situations in the sportsman.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The methodology used in this research was qualitative because it seeks to characterize and analyze criteria; two techniques were used to collect the important data required; the first one applied was the interview, conducted with 13 coaches who lead teams and high-performance athletes from different sports disciplines in Ecuador. The instrument was a bank of open questions; the second interview was a documentary review, with the mixed card instrument based on 17 articles and books obtained from the Redalyc Scientific Information System, with the objective of having a logical collection and ordering of data; the techniques of content analysis and evaluative reading were also applied to these data.

The instruments were built on the basis of solving the following question: What is the challenge to be overcome by athletes and coaches in the context of the pandemic caused by COVID-19? These instruments were validated by the judgment of seven experts, who were designated as having a master's degree in sport training, teaching experience and having led a team. Following this process, it was decided to make only one circulation because there were favorable coincidences and there was no observation in the dimensions of the content of the bank of questions and content of the mixed card, so no revalidation was made.

The results obtained in the interviews and in the review were critically analyzed from a two-component view: the first one, the COVID-19 as a challenge for the sports coach and, the second one, the COVID-19 as a challenge for athletes and its psychological impact. With these components, a theoretical cross between instruments was made, with the objective of evaluating the points of agreement and disagreement. With this analysis, contributions of understanding and comprehension of the information as a valid data for the solution of the problem that was dealt and from which the proposal emerged.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 as a challenge for the sports coach

There is no doubt that the pandemic has become a real challenge for the professional of physical activity and sport. And it is because it calls for reflection on training itself and how, from it, unpredictable situations can be faced, in terms of how to mobilize knowledge, how to adjust and innovate. The important thing is to respond and achieve the social adaptation of the profession. Therefore, we present an analysis of the interviews and content reviews in this first component (Table 1).



Table 1. - Results of the interviews first component

Component	Subcomponent	Analysis
The COVID-19 as a challenge for the sports coach	Training environment	The use of the sports infrastructure is null or limited. There are no biosecurity protocols and no resources to implement them.
	Training and knowledge	Individual and team performance is highly dependent on the development of the training proposal in this context. The responsibility of the technical body is to seek training alternatives. There are no alternatives to continue this process of learning in sports, due to the lack of training in research and curiosity to acquire knowledge
	Physical, technical and tactical performance	The physical condition of the athlete is lost due to the lack of continuity in the training process. It will take months for the athlete to reach the same level of sport as before the pandemic. Social distancing does not allow for the development of technique and tactics.

The sports coach is responsible for the athlete in relation to the fulfillment of all aspects included in the living environment (Sánchez Bañuelos, 2003). Under normal conditions, he or she is responsible for ensuring sports performance in this pandemic situation by COVID-19 that faces much more psychological impact and, in addition, experiences an extra addition with his or her athlete, of how to guarantee maximum sports performance.

The experience that COVID-19 leaves behind cannot serve only to do what is necessary in the present; it must serve to learn about what has been done and to anticipate more effective and rapid future actions. The coach must be prepared for the unpredictable and keep busy with continuous training, so that every day he or she can appropriate knowledge, develop skills and strengthen capacities to be more resilient and thus achieve sustainable professional development.

A coach assumes the figure of the leader. Today, when the distance with that leader has been broken in a face-to-face way, the sportsmen require that the mentioned indicators are pertinent for the challenge faced, while they realize that that "Being a person", who is the sports coach, has diverse knowledge that are his multiple tools. When we think about the image of a sports coach, we do so recognizing only his or her capacity for sport and for the training and preparation of athletes, but we do not recognize how integral this training can be.

The relationship between physical and mental health is well known and no longer a point of discussion. De la Serna (2020) stated that "When someone suffers from a physical illness, this will have a direct effect on their state of mind and this on the rest of the person's environment" (p. 165). If to this real and common situation of optimizing the living environment, the sports coach takes away importance and acts on it, how is it not



going to be so now when a set of experiences are combined to make the matter more complex, making the COVID-19 a difficult problem to face, a tenacious and demanding challenge.

COVID-19 as a challenge for athletes and its psychological impact

There is a specific challenge that the sportsperson must overcome, in the matter of the pandemic; among several aspects, the living environment is one of them, that is, a sportsperson in times of coronavirus is one more human being who is living the same psychological impact as the rest of the population; but, at the same time, he is a sportsperson who lives his own. It is a double burden that impacts his life and his work. It is a burden that every coach, as the person responsible for guiding and leading, must address. In this sense, an analysis of the interviews and content reviews concerning the second component is presented (Table 2).

Table 2. - Results of the interviews second component

Component	Subcomponent	Analysis
The COVID-19 as a challenge for athletes and its psychological impact	Isolation and social distancing	Diminished interpersonal relationships (family and friends) Rhythm imbalance in the sleep cycle
	Modified behavior	Affecting mood and positive thinking. Internalized demands of failure in the face of noncompliance with the activity. Loss of interest in what previously produced pleasure.
	The vital environment of the sportsman or woman	Decreased sports performance. Inaction and stopping of the sport environment.

The psychological researches by the impact of the coronavirus determine the confluence of diverse variables that are conjugated incessantly: depressive symptomatology, affectation of the state of mind and the positive thoughts, internalized exigencies of failure before the breach of the normal activity, anhedonia (loss of interest by which before it produced pleasure) and its consequent personal abandonment, imbalance of the rate in the cycle of the dream that produces diminution of the attention and the cognitive functions (De la Serna, 2020).

For the athlete, such an imbalance in his or her living environment can have devastating effects on sports performance. On this descriptive life situation for all, the inaction and the stopping of the sport environment were also combined, with which the training process was stopped and the sport activity as well. In this sense, both the interviews and the reviews mention that training should lower this impact and introduce a playful approach, with which a pleasant and enjoyable approach to training under adequate conditions could be adapted (Posso, Barba, Castro, Núñez y Marcillo, 2019).



The demands promoted by governmental and non-governmental organizations produced restrictions and isolation; the Spanish Society of Sports Medicine, the Spanish Agency for Health Protection in Sports and the **General Council of Official Medical Associations (2020) and the Spanish Government's Superior Sports Council and Ministry of Culture and Sports (2020)** mentioned that the resumption of any sports activity was subject to the health situation. This situation increases the uncertainty of a return to normality, the possibility that certain events or competitions may temporarily disappear, in addition to those already suspended, the return to training and competitions only under the responsibility of the athlete, the real risks of exposure to COVID-19, the financial and employment impact for athletes and clubs, the breakdown of training plans, the program of maintaining physical fitness only at home and the obligation to maintain it in aerobic, strength, flexibility and technical exercises, specific to each sport.

Dopico Pérez, Fernández Tellez and Baza Farjat (2017) also agree that coaching is seen as comparable to the "Being a Person" of the previous authors. The person we are seeing in his human dimension (**Sánchez Bañuelos, 2003**) can, according to **Dopico Pérez et al., (2017)** influence the athlete before, during and after the sports event and they point out that this work is thorough and reaches issues such as language, mood, promotion of the positive, recognition of weaknesses and strengths of the athlete, stimulation and guidance towards the objectives, stimulation of emotions and experiences and the reworking of what is desired in the future.

Options to face COVID-19 challenge

Faced with a challenge of global magnitude, efforts are concentrated on objectives such as strengthening the response alternatives. This leads to the question of how a sports coach can take on the challenge of COVID-19, and it is therefore necessary to recognize and analyze what the sports coach has at his disposal to succeed in the sustainable development of the sports coach in the face of the crisis. This implies that the sport coach is trained to improve the capacities he/she has to recover from adverse and potentially destructive situations. Thus, a proposal of options is presented so that the sport coach can face the challenge that COVID-19 entails.

The alternatives are, in essence, the expression of the sports changes that are guiding information and communication technologies and current approaches to sports training. And from this vision, the pandemic is but the perfect scenario for the professional sustainability of the sport coach, who must act, continue with his sport leadership, adapt or adapt the proposed sport training plan, adjust what is necessary for the life and sport environment of his athlete to remain in balance and attend to his threatening psychological state in crisis. To understand that this illness, more than a work obstacle, is an opportunity for new action and knowledge, it is necessary.

The knowledge about the problematic situations is another of its possibilities and comes from possessing the knowledge about the new realities to be faced. Trying to do so is only achieved if one assumes the search for knowledge. Regarding this option, the knowledge to develop has to do with the psychological state of the sportsman or woman, especially described in the challenge. Therefore, it leads the sports coach to a concept already mentioned as living environment.

The configuration of knowledge is another option (and the same comes from the previous one). This concept specifies a transformation among the forms of disciplinary production that allow the sports coach to expand the vision of his work and move to psychology, social psychology, guidance, pedagogy, among others to achieve knowledge from which



he can face the COVID-19. Precisely, the multiplicity and proliferation of information about the disease, to face it, we find it in the psychological field, being its impact one of the most substantial for the population.

Considering the critical context, as a scenario for learning, is another option, which promotes a new context for innovation and learning. Recycling knowledge and know-how is the next option, it gives an account of the capacity to learn in a permanent, contextualized and autonomous way; it is, in itself, the capacity to learn from the analysis of the implications of reality in your profession.

The new knowledge referred to the disease should enter as conceptual content, to be studied in the plans designed by the sports coach. Of course, they must also be crossed with those of the training and with the inherent psychological impact of crises such as the one we are experiencing. In addition to conceptual content, procedural content must also be offered, where places within the home are conditioned for the training plan, aerobic, strength, flexibility and technical exercise specific to each sport in times of crisis, design of training plans with the support of b-learning, recognition of needs in self-diagnosis by the athlete, among others. In addition, attitudinal, which are responsible for motivation and self-motivation, resilience, optimism, among others, as content that addresses the problem of emotional stability of the athlete.

CONCLUSIONS

COVID-19 was for the world population a sui generis situation of deep negative impact, but at the same time an empowering situation for sports training professionals who, after facing the challenge of the psychological impact of athletes, must now understand the need for training in sustainable development that gives them options to continue facing new critical contexts.

The challenge to face the pandemic is really an optimal opportunity to think about the professional profile, because it was just in this critical context where the options to respond were activated, turned into a new learning context, developer of skills and knowledge. To believe that the negative is always fateful is not a conclusion in this research. It is rather the demonstration that uncertain and unpredictable realities are the perfect breeding ground for improving the profession. In this crisis, sports coaches have a way of reflecting correctly on the need for lifelong, contextualized and autonomous learning.

Thinking about the future, the crisis should also serve to learn that we must be better prepared for similar future crises, where sustainability rests on the capabilities that, as professionals, we always have and continue to develop, in order to optimize sports training.



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Conflict of interests:

The authors declare not to have any interest conflicts.

Authors' contribution:

Javier Alcides Álvarez Erazo: Conception of the idea, literature search and review, instrument application, literature search and review, general advice on the topic addressed, statistic analysis, preparation of tables, graphs and images, database preparation, drafting of the original (first version), review and final version of the article, article correction, general advice on the topic addressed, translation of terms or information obtained, review of the application of the applied bibliographic standard.



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