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Overcoming performance slumps: Psychological resilience in elite cricket batsmen

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of performance slumps in cricket from the perspective of psychological resilience. Findings from a thematic analysis of a focus group ($n = 4$ athletes) and one-to-one interviews ($n = 10$ athletes) with fourteen expert cricket batsmen indicated that numerous factors associated with psychological resilience protected players experiencing poor performance from the negative effects of stress, enabling them to successfully implement strategies to overcome slumps. These strategies fostered the strengthening and acquisition of technical, tactical, and psychosocial resources that protected players against future slumps. The findings suggest practical strategies to aid players experiencing slumps to overcome their performance difficulties.

Keywords: Challenge appraisal; Confidence; Growth; Strengths; Stress

1 Overcoming performance slumps: Psychological resilience in elite cricket batsmen

2 There is a natural cycle of athletic performance in elite sport that ebbs and flows
3 above and below an athlete's own expected levels (Mummery, Kerry, Schofield, & Perry,
4 2004). However, athletes regularly experience extended periods outside this natural cycle
5 where performances are considerably below their usual standards (Patel, Omar, & Terry,
6 2010). These periods are often referred to as 'performance slumps'. Taylor (1988) suggests a
7 slump is a decline in performance over an extended period that goes beyond normal cyclic
8 variations. Furthermore, slumps are associated with physical, technical, and psychological
9 changes to an athlete that can have negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioural
10 consequences. Slumps have been recognised as a significant issue in the sport of cricket with
11 anecdotal accounts (e.g., Waugh, 2006; Vaughan, 2009) and scientific research suggesting
12 that the 'loss of form' and consistently lower than expected standards of performance are
13 some of the most salient stressors experienced by cricket batsmen (Thelwell, Weston, &
14 Greenless, 2007).

15 Persistent and/or reoccurring slumps can have significant detrimental effects on
16 cricketers' wellbeing, and the need to overcome slumps and return to usual standards of
17 performance is of great concern (Vaughan, 2009). In this respect, researchers have reported
18 that cricket batsmen view resilience as a crucial attribute that enables them to overcome
19 performance adversity (Weissensteiner, Abernethy, Farrow, & Gross, 2011). However, to the
20 authors' knowledge, there is no existing research that has specifically explored experiences of
21 overcoming batting slumps from the perspective of psychological resilience.

22 Early research on performance slumps placed the phenomenon within the context of
23 the stress process. However, slumps are distinct from other phenomenon in sport that
24 involves stress and performance decrement, such as 'choking' or the 'yips'. In these cases,
25 athletes tend to experience more acute loss of performance and, especially in the case of the

1 'yips', with more pronounced physical antecedents and consequences (Mesagno & Hill,
2 2013).

3 Empirical work on slumps has tended to focus on the cognitive and behavioural
4 strategies used to manage slump-related stress. Researchers have indicated that athletes used
5 a variety of problem-focussed, emotion-focussed, and avoidant coping strategies in order to
6 mitigate slump-related symptoms (Madden, Summers, & Brown, 1990). For example,
7 Prapavessis and Grove (1995) found that semi-professional baseball players attempted to
8 increase effort, maintain a positive outlook, return to the basics of skill execution, and use
9 social support in order to overcome their slump.

10 More recently, research has found that the occurrence of slumps is associated with
11 causal attributions for performance. Specifically, Ball (2013) conducted a study with elite
12 athletes competing at national and international level in a variety of individual and team
13 sports and found that athletes with a pessimistic explanatory style experienced more frequent
14 performance slumps. Ball suggested internal and stable attributions for poor performance
15 fostered negative emotional states, reduced motivation, and decreased confidence that further
16 inhibited future performance. Thus, athletes with a pessimistic explanatory style can
17 experience a downward spiral of performances that further reinforces their internal and stable
18 attributions. This is consistent with attribution theory (see Weiner, 2010), which posits that
19 individuals with a pessimistic explanatory style typically explain their poor performance with
20 stable causes, such as a lack of ability. Furthermore, individuals with a pessimistic
21 explanatory style anticipate that negative outcomes will be persistent and enduring, often
22 leading to a reduction in expectations of success.

23 In contrast, research has shown that an optimistic explanatory style can facilitate
24 future performance after failure (Martin-Krumm, Sarrazin, Peterson, & Famose, 2003).
25 Individuals with an optimistic explanatory style explain negative outcomes with more

1 unstable/external attributions, such as a lack of effort, incorrect tactics, and/or bad strategy.
2 This offers a context that facilitates relatively stable expectations for future performances.
3 Therefore, athletes with an optimistic explanatory style are less likely to suffer a reduction in
4 motivation and confidence following poor performance, and can avoid the downward spiral
5 of negative emotions that are associated with failure (Martin-Krumm et al., 2003).

6 The research described above has provided some understanding of the psychological
7 states and mechanisms associated with performance slumps. However, findings are
8 dominated by studies using quantitative self-report data and a narrow focus on coping with
9 the emotional consequences associated with a drop in performance (Ball, 2013; Prapavessis
10 & Grove, 1995). Much less is known about the subjective experiences of slumps in specific
11 sports, the psychosocial processes that may influence the way athletes' evaluate the
12 potentially stressful experience of an extended period of poor performance, or the specific
13 psychosocial characteristics that may influence the stress process.

14 Given that resilience has been identified as an important factor in overcoming
15 performance adversity in cricket (Weissensteiner et al., 2011), recent theoretical and
16 empirical developments on the concept of psychological resilience (see, Sarkar & Fletcher,
17 2014a, for a review) may offer a useful lens to advance the understanding of performance
18 slumps in this sport. Several theories/models of resilience have been proposed in general
19 psychology (see, for a review, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), and despite some differences, they
20 contain a number of common features. Most theories/models acknowledge that resilience is a
21 dynamic process that operates over time, rather than a static or unidimensional 'trait'
22 (Richardson, 2002). Furthermore, resilience incorporates a constellation of psychosocial
23 factors that interact to influence the process and outcomes of engaging with potential stressful
24 situations (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013).

25 Specifically related to sport, Galli and Vealey's (2008) conceptual model of sport

1 resilience was developed from the analysis of semi-structured interviews exploring the
2 adversity-related experiences of ten current or former college and professional athletes. It
3 describes resilience as a multi-dimensional process moderated by personal protective
4 characteristics, and socio-cultural factors occurring over time in relation to specific person-
5 environment interactions. The conceptual model of sport resilience has received support from
6 Machida, Irwin, and Feltz (2013) when examining resilience in athletes with spinal-cord
7 injury and from Brown, Lafferty, and Triggs's (2015) study of the adversity-related
8 experiences of elite winter sport athletes.

9 However, Fletcher and Sarkar (2012, 2013) have been critical of the model of sport
10 resilience due to Galli and Vealey's (2008) over reliance on Richardson's (2002) resilience
11 model. Specifically, Fletcher and Sarkar (2012; 2013) argue that, although there has been
12 some support for Richardson's model, it is limited by a linear stage framework that may not
13 fully capture the dynamic nature of resilience process. Furthermore, Richardson's model is
14 biased toward coping-oriented processes and fails to account for higher level meta-cognitive
15 and emotive processes involved in appraisals of stress.

16 In recognizing the limitations of the conceptual model of sport resilience (Galli &
17 Vealey, 2008), Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) developed a grounded theory model of
18 psychological resilience derived from interviews with 12 Olympic champions. Results
19 indicated that numerous psychological factors - relating to a positive personality, motivation,
20 confidence, focus, and perceived social support - protected the world's best athletes from the
21 potential negative effect of stressors by influencing their positive evaluation and meta-
22 cognitions (knowledge of, and control over, cognitions) of stressors. These processes
23 promoted facilitative responses (e.g., positive behavioural responses) that facilitated optimal
24 performance. Resilience was conceptualised as the interactive influence of psychological
25 characteristics within the context of the stress process (cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013) and thus,

1 building on this perspective, psychological resilience was defined as “the role of mental
2 processes and behaviour in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the
3 potential negative effect of stressors (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012, p. 675, 2013, p. 16)”.

4 Notwithstanding the important advances that have been made in the study of
5 psychological resilience in sport, existing research (e.g., Galli & Vealey, 2008; Fletcher &
6 Sarkar, 2012) has focussed on somewhat heterogeneous adversity-related experiences (e.g.,
7 loss of form, personal tragedy, relationship difficulties) in single studies. As Fletcher and
8 Sarkar (2012) argue, the stress-resilience-performance relationship is dynamic and is often
9 influenced by a wide number of situational factors. The resilience process should, therefore,
10 be considered in relation to specific stressors and the context in which they arise. Indeed,
11 Brown et al. (2015) found that the resilience process was context-specific and was influenced
12 by the type of adversity (e.g., career impacting injuries, funding issues, and performance
13 setbacks) being experienced. This provides a strong rationale for a deeper investigation of the
14 resilience process in response to distinct sporting stressors, such as batting slumps in cricket.

15 With this in mind, the purpose of the current study was to explore cricket batters’
16 experiences of performance slumps from the perspective of psychological resilience.
17 Specifically, we aimed to identify the psychosocial factors that facilitated resilience for these
18 individuals, and also those factors that proved detrimental to their ability to overcome
19 slumps.

20 **Method**

21 **Methodology and Philosophical Underpinning**

22 A qualitative approach was adopted due to the exploratory nature of resilience in a
23 previously under-represented group. Ungar (2003) proposed that qualitative methods can
24 make a substantial contribution to our understanding of resilience since this approach can be
25 particularly useful to highlight the sociocultural context in which resilience occurs. Data was

1 collected in two stages: a focus group followed by individual interviews. The rationale for
2 using this dual approach came from the desire to gain a rigorous and in-depth examination of
3 a relatively underexplored phenomenon (i.e., performance slumps in cricket). It has been
4 suggested that focus groups can facilitate new insights into phenomena as participants
5 explore similar experiences and shared understanding (Wilkinson, 2003). Conducting one-to-
6 one interviews provided further context to the emerging themes from the focus group and
7 facilitated understanding of personal experiences of performance slumps.

8 The present research was conducted from a critical realist perspective. Wiltshire
9 (2018) suggests critical realism offers a way of transcending persistent paradigmatic debates
10 that constrain the impact of research in the field of sport and exercise psychology by bridging
11 the gap between realist and constructivist–interpretivist approaches. Critical realism proposes
12 a stratified ontology that distinguishes between three domains of reality, these domains are
13 referred to as *the real*, *the actual*, and *the empirical* (Bhaskar, 1979). The real domain
14 contains relatively enduring biochemical, economic, and social structures that can generate
15 events and phenomena. These social structures exist and exert causal influence irrespective of
16 whether people are aware of them or not, and are thus ‘mind-independent’ (Parker, 1998).
17 The actual domain consists of events and phenomena that are generated when the causal
18 mechanisms of the real are activated (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson, & Norrie, 2013). In
19 the empirical domain, lived experiences of events are conceived of as being separate from the
20 actual events themselves. This is because critical realism argues that scientific activity is
21 inherently fallible and laden with subjective beliefs and values. There is no way of knowing
22 the world, therefore, except under particular, more or less transient historical and cultural
23 descriptions (Danermark, Ekstrom, & Jacobsen, 2005).

24 In describing a stratified ontology, critical realism recognises interactions between
25 relatively enduring ‘real’ social structures of reality *and* the ways that human beings engage

1 with, interpret, and make sense of the world (Elder-Vass, 2012). Thus, in the present study,
2 the participants' experiences are viewed as being subjective, but also real for them; and, at
3 the same time, their experiences are influenced by complex cultural and social factors that
4 exert causal influence (Christ, 2013). For example, in an environment such as an all-male
5 professional cricket team, socially constructed, but relatively enduring, ideas around
6 masculinity are likely to influence individual perceptions and experiences of stressors and
7 adversity (Douglas & Carless, 2009).

8 **Participants**

9 Purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to select and recruit participants. Players
10 were invited to take part if their primary role within their team was as a batsman, and they
11 had played at a high level of cricket with significant demands associated with performance
12 and competition for places. As such, players competing at semi-professional ('Minor
13 Counties') and professional level ('County Cricket') were invited to take part.

14 In the first stage of the study, four male participants aged between 22 and 28 years (M
15 $= 26.52$, $SD = 5.43$) took part in a focus group. The participants began playing cricket in
16 childhood and were currently playing at a semi-professional level. One of the participants in
17 the focus group had previous experience of playing at a professional level. The other three
18 had ambitions to play at a higher level and had been selected for training camps, or had trials
19 for professional teams, but had not been offered a contract. The sample was selected due to
20 their extensive playing experience at a high standard of cricket ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 1.87$ years),
21 therefore, they were able to provide detailed descriptions of the technical (e.g., skill
22 execution), psychological (e.g., cognitive processes/emotions) and practical (e.g., strategies
23 used to overcome slumps) aspects of batting performance slumps.

24 In the second phase of the study, ten male participants aged between 19 and 42 years
25 ($M = 27.12$, $SD = 7.97$) took part in one-to-one interviews. Eight of the participants were

1 active players currently contracted to professional teams in the UK, with professional
2 experience ranging from one to ten years ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 3.51$). Two participants were
3 recently retired professional cricketers each with over twelve years playing experience. The
4 final participant was currently playing semi-professional cricket overseas and had previous
5 experience of professional level cricket in the UK.

6 **Procedure**

7 After institutional ethics approval, the purposive sample (Patton, 2002) of experienced
8 cricketers was recruited from cricket clubs in northern England. Contact was made with each
9 individual to explain the scope and purpose of the focus group/interview and gain consent to
10 take part. All data was collected by the first author face-to-face except one individual
11 interview involving the overseas participant, which was conducted via video telephone
12 software.

13 Participants were informed at the beginning of the focus group/interview that the aim
14 of the study was to explore their experiences of 'losing form' (a common term in cricket). A
15 semi-structured focus group/interview guide was used during all stages of data collection. As
16 the purpose of the interviews was to explore each athlete's personal experiences, definitions
17 or descriptions of performance slumps were not provided. The questions were designed to
18 illicit information on the participants' own experiences of performance slumps (e.g., Can you
19 tell me about a time when you have experienced a significant drop in your performance?),
20 strategies used to overcome the slump(s) (e.g., Can you tell me how you responded to this?),
21 and perceptions of how the slump affected them as a player/person (e.g., What impact did this
22 have on you?"). Follow-up questions and probes were used in order to gain a deeper
23 understanding of the players' accounts and, in the case of the focus group, the players were
24 also encouraged to highlight and discuss shared understandings of slumps. The focus group
25 lasted 65 minutes and the individual interviews lasted between 37 and 75 minutes ($M = 51.5$,

1 *SD* = 12.1).

2 **Data Analysis**

3 The focus group was transcribed before the individual interviews took place and
4 helped to provide an initial understanding of the phenomenon. Once all interviews had been
5 completed, the focus group and interview data was combined for further analysis. This
6 enabled a more contextualised and comprehensive analysis to be conducted (Shaw & Yueng-
7 Hsiang Huang, 2005). The analysis was conducted using the guidelines for thematic analysis
8 presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). After the transcripts were thoroughly read several
9 times, initial coding was carried out inductively and aimed to explore the participants
10 subjective experience through their own perceptual filters (Christ, 2013). This led to
11 primarily semantic codes, however, latent content that moved beyond what was explicitly said
12 was also identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second stage of the analysis had more of a
13 deductive element (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008), using previous literature (e.g., Fletcher
14 & Sarkar, 2012) to inform the analysis process. The integration of subjective and objective
15 knowledge, a process that is referred to as retroduction by critical realists, was designed to
16 facilitate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of slumps in the context of
17 psychological resilience (Danermark et al., 2005). Moving toward the final structure of the
18 analysis, similar codes were clustered around a central organising concept to form themes,
19 before a second level of abstraction produced higher-order themes. The higher-order themes
20 were used to develop general dimensions, which structured the analysis around fundamental
21 ideas related to the players' perceptions and experiences of resilience.

22 **Research Quality**

23 Researchers using qualitative methods have been encouraged to present procedures
24 that promote 'rigour' in their data collection and analyses and 'trustworthiness' in their
25 findings. In this respect, a variety of research quality criteria have been developed (see,

1 performance slumps were “not performing to your potential” and “not being up to your usual
2 standards”. The exact duration of performance slumps varied from slump to slump and from
3 person to person, but generally the players related a slump to a period that went beyond four
4 or five innings of lower than expected performance.

5 To address our primary research aims, the data derived from the focus group and
6 interviews were collated and analysed to produce four general dimensions: appraisal of the
7 slump, controlling performance states, context of the slump, and personal protective factors.
8 The four general dimensions were comprised of ten higher-order themes that were
9 categorised from 27 lower-order themes. General dimensions, higher-order themes, and lower
10 order themes are presented in Figure 1. Findings are organised under each general dimension
11 and are presented below with illustrative examples from the data. All the names used in the
12 results are pseudonyms.

13 **Appraisal of the slump**

14 This dimension was related to the players’ evaluation and assessment of performance-
15 related stress when faced with an extended period of low scores. Appraisal of the slump
16 contained three higher-order themes: ‘maintaining a positive mind-set’, ‘causal attributions’,
17 and ‘challenge/threat appraisal’. Through the analysis of the data, it became clear that
18 extended periods of low scores were pertinent stressors for the professional cricketers since
19 their place in the team, and ultimately their livelihood, was dependant on them scoring runs.
20 A negative interpretation of stress often led to a loss of judgement, anger, and frustration,
21 making action to address the slump more difficult. However, there was a strong view that “a
22 positive mind-set” in the face of low scores could mitigate negative cognitive and emotional
23 responses. David, a player with experience of playing international cricket, described how he
24 worked with his coach to avoid putting a “label” on a period of low scores:

25 We’d try and stay away from the word ‘form’ and we’d try to talk about ‘mind-

1 set'...positive mind-set and thinking, discarding the last innings if it didn't go too
2 well and very much looking at the present to get them [emotions] as consistent as I
3 could.

4 Attributions for periods of low scores were also an important factor in the way that
5 players' viewed their experiences. When they were going through a slump the players' would
6 sometimes doubt and question their own ability. This stable, internal attribution increased
7 negative cognitive and emotional responses, and prevented the players from formulating
8 strategies to overcome their slump. In contrast, accepting that performance was cyclical and
9 slumps were "just part of the game" (i.e., an external and unstable attribution) helped to
10 reduce cognitive and emotional distress. Tony had played professional cricket for over 10
11 years and had developed a pragmatic attitude towards slumps: "they happen to us all, that's
12 professional cricket, that's sport, and you've got to recognise that, and just focus on the next
13 innings".

14 The players' challenge/threat appraisal was also a key factor in the resilience process.
15 All of the players said they felt the pressure of performing at an elite level and this was
16 magnified during a period of low scores. However, several players indicated that they were
17 able to embrace and thrive on the pressure they experienced when in a performance slump,
18 which helped them to increase their focus and strengthen their determination, as the following
19 quote from Robert illustrates:

20 Some people can thrive off them [slumps]. Pressure can make you more determined
21 and focussed, whereas other people might crumble when they are under pressure and
22 they do silly things when they are out there [batting]... I think for me, the pressure
23 gets me more focussed.

24 Central to the resilience process was the ability to view slumps as opportunities for
25 personal growth and learning. This helped the players to develop self-awareness and enabled

1 them to become better equipped to deal with future performance-related stress. Carl, a former
2 professional cricketer who took part in the focus group commented:

3 Rough patches are just as good as your better patches in a way, because it's teaching
4 you the game...because you're not thinking about your game when you're doing
5 well...it's your rough patches where you find out where your game is strong.

6 **Controlling performances states**

7 Controlling performances states related to the awareness of, and ability to master,
8 psychological processes *during* innings. This dimension was comprised of three higher-order
9 themes: 'controlling cognitive processes', 'maintaining focus', and 'regulating arousal'.

10 Controlling cognitive processes is the higher-order theme that refers to the players' attempts
11 to regain control of their performance by using a variety of cognitive-behavioural strategies,
12 such as best performance imagery, and positive self-talk. This was expressed in quotes such
13 as; "I try to visualise the performances when I've actually gone through a good run" and "I
14 try to get myself going...so I'll say to myself 'come on' and try talking myself up". Chris, a
15 first year professional player, described how he developed a particular motivational and
16 instructional cue phrase, "happy feet", during one particular performance slump that
17 reminded him to stay positive when batting. This allowed him to block out any negative
18 invasive thoughts and concentrate on the execution of his skills.

19 I talk to myself, say things like 'get busy', 'see the ball', but the big one is 'happy
20 feet', so I feel light on my feet. Yeah, 'happy feet', then I'm focussed and I know I'm
21 going to hit the ball there, I'm going to do that, and those sort of positive words help
22 me concentrate.

23 The importance of managing concentration levels and attention during innings was
24 also discussed by Martin, who played professionally for 12 years before his retirement. He
25 described how focussing on short term goals during slumps helped him to stay in the

1 moment, concentrate on what was required in the game situation, and do whatever it took for
2 him to ‘grind out’ a score for his team:

3 You break it down to each ball, and each ball you say I’m going to deliver my skills
4 here, just concentrate on every ball and just compete, just compete and think what
5 does this team need right now, that’s the most important thing.

6 ‘Regulating arousal’ concerns the importance of being able to access an optimum
7 state of personal readiness to perform. A couple of players described being under aroused if
8 they were experiencing a performance slump, such as Alan who said he “struggled to get
9 butterflies” after becoming so demotivated during a slump. However, the majority of players
10 described becoming over aroused during slumps, usually driven by desperation to get back to
11 how they had previously performed. Kevin described how he was so over aroused during a
12 slump “every ball felt like a massive thing” and “batting for half an hour felt like a day”, but
13 this experience had helped him to become more aware of his ideal performance state, and
14 better equipped him for future slumps:

15 I got to a point where I just couldn’t get myself up for it anymore because I thought
16 that was the right thing to do. I thought if I can get as up for it as I possibly can be,
17 even if my technique’s not quite right, then I’ll be alright. But in hindsight I should
18 have tried to do the opposite.....but at the time it was just hard to think like that, I
19 couldn’t think clearly...rather than now, I just stay calm, think clearly and that helps
20 me to focus a lot more and be able to concentrate.

21 **Personal protective factors**

22 Throughout the data analysis, it appeared that various individual differences and
23 personal characteristics influenced the ways in which the players dealt with performance
24 stressors related to their poor form and protected them from the potentially negative effects of
25 their experiences. This dimension consisted of two higher-order themes: ‘personal resources’,

1 and ‘awareness of strengths’. The personal resources that were facilitative for the resilience
2 process included determination, a strong work ethic, competitiveness, confidence, and
3 perceived social support. Enjoyment of and passion for cricket was cited by a number of
4 batsmen as playing an important role in their response to performance stressors, and often
5 acted as a powerful motivational resource behind positive behaviours and actions to address a
6 series of low scores. For example, Matt, one of the established professional players, said:

7 I just enjoy playing cricket, it’s something I’ve been brought up on and it’s something
8 I would like to be involved in for as long as possible. If that means dragging myself
9 down the nets, or improving my fitness to get me through a bad run, then so be it.

10 Confidence was one of the most salient individual differences in the data analysis.

11 Players viewed confidence as a protective resource against stress, but acknowledged
12 that they were vulnerable to a drop in confidence after a run of low scores. Despite relying on
13 good performances as a source of confidence, there was wide recognition amongst the players
14 that breaking the link between their performances and their confidence was the key to
15 mitigating the negative effects of stress during slumps. Alex, a particularly insightful player
16 with over 10 years’ experience in English ‘county’ cricket, described the following:

17 I try to link my confidence to my effort, not my performance. So I’m doing everything
18 I can to give myself the best chance of performing, and effort being the measure of
19 your confidence level would give you more stability, because with the best will in the
20 world, if you just base your confidence on your performance, it’s just the nature of the
21 game, you could be in the best ‘nick’ [form] of your life and still get nought if you get
22 a good ball.

23 The higher order theme ‘awareness of strengths’ was comprised of the lower-order
24 themes: ‘cricket knowledge, ‘back to basics’, and ‘batting with a plan’. These themes
25 captured the players’ view that a deep knowledge of their personal cricketing skills and their

1 personal strengths helped to protect them against the negative effect of stress that slumps can
2 cause by giving them a basis to develop specific strategies to address their loss of form.
3 These strategies were employed in practice and in games and enabled them to quickly
4 rediscover their expected levels of performance. This helped to minimise the “poor
5 judgement”, “loose shots” and the “mental blocks” that were identified as symptomatic of
6 batting slumps.

7 Crucially for the resilience process, the experience of overcoming a performance
8 slump often helped the players to become more aware of their personal strengths, and cricket
9 skills. This learning and sense of growth allowed them to develop a method of batting that
10 they could rely on during periods of low scoring and, in the longer term, facilitated more
11 consistent performance. Gary, a first year professional, discussed how experiencing a slump
12 in professional cricket for the first time helped him to improve:

13 I wasn't really aware of where I was strong before...but I've sort of got my game plan
14 against spinners and my game plan against seamers [types of bowling] now that just
15 works for me. But in the past I'd not really thought about it, I'd just gone out and
16 batted and not really thought about what I was trying to achieve.

17 The process of reflection evident in Gary's quote above can also be seen in the
18 following quote from Matt when discussing how he reflected on the cognitive, emotional, and
19 practical aspect of batting during slumps. This appears to have given him some clarity and
20 perspective on his performance (e.g., reframing slumps as “ebbs and flows”) that helped him
21 to become a better player. It is interesting to note, however, that this process of reflection was
22 not easy and Matt needed support to facilitate the process.

23 My own personal struggle was the ability to just replicate the mental processes more
24 consistently, so I would do some reflection so I knew my thoughts, my feelings, and
25 the outcomes I wanted as I go into the next session. But on my own I find it very

1 difficult and that's where John (sport psychology consultant) helped me to get a few
2 things down in that period... I think that experience was vital and the longer that
3 goes on the more you begin to notice the perhaps ebbs and flows of performance and
4 assuming that you get the opportunity to speak to the right people or you are
5 reflecting in the right ways you should become a better batter for them (slump).

6 The type and timing of social support was a salient theme throughout. All but one of
7 the players discussed the importance of a trusting relationship in their life, which helped them
8 to keep their slump experiences into perspective. Often, support came from people not
9 directly involved in the day-to-day aspects of playing cricket, and conversations were not
10 always related to the players' performance issues. In the following quote, Mike talks about
11 the importance of his relationship with his father during slumps. The idea of "family time"
12 invokes a sense that Mike feels cared for and safe in this environment, and interactions with
13 his Dad helped him to feel more confident about his situation.

14 If I'm not performing well then I speak to my father, family time. It doesn't have to
15 be cricket related... I will just go and speak to my dad just about life or other
16 things...it's important to have someone you can go to when you are going through
17 bad form, whether that's a family member, a friend, someone that you are very close
18 to that you trust...my Dad will just talk to me and give me a lot of confidence he just
19 says to me you know 'keep going', 'you're good enough', it give me that inner
20 confidence because he knows me, he's known me all my life.

21 Some of the players discussed how a strong relationship with their coach and senior
22 teammates facilitated informational support regarding specific technical aspects of batting,
23 which offered new insight into the perceived issue. However, a number of players found
24 accessing social support within the team environment more difficult. This was highlighted by
25 the following quote from John, who spent almost ten years as a professional cricketer:

1 You had to be perceived to be a man, you know, you couldn't say I'm struggling
2 here...you couldn't really show any weaknesses otherwise you'd be perceived as
3 being soft. I would have never have had that conversation with a senior player
4 because they would have thought 'he's soft, get him out of the team, chuck him out'.

5 **Context of the slump**

6 This dimension refers to external factors, largely outside the players' control, that
7 influenced their slump experience and the resilience process. Specifically, 'timing of the
8 slump' and 'career status' were the two higher-order themes. The timing of the slump during
9 the season was particularly important for the players' ability to mobilise the personal
10 resources that protected them against performance stress. This was related to the nature of the
11 cricket season where a player may be playing five or six days per week for six months.
12 Players experiencing slumps during the middle of the season often found it difficult to deal
13 with their performance-related stress and were often "dropped" (deselected) after continued
14 poor performance. In comparison, those suffering a performance slump toward the end of the
15 season were in a better position to "think rationally" and were able to successfully implement
16 strategies to overcome their slump.

17 Career status also had a major influence on players' capacity to demonstrate
18 resilience. The players described lacking the resources (e.g., confidence) to deal with initial
19 experiences of slumps in their early career stages, but also lacking the motivation to deal with
20 the stress of slumps toward the end of their careers, when they had already achieved many of
21 their cricketing goals. One of the retired players commented:

22 Once the next slump came, I almost didn't have the energy for it. I thought, 'I don't
23 think I can do this again', because it took an enormous commitment for me to get
24 myself in a place where my performance was good enough.

25 Career status was closely linked to the theme of life experience. That is, the more

1 experienced/older players were able to place their sporting difficulties in the context of the
2 things that mattered to them the most. This reduced their perceptions of performance related
3 stress. For example, one of the retired players talked about how a family member's illness led
4 him not only to overcome a slump, but then enabled him to play some of his best cricket of
5 his career:

6 My wife's mother had been very, very sick so I was having a tough professional
7 period but I was having a much more difficult personal period and my cricket
8 became of secondary importance to me, until then it was everything. It was the first
9 time in my life that a personal thing had put the whole thing into perspective for me,
10 and what happened? I got runs. I'd just got this mentally that I'd got to do what's
11 right for the people close to me and I'm not going to worry too much about it
12 (slump) and for a time that's when I played my best cricket, and it was largely due to
13 that gravitas of the situation with my wife's mum and the situation just putting the
14 whole thing into perspective.

15 Discussion

16 Via a combination of qualitative methods (i.e., focus group and interviews), the
17 purpose of the current study was to explore the experiences of performance slumps of expert
18 cricket batsmen from the perspective of psychological resilience. In doing so, the present
19 findings identified the psychosocial factors that facilitated resilience, and also explored those
20 factors that proved detrimental to the participants' ability to overcome slumps.

21 Overall, the findings indicate that overcoming slumps was associated with a
22 psychosocial process that allowed players to access and promote personal resources in order
23 to protect against the potential negative effect of stressors related to an extended period of
24 low scoring. This enabled the players to respond to a loss of form in a facilitative way by
25 successfully implementing strategies that enabled them to return to expected levels of

1 performance. Furthermore, this process helped the players to strengthen and acquire
2 technical, tactical, and psychosocial resources that could protect them against future slumps.

3 The present findings offer a new way of conceptualising responses to performance
4 slumps that move beyond the coping perspective that has dominated previous research.
5 Although studies on coping with performance slumps (e.g., Madden et al., 1990; Prapavessis
6 & Grove, 1995) have highlighted the different strategies that athletes use to manage their
7 performance-related stress, they overlook important aspects of the stress-performance
8 relationship. More specifically, coping is related to the selection of strategies to manage an
9 event *after* it has been perceived to be stressful and can include both adaptive and
10 maladaptive responses (cf. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). In contrast, the present findings
11 demonstrate the importance of the players' initial appraisals of their slump. That is, when
12 players were able to disassociate themselves from the 'numbers' (i.e., their low scores) they
13 were able to see a slump as "just part of the game" or the "ebbs and flows of performance".
14 This enabled them to maintain physical, technical, and tactical functioning, and this
15 facilitated a return to their accepted levels of performance. This was discussed by, for
16 example, Tony who avoided putting a "label" on a period of low scores in order to maintain a
17 positive mind-set and a more consistent emotional response to his slump.

18 The importance placed on positive appraisals of potential stressors in the present
19 findings supports extant models concerning the stress process in sport. For example, the
20 theory of challenge and threat states in athletes (Jones, Meijen, McCarthy, & Sheffield, 2009)
21 outlines how athletes' respond to competitive situations through a process that determines
22 challenge and threat states. A challenge state arises when appraisals of competitive demands
23 and available resources to meet these demands result in high self-efficacy, a perception of
24 control over the situation, and desire to demonstrate competence. Therefore, an athlete
25 experiencing a challenge state is able to maintain motivational, attentional and physical

1 functioning despite potentially threatening situations like, for example, competing during a
2 performance slump.

3 For several of the players in the present study, central to the appraisals of slumps was
4 the ability to see them as an opportunity for personal development and growth. Overcoming
5 lower than expected performances involved interactions between cognitive, affective, and
6 relational processes that enable the players to evaluate a period of low scoring as an
7 experience that could have potential benefits. This was demonstrated, for example, by the
8 experiences of Carl, who commented that he saw “rough patches” as the opportunity to learn,
9 grow and become a better player through a greater understanding of his game. This finding is
10 line with the findings of Fletcher and Sarkar (2012), who found that Olympic champions had
11 a tendency to see stressors and adversity as opportunities to demonstrate mastery and develop
12 skills to give them a competitive edge.

13 The present findings offer broad support to the grounded theory of psychological
14 resilience and optimal sport performance (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012), in that the process of
15 resilience is influenced by a constellation of psychological factors (positive personality,
16 motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support) that influences athletes’
17 challenge appraisal and metacognitions. What the present findings add to this perspective is
18 closer analysis of the process of resilience gained from exploring the experiences of a specific
19 stressor and a specific sport (i.e., batting slumps in cricket). For example, regarding the
20 players’ meta-cognitions, a key message from the current findings relates to the players’
21 ability to use reflective thinking to evaluate their performances and develop effective
22 strategies to address their run of low scores. The process of resilience was facilitated when
23 players were able to reflect on previous positive performances and current performance
24 difficulties to gain a comprehensive understanding of the technical, tactical, and
25 psychological aspects of their ‘loss of form’. For example, Gary’s ability to recognise that he

1 needed to change his approach to batting when facing different types of bowling. A higher
2 level of evaluation and assessment fostered feelings of control and mastery, and helped the
3 players to initiate successful strategies to shorten the duration and depth of their slump.

4 The present research supports work by Andersen, Hansen, and Haeren (2015) who
5 suggested that elite athletes have four different styles of reflection, with some styles more
6 conducive to productive learning than others. Andersen et al. (2015) argued that the most
7 desirable style of reflection involves a rich appraisal of specific situational demands, the
8 ability to put to one side previously held assumptions and beliefs, and the awareness to react
9 to specific feedback signals with appropriate actions. Thus, purposeful reflection can
10 accelerate learning by providing people with a means to generate self-awareness and
11 empowering them to implement change (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014b).

12 The cognitive processes involved in resilience against performance slumps were often
13 related to the players' explanatory style. Specifically, an optimistic explanatory style was
14 facilitative for resilience. This is consistent with previous findings on slumps (e.g., Ball,
15 2013), but extends resilience research by identifying the specific attributions made by high
16 level cricket batsman in relation to a specific performance-related stressor. To illustrate,
17 players who had an optimistic explanatory style recognised that periods of low scoring were a
18 natural part of a performance cycle. The players were always striving for a consistent level of
19 high level performance, but they recognised that this was difficult to maintain. Moreover,
20 they were aware of a multitude of factors that could influence their performance that were
21 outside of their control (e.g., good performance by the opposition, poor officiating, and
22 adverse playing conditions). Thus, players demonstrating resilience viewed low scores as
23 'blips', had a more optimistic assessment of their ability to overcome their performance-
24 related stressor, and were therefore confident they would quickly return to their best form.
25 This enabled the players to remain distanced and detached from the negative aspects of their

1 situation, allowing them to mitigate emotional distress, and remain focussed on strategies to
2 overcome their current loss of form (Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015).

3 Relatively little attention has been given to the specific psychological processes
4 involved in resilience during the physical act of performance (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012;
5 Brown et al., 2015). Thus, the findings from the current study offer some unique insights into
6 the psychological performance states related to the experience of slumps in cricket. Although
7 ideal performance states were highly idiosyncratic, players that had positive expectations of
8 success, control over their cognitive and emotional reactions, and feelings of being relaxed
9 yet energised, were best placed to overcome performance slumps (Harmison, 2006). For
10 example, Martin discussed that even when he struggled to execute his skills fluently, the
11 ability to regulate his performance state through cognitive-behavioural strategies allowed him
12 to ‘grind-out’ an innings. These experiences often encouraged the learning and utilisation of
13 new skills and approaches to batting that offered protection from stress, and equipped the
14 players with additional knowledge that could be utilised when the next run of low scores
15 came.

16 Similar to previous findings (e.g., Brown et al., 2015; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Galli
17 & Vealey, 2008) social support played a vital role in the process of resilience for these cricket
18 players. Social support has been identified as a key factor for the well-being and sporting
19 success of athletes (e.g., Freeman & Rees, 2010), and the players in the present research
20 discussed the importance of emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support. The
21 players often discussed the details of the specific types of support they received; it was the
22 way that this support led to a more positive appraisal of their situation that influenced the
23 resilience process. For example, the support Matt received from his sport psychology
24 consultant helped him to reframe slumps as natural “ebbs and flows” of the game.
25 Furthermore, as demonstrated by Mike when he discussed the importance of have a caring

1 and trusting relationship with his father, perceptions of support from family members often
2 helped the players to place their performance slumps in perspective, reaffirmed that they were
3 loved and cared for regardless of how they performed in sport. This helped them to approach
4 their slump with a greater sense of self-esteem and confidence that often facilitated resilience.

5 It is important to note that some of the players highlighted difficulties in accessing
6 social support and this would often hinder the resilience process. This appeared to be related
7 to traditional masculine attitudes within an all-male team environment and the reluctance to
8 ask for support. This supports research from Mitchell, Neil, Wadey, and Hanton (2009) who
9 found that men recovering from serious sporting injuries tended to perceive social support as
10 less available than women in similar circumstances. This is congruent with studies from the
11 healthcare literature, which suggests that men can face barriers as receivers and providers of
12 support during times of stress, often linked to difficulties in expressing feelings without
13 undermining masculine identity expectations (Love, Thompson, & Knapp, 2014).

14 **Practical Implications**

15 Recently, Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) presented an evidence-based approach to
16 developing psychological resilience that seeks to promote the personal qualities, facilitative
17 environment, and challenge mind-set that enables high level performers to withstand
18 pressure. This framework, alongside the context-specific knowledge provided in the present
19 research, could be used by coaches and practitioners working within elite cricket to
20 implement individual and team-level resilience training and education programs. These
21 strategies could be part of a holistic approach to help players develop and foster the resilient
22 characteristics and processes that can protect them from the potential negative effects of
23 stress during periods of low scoring.

24 Specifically, the ability to positively evaluate and interpret pressure (challenge state) -
25 that appeared to be so crucial for resilience in the present research - could be developed by

1 implementing pressure inurement training (PIT; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Pressure training
2 systematically manipulates the training demands an individual is facing (e.g., by introducing
3 constraints on the rules of play) and/or the salience of an activity (e.g., by manipulating the
4 players' perceptions of being judged) to help athletes engage with potential performance
5 stressors. The aim is to support athletes to become 'comfortable feeling uncomfortable' in
6 situations that simulate their competitive environment and help them to develop strategies for
7 self-regulation. Given that self-regulation during batting performances was a key aspect of
8 the resilience process for the cricketer in the present research, a PIT approach may help
9 players to identify, develop, and test their personal strategies in a proactive approach to
10 developing resilience.

11 In the present study, an acute awareness of one's own tactical and technical cricketing
12 strengths was a key resource that protected the players from the potential negative effects of
13 stressors related to their low scoring. Therefore, personal qualities to promote resilience could
14 be enhanced using a strengths-based approach to coaching (see, Ludlam, Butt, Bawden,
15 Lindsey, & Maynard, 2016). This may encourage a heightened awareness of strengths that
16 could foster a subjective feeling of control and mastery over their experiences, and enable
17 players to formulate specific practice and performance strategies to overcome their slump.
18 The specific techniques used to illicit players' strengths could include helping them to
19 identify their desired role within the team as part of traditional performance profiling (Butler
20 & Hardy, 1992), and techniques from appreciative enquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros,
21 2008) that seek to explore 'high-point experiences' (e.g., best performances) and 'possible
22 selves' to highlight relevant skills and personal beliefs associated with perceived strengths.

23 Support for strengths-based approaches comes from research that suggests that
24 developing athletes' 'super-strengths' is a useful technique to build robust sport confidence
25 (Beaumont, Maynard, & Butt, 2015), which, in the present study, was an important attribute

1 that helped to facilitate the resilience process. Moreover, wider research from positive
2 psychology indicates that people who use their strengths more frequently are more likely to
3 achieve their goals (Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010), have higher
4 self-confidence, experience less stress, and are more resilient than individuals that use their
5 strengths less often (Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2015).

6 When developing suitable interventions, the findings from the present study also
7 suggest that it is vital to take into account the environmental factors that influence the
8 resilience process. For example, when the players in this study demonstrated resilience during
9 slumps, they perceived that appropriate social support was available to them. This helped
10 them to withstand the pressure of the slump they were experiencing and underpinned their
11 ability to maintain their sense of self-esteem. Therefore, ensuring that athletes feel like they
12 are supported can help to promote the facilitative environment that appears to be so crucial to
13 the processes involved in resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Specific attention should be
14 given to athletes support structure within and outside the immediate sporting environment.
15 Family and close friends appear to be particular important for a sense of wellbeing since the
16 close bonds they hold with athletes helps to reinforce feelings of self-worth.

17 Regarding social networks within sport, team structures should enable and encourage
18 players to develop positive relationships with teammates and support staff to create
19 opportunities to share experience and knowledge that can be drawn on during difficult times
20 (Morgan, Fletcher, & Sarkar, 2013, 2015; 2017). Moreover, given the findings of this study,
21 particular attention should be given to the masculine attitudes that may be present within a
22 male dominated environment that may undermine support structures and prevent athletes
23 from seeking the support that they would like and potentially need. Previous research has also
24 pointed to the possibility that elite male performers project 'bravado' as a means to obscure
25 any issues and underlying concerns that they may have about their performances and status

1 within a team (e.g., Wei-Ong, McGregor & Daley, 2018). It is therefore important that the
2 culture within a team challenges these attitudes and behaviours and promotes an empathic
3 and supportive environment. A potential intervention approach to achieve this is through
4 Personal-Disclosure Mutual-Sharing (PDMS). PDMS involves individuals publicly
5 disclosing personal stories and experiences to members of their team (Holt & Dunn, 2006).
6 This process may provide the means for developing trust, empathy, and team cohesion
7 (Evans, Slater, Turner, & Barker, 2013), guard against the formation of masculine norms and
8 promote the supportive environment that facilitates resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016)

9 **Strengths and Limitations**

10 To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the
11 resilience process in relation to a specific sporting stressor (i.e., a performance slump). By
12 investigating the resilience process in this way, the study has offered context-specific
13 knowledge to existing models of resilience in sport (e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012), and has
14 proposed specific strategies that may protect cricket batsmen against the potential negative
15 effects of stress in the face of performance slumps. However, these findings should be
16 evaluated in the context of the study's limitations. In particular, each player gave a single
17 account of their slump experiences, either in the focus group or interview, which may not be
18 sufficient to fully understand the dynamic processes involved in resilience. Furthermore, the
19 players' discussions about their experiences were wide ranging and diverse, with some
20 focussing on slumps from some years in the past and others discussing more recent
21 experiences. It is possible therefore that those reflecting on more recent slumps,
22 predominantly those in earlier in their career, may have lacked the perspective to fully
23 appreciate what they had learned from their experience.

24 **Future Research**

25 Although the focus on performance slumps was a potential strength of the present

1 study, stressors in elite sport do not occur in isolation and it is common for athletes to
2 experience a number of competitive, personal, and organisational stressors in combination
3 (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Research on resilience in mainstream psychology has
4 distinguished between resilience against long-term chronic adversity, termed a ‘trajectory of
5 emergent resilience’, and acute traumatic events, referred to as a ‘trajectory of minimal-
6 impact resilience’ (Bonanno & Diminich, 2013). With this in mind, research on resilience in
7 sport may wish to examine how resilience against enduring competitive and organisational
8 stressors interacts with, and influences, resilience against acute personal stressors (cf. Sarkar
9 & Fletcher, 2014a). This type of research could be operationalised with longitudinal designs
10 to provide a greater understanding of the dynamic process involved in resilience and the
11 temporal nature of the development of resilient qualities.

12 **Conclusion**

13 The current study has provided insight into the resilience process involved in batting
14 performance slumps in elite cricket. Findings indicated that the players’ subjective appraisal
15 of the slump, personal protective factors, ability to control performance states, combined with
16 the context of the slump (e.g., timing of the slump and career status), were important factors
17 that enabled cricket batters to not only overcome slumps but to learn and grow from them.
18 Reflecting on slump experiences served to strengthen existing protective resources and
19 provide new ways of shielding players from performance-related stressors. Applied strategies
20 that may be useful to develop resilience include a strengths-based approach to practice and
21 performance that could increase the awareness and utility of an individual’s unique tactical
22 and technical skills. Future research in sport should take a holistic approach to the study of
23 resilience to explore how overcoming long-term chronic stressors (e.g., competitive,
24 organisational) interact with, and influences, acute stressors (e.g., performance stressors).

25

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RESILIENCE IN ELITE CRICKET

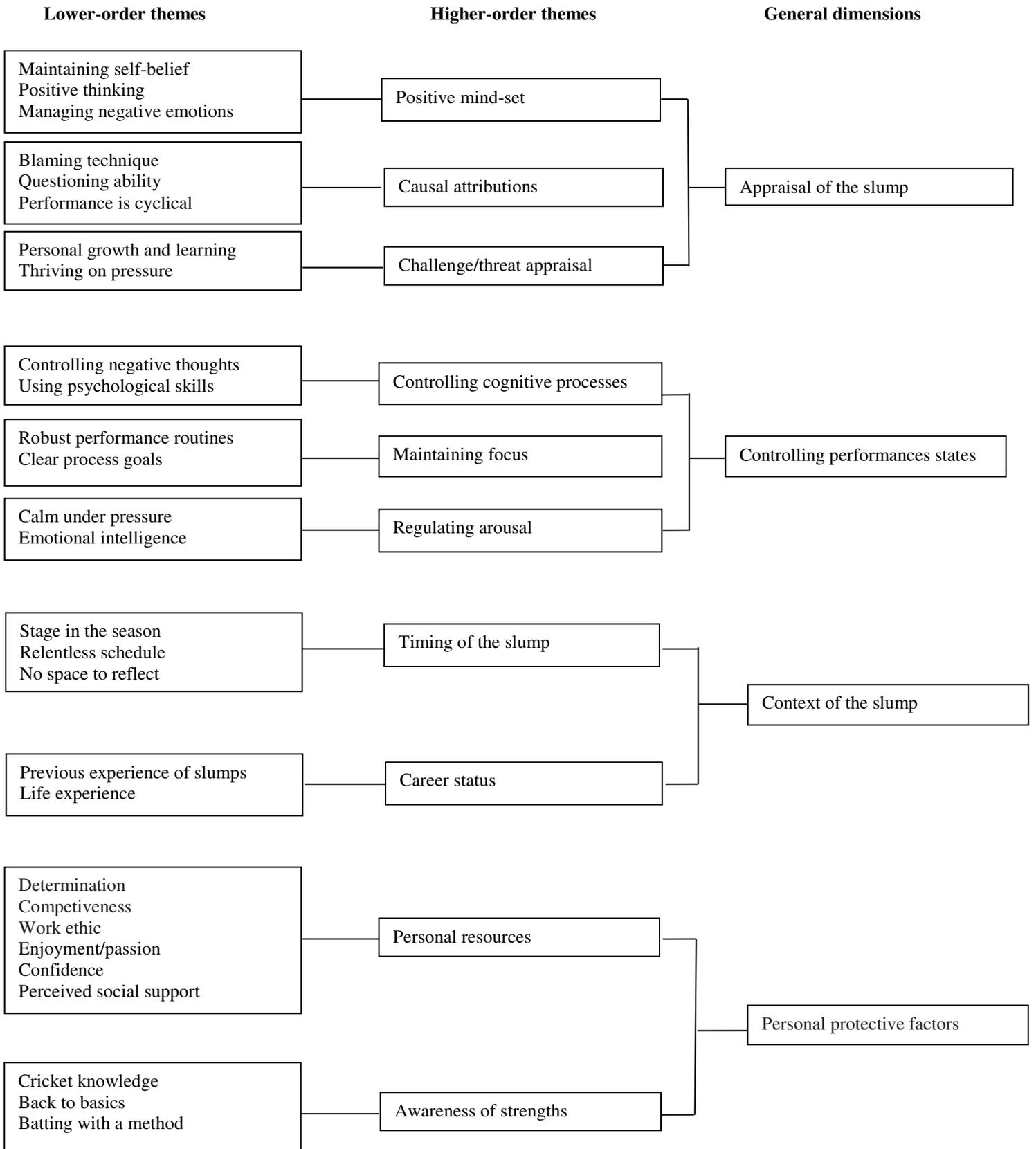


Figure 1. Factors that contribute to the resilience process during batting performance slumps in elite cricket