Original Article

How do elite soccer coaches prepare their players and teams psychologically?

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Abstract:

The aim of the present study was to examine the psychological preparation strategies often used by soccer coaches with their players and teams, as well as to ascertain where and why they employed these strategies. Thirteen elite coaches from Portuguese Premier Soccer League clubs were interviewed. Globally, results showed that the participants used a considerable set of strategies and activities with psychological effects in training, competition, and outside these environments. However they exhibited a limited use of psychological techniques, specifically in the practice setting. Overall, the findings seem to suggest that the participants mostly based their psychological intervention on their vast experience as coach, as well as during their soccer playing careers. Practical implications and future directions to enhance the psychological preparation of soccer players and teams are discussed.

Key words: beach psychological preparation, psychological techniques, Portuguese elite soccer teams, qualitative study, coach's perspectives.

Introduction

Nowadays, the importance of psychological preparation in the development of athletic performance is well known. According to Gould and Maynard (2009), psychological preparation can be viewed in several ways. For these authors, it can be broadly defined as anything athletes do to prepare themselves for sport involvement, or in a more specific manner in terms of techniques used by athletes to ready themselves for specific athletic tasks (e.g. visualization to aid in the execution of a balance beam routine). In the current study, psychological preparation is defined as “those cognitive, emotional, and behavioural strategies athletes and teams use to arrive at an ideal performance state or condition that is related to optimal psychological states and peak performance either for competition or practice” (Gould, Flett, & Bean, 2009, p. 53). Based on the work of Vealey (1988), a distinction is also made between psychological skills or states the athlete is trying to achieve (e.g. stress management, concentration, self-confidence and motivation) and the methods or cognitive or behavioural strategies the athletes use to arrive at these states or skills (e.g. goal-setting, imagery, relaxation and self-talk).

Research has shown that athletes of several sports can benefit from the use of psychological techniques to improve sport performance (Frey, Laguna, & Ravizza, 2003; Rogerson & Hrycaiko, 2002; Thelwell & Greenlees, 2003). Goal-setting, relaxation, imagery and self-talk are the four psychological techniques more often referred to in the sport psychology literature. However, in order for athletes' to successfully apply these and other psychological techniques they need to learn the basic principles of each technique and be taught the most effective way to use them. Bertollo, Saltarelli, and Robazza (2009) stated, that some athletes may be helped to learn, refine, and practice psychological techniques aimed at gaining personal control of debilitating states and improving psychophysical conditions that facilitate performance. Psychological skills can be developed by elite level performers in formal settings when, for example, they decide to undertake sport psychology consultancy, or in informal ways through the influence of significant persons, such as coaches, (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002).

The coach is the manager of the team and therefore has great influence in the psychological development of their athletes and teams. According to Gould and Maynard (2009), they facilitate this development in several ways, including emphasizing certain things such as hard work, discipline, having fun, having characteristics that facilitated athlete trust, providing encouragement and support, directly teaching or fostering psychological skills, and by understanding the athletes. Furthermore, coaches have the power to allow or not allow the interference of external collaborators (e.g. sport psychologists) in their work with their team and athletes (Morris, 1997).

Psychological preparation and sport psychology were identified as coaching actions that had helped the athletes and teams to perform to their maximum potential (Gould & Maynard, 2009). Accordingly, coaching literature emphasizes the importance of integrating psychology preparation into the coaching process (Côté,

Bruner, Erickson, Strachan, & Fraser-Thomas, 2010; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Gould, Chung, Smith, & White, 2006). Coaches must believe in the value of psychological training, understand their principles and apply them on a regular basis in the coaching plan. Although research on psychological preparation strategies used by coaches, has not been studied as extensively as other areas in sport psychology, it has not been completely ignored (Bloom, Stevens, & Wickwire, 2003; Côté, Whitney & Sedgwick, 2003; Gould, Damarjian, & Medbery, 1999; Sedgwick, Côté & Dowd, 1997). For example, Gould and colleagues (1999) found that concentration drills, simulating pressure, imagery, goal-setting, enhanced motivation, thought stopping, initiating team activities, discussion and teaching about mistakes, and breathing and relaxation techniques were some of the specific exercises/strategies used by elite junior tennis coaches with their players. Although the aforementioned investigations offer valuable insight into the psychological skills and techniques used by coaches with athletes, a more detailed understanding of this area of research is necessary, namely regarding where and for what purposes coaches use them.

At this level, it should be noted that the implementation of psychological preparation strategies (and its' consequent effectiveness), needs to consider the requirements of each athlete as well as the specific sport demands. Different athletes and different sports required different things from their coaches at different points in their careers. This emphasized the importance of coaches reading athletes' psychological needs and using different approaches at different times and in different situations (Gould & Maynard, 2009). In line with this, Taylor (1995) developed a conceptual model that describes several critical aspects in the development of competitive psychological preparation strategies. Specifically, the model emphasizes the importance of understanding the individual needs of athletes, the particular demands of sports, and integrating this information into an effective intervention package. Integration of this information enables consultants to develop customized competitive psychological preparation strategies that will optimally prepare each individual athlete for the particular sport settings in which they compete.

Despite elite soccer coaches being the center of public interest and media attention worldwide, little is known about their actions and attitudes regarding the psychological preparation of their players and teams. For Potrac, Jones, and Cushion (2007) there is a certain degree of "mystique" surrounding the top-level soccer coaches and the means and methods that they utilize in their respective quests to produce successful soccer teams.

Although international literature supported the positive influence of psychological techniques on soccer players' performance (e.g. Johnson, Hrycaiko, Johnson & Halas, 2004; Thelwell, Greenlees & Weston, 2006, 2010), there are a paucity of studies concerning the specific strategies employed by soccer coaches to prepare their players and teams psychologically. This gap in literature is even more critical on a national level. Indeed, to our knowledge, no previous research has focused on this specific research topic. Knowing the psychological preparation strategies used by coaches with their players and teams can bring important insights about the relevance of psychological intervention in Portuguese soccer.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the repertoire of psychological preparation strategies used by Portuguese elite soccer coaches with their players and teams. Additionally, we intended to examine where and for what purpose they use these strategies.

Due to the in-depth nature of the question being asked (i.e., what, where, and why), a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. Through the use of qualitative methodology, we believed our findings could bring a new and in-depth vision to this phenomenon and be useful to provide tools for reflection about psychological intervention in the context of Portuguese soccer.

Method

Participants

Thirteen male professional soccer head coaches composed the sample of this study. Their ages ranged between 43 and 63 and their experience as soccer coaches ranged from 10 to 29 years. The sample was selected based on the three following criteria: i) have worked, or currently work with "elite-level" athletes' (Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005), ii) be employed by their respective governing bodies of sport (national squads) or by professional clubs (Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008) and iii) had a minimum of ten years of soccer coaching experience (Bloom, Durand-Bush, & Salmela, 1997; Sedgwick et al., 1997).

All of the participants held coach positions in Portuguese Soccer Premier League clubs (one of the top 10 European Soccer Leagues). They also had the highest level of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) coaching qualification: UEFA Pro License. For most participants (n=9) these courses were the only source of sport psychology education. On the other hand, four of the coaches had academic courses which contained Sport Psychology modules.

Interview guide

An interview guide was developed in accordance with the specific purposes of the current study. Three pilot interviews were conducted with three professional soccer assistant coaches. Minor amendments to the questions were made to the appropriateness of the probe and elaboration questions. As a result, the final interview guide was comprised of three sections. The first section included demographic information and other

introductory comments. The second section composed the main body of the interview and focused on the psychological preparation strategies. Here the coaches were asked to identify and explain the psychological preparation strategies that they employed in training, competition and outside these two locations. In this section the coaches were also asked about the intended outcomes with the application of each mentioned strategy. The third and final section of the interview provided the opportunity for any final comments and summary questions from both the interviewer and interviewee.

The interview guide (available from the first author) was used to standardize the interviews and to minimize bias.

Procedures

All of the participants took part in a semi-structured interview lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. Each interview was conducted face to face by the first author who had previous experience as an assistant soccer coach in the Portuguese Premier League and was therefore familiar with the experiences and terminology used by the participants. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) this was one method of ensuring the trustworthiness of the data collection. The data were compiled in an environment comfortable for the participant. Nine of the 13 interviews took place in the coaches' offices before or after a training session. Of the remaining interviews, three were conducted in the coach's home, and one in a hotel room.

Data analysis

Interviews were analyzed in a process of inductive-deductive content analysis (Patton, 2002), which consisted of several steps. First, interviews were transcribed, read and reread by the first author in order to become completely familiar with the content. Second, raw data were identified and coded. Different levels of coding were developed to refine categories until saturation of data was reached. First-order subthemes, second-order subthemes and general dimensions were established according to a progressive level of higher abstraction. Next, in order to establish trustworthiness, all findings were presented and discussed with another author to serve as the "devil advocate" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). After discussion, different suggestions were presented, changes were made as appropriate and a final consensus was reached. Finally, the first author checked all the findings again in depth to provide a validity check.

Results

The inductive-deductive analysis highlighted two general dimensions emerging from 65 raw data themes mentioned by the elite coaches. The dimensions were abstracted from 5 second-order subthemes and these from 14 first-order subthemes. The general dimensions are represented in figures 1-2. Frequency analysis and representative quotations from the transcripts are interspersed amid the results to clarify the emergent themes

Activities, exercises and strategies used by the coaches and from which they derive psychological effects

The first dimension was related with a group of activities, exercises and strategies designed and applied by the coaches to have psychological effects in their players and teams. Forty-two raw data themes comprised this dimension and three second order themes were used to define it (Figure 1).

Participants revealed using several exercises and strategies with psychological effects in a training setting. Of these, coaches' speech with the team (n=13) and players (n=12) were clearly the strategies most often mentioned by the participants. For example one coach said:

For me, the speech with the players during the week (in training sessions) is the best form to prepare the players for the competition. My vast experience lets me identify the psychological state of my team and my players. Based on this information I talk individually with my players in order to regulate their psychological state.

All of the participants considered the coaches' speech during the training sessions, as a great way to enhance the psychological skills of their players and teams. For example, some coaches revealed using this specific strategy in training to increase the confidence and the motivation of their players.

In the first session training after a game I always speak to my players, not just about the game but also in order to prepare them psychologically for the next game...for example, when we've lost two or three games consecutively, I have a positive speech that increases the players confidence and motivation...I tell them they won't forget how to play one day to another...we should say that sometimes not training in the field is the best training. If the players are not prepared psychologically, they won't be able to train hard in the field.

Other exercises and strategies employed in training from which coaches derive psychological effects included, tactical exercises, feedback, competitive games/exercises, press conference (after the last training before the game), fun games, open exercises, hard physical work, evidence of cheerfulness at training sessions, respect for the players, training at different locations, free period at the end of the session and open leadership.

Figure 1. Activities, exercises and strategies used by the soccer coaches with their players and teams, and from which they derive psychological effects

Note: The number following each raw data theme and first order subthemes indicates the number of participants who reported them.

These set of exercises and strategies were applied in training by the majority of the coaches, in order to enhance several psychological skills (e.g. increase confidence and motivation, improve focus and promoting team cohesion) of their players and teams.

For example, one coach reported creating scenarios of game environments to improve the focus of their players, as illustrated in the following quote:

And when we take the players to the beach, we are also training their concentration. Usually, in the summer the beach is full of people, and as people have the possibility of being close to our team, they take pictures, make noise, call the players, etc...; and this is a good way of improve athletes focus . In a scenario where several factors disturb their attention, they must have the ability to focus on the task and to ignore all of these outside factors.

The thirteen participants of this study also point out the use of a considerable set of strategies in competition to influence their players and teams psychologically. As with the training environment, the coaches' speech with the team (n=13) and with the players (n=19) were again the strategies most mentioned by the coaches. The next comment shows the former strategy in competition setting: "A frequent psychological preparation strategy that I use in competition is the pep talk, a speech with the team...for me this is the best strategy to prepare the team for the game".

Also in this location (competition), the participants elicited a diversity of other strategies used to have psychological effects in their players and teams (e.g. feedbacks during the game, slogans in the hall, flash interview, motivational videos/slides and projection of a calm image). When the coaches talked about the desired outcomes in competition, they mentioned the use of the previous strategies to enhance several psychological skills of their players / teams (e.g. reduce anxiety, to facilitate appropriate focus and to increase confidence and motivation levels). For example, one of the coaches revealed using the speech with the team in competition to optimize their confidence levels, as illustrated in the following quote:

Before the game, in the pep-talk I promote a speech that affects the team confidence. Sometimes, when I feel the team's confidence levels are low, I try to convey a message that increases those levels; other times, when I feel the team has too much confidence, I do the opposite...so, depending on how I think the team are feeling, I promote a speech that optimizes the team's confidence levels.

Similarly, three coaches referred the use of the flash interview to increase the team confidence. Other participants mentioned that they sometimes used antagonistic comments of opponent published in the media (n=1) and put slogans on the walls of dressing room (n=1) with the aim of increasing motivational levels of their players, specifically before the beginning of game. These perspectives are well demonstrated in the next comments: "I begin the psychological preparation for the next game in the flash interview... For example, when things went wrong in the game, I give a speech aimed at increasing the confidence levels for the next game"; "Putting some motivational slogans on the dressing room walls before the game is a strategy that I use to increase the motivational levels of my players...I usually put these slogans up before the biggest games"; "Sometimes, before the game, we quote some antagonistic comments of the opponent published in the media, in order to provoke the athletes and thereby promote an extra motivation for the action".

Finally, five coaches stressed the use of some activities and strategies outside both training and competition (e.g. team dinners, game model selected and pre-season training camps) with the sole purpose of enhancing team cohesion, as showed in the following quotations: "We organize many group dinners as a way to promote cohesion; it is a way to bring a group closer together"; "The election of the zone as a defensive method is in itself a way to promote team building ... the zone requires solidarity and mutual assistance in the task, and, therefore, requires good teamwork".

Psychological techniques used by the coaches

The second dimension, psychological techniques, shows the coaches' perspectives on the application of psychological techniques with their players, and included twenty-three raw data themes that emerged into two second-order subthemes (Figure 2).

Only six of the participants mentioned the application of psychological techniques in their coaching routines, and of these only two cited their use in both training and competition. Thus, a considerable lack of use of psychological techniques was exhibited by the majority of these coaches.

Goal setting (n=2) and imagery (n=1) were the only two psychological techniques mentioned for the practice setting. When the two coaches were asked about their use of goal setting in a practice setting, they mentioned setting goals related with technical and tactical aspects. Additionally they reported employing this specific technique to facilitate appropriate focus, as well as, to increase players' motivational levels. For example, one of the coaches stated that in all of the training sessions the tactical goals of each part of the session were clearly established in order to facilitate appropriate focus of their players, as in the next comment: "Before each exercise I inform my players about the tactical goals of the exercise. I do this to stimulate their focus during the training sessions".

With respect to the use of imagery, the same coach reported that during the training session he constantly asked the players about their tactical decisions:

When I've seen a player make a bad decision, or be in a wrong position, I immediately stop the training and demand that everyone stays in place. Next I ask the players to visualize the situation and ask him what he did wrong and what he should do...if the situation stops, the players can analyze the different options and select the best...if the player is conscious of this he will be more effective in identical future situations.

Finally, in the competition setting, participants mentioned the use of goal-setting (n=6), imagery (n=2), self-talk (n=1) and thought stopping (n=1) in their coaching routines.

In relation to the use of goal-setting, coaches employed team and individual outcome goals to enhance the motivation of their players and teams. The following expression is quite representative of that:

I set goals with the players and the team. I did it because I think this of a way of motivating them. How does that happen? For example, I would propose that a player scored 5 goals in three games or that the team scored more than 35 goals until the end of the first lap.

From the three coaches that reported the use of imagery, two of them stated that they encouraged the players to focus on success by recalling past games where the player/team was successful. Specifically, these two coaches applied this specific strategy to increase players' motivation and confidence levels. With regard to the last purpose, a coach said: "Sometimes during the pep-talks before the game, I tell my players to remember previous situations that our team has had success...I do this with the intention of boosting their confidence levels for the game".

Lastly, two different coaches stated using the dialogue with the players in order to stimulate their positive self-talk as well as thought stopping technique. These same coaches mentioned using these two psychological techniques to improve the player's self-confidence and concentration levels.

Figure 2. Psychological techniques employed by the soccer coaches with their players

Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to identify the strategies often used by Portuguese elite soccer coaches to prepare their players and teams psychologically. Additionally we intended to gain an insight to where and why they used them.

Results from this study showed that Elite Portuguese soccer coaches employed a considerable number of strategies and activities in training, competition and outside both environments to influence their players and teams psychologically. In effect, when analyzing the results, one could argue that the coaches' speech with the team and the player, were the strategies employed most frequently by the soccer coaches in both practice and competition setting. This data are not surprising, in view of the fact that both strategies are usually used by soccer coaches (as is often illustrated in the three national sport newspapers), and may be applied even without a profound knowledge of the field of sport psychology. The results also revealed that most of the activities, exercises and strategies with psychological effects employed by the participants were consistent with several studies on coaching (e.g. Bloom et al., 2003; Côté & Sedgwick, 2003; Sedgwick, et al., 1997). For example, despite the obvious differences in the key aims of the current study, compared with Bloom et al. (2003) investigation, some strategies, such as training camps and team dinners, emerged in both studies. Similarly, strategies such as giving positive and corrective feedbacks, creating a motivational environment, and projecting a calm image coincide with Sedgwick et al. (1997), and Côté and Sedgwick (2003) studies. The data of the aforementioned studies converges with the strategies identified by the coaches in the present study. However it is important to note that these strategies and activities from which derive psychological effects are not psychological techniques (there is a substantial difference between both).

Surprisingly, participants also mentioned some strategies (to influence their players and teams psychologically) usually absent in the coaching literature, such as the use of press conferences and flash interviews to convey specific messages to the players. These strategies may be intimately related to the soccer context in which this investigation was conducted. In fact, the media attention that this sport has may lead the coaches to use these strategies as a way to influence the psychological performance of their players and teams.

These strategies probably would not have the same impact in sports with less media attention.

The activities, exercises and strategies (from which derive psychological effects) mentioned previously may have been learned through 'trial and error' and/ or passed from generation to generation, thereby allowing the coaches to gain sufficient knowledge so as to master and maximize their use.

In general, these results appear to be evidence that elite Portuguese coaches give considerable attention to the psychological preparation of their players and teams. However, this does not mean that they conduct this process in the best or more effective way. In fact, when we analyze in detail the coaches' intervention at this level, it was evident that it is mostly based in the application of a set of exercises, activities and strategies with psychological effects over their players. Although we do not doubt the quality and importance of this coaches' intervention, it should be noted that it is not the same as a systematic psychological skills training (PST) intervention. For example, despite recognizing the importance that the coaches' speech with players assumes in their relationship, it appears to consensual that this type of intervention is not enough to answer all of the players' psychological demands. It is not enough for the coach say to the players that «it is necessary to concentrate for the full 90 minutes»; «that they have to have confidence to be able to win»; or that «they have to have a strong team spirit to overcome all of the difficulties».

Although PST was recognized as an invaluable training tool by coaches of various contexts (Sullivan & Hodge, 1991), it is often excluded from coaching practices (Barreiros, Silva, Freitas, Duarte, & Fonseca, 2011; Gould et al., 1999; Grobbelaar, 2007). In this context, it should be noted that only six of the participants of the current study mentioned employing psychological techniques with their players and teams. Of these coaches, two used psychological techniques in both training and competition, while the other four only employed it in the competition setting. Coaches must be aware of the relationship between psychological techniques in practice and success in competition in order to positively influence their athletes to give equal importance to both competition and practice settings for psychological training (Frey et al., 2003). Overall, even these six coaches revealed through their comments, that they did not utilize all of the functions and principles of the psychological techniques cited, namely goal setting, imagery and self-talk (see: Hardy, Gammage, & Hall, 2001; Munroe, Hall, & Weinberg, 2004; Munroe, Giacobbi, Hall, & Weinberg, 2000).

Therefore the findings of the current study seem to suggest that the participants do not contemplate a regular and systematic use of psychological techniques in their coaching process. This is in agreement with several researchers (Almeida, 2004; Barreiros et al., 2011; Fonseca, 2004) that pointed out the limited use of systematic PST in professional Portuguese soccer. A range of possible explanations for the findings of the present study can be suggested. The first relates to the lack of sport psychologists working in Portuguese Premier League Soccer clubs (Barreiros et al., 2011; Fonseca, 2004). The existence of these experts in Portuguese Professional soccer teams is the exception and not the rule (Fonseca, 2004).

A further possible explanation could relate to the lack of PST knowledge by the participants. According to several studies (e.g. Maleté & Feltz, 2000; Vealey, 1988) the lack of PST coaches' knowledge is one of the biggest reasons that PST is neglected. This study did not attempt to examine the reasons why the majority of the soccer coaches did not contemplate a regular and systematic use of psychological techniques into their coaching process. However, future research could and should explore this issue.

In recent years the applied sport psychology literature has seen an increase in the number of experimental studies supporting the positive influence of PST on performance of athletes of several sports (e.g. Blakeslee & Goff, 2007; Cohen, Tenenbaum, & English, 2006; Mamassis & Doganis, 2004; Sheard & Golby, 2006; Thelwell & Maynard, 2003; Thelwell & Greenlees, 2001), and in particular on performance of soccer players (Thelwell, Greenlees & Weston, 2006, 2010). Hence, it could be advantageous for the participants to enhance their PST knowledge and collaborate with sport psychologists in order to boost the psychological preparation of their players and teams. For Weinberg and Gould (2011), a PST programme should be planned, implemented, and supervised by a qualified sport psychologist consultant. On the other hand, some of the sport psychologists' work is not in the reach of the soccer coach, because of the time it takes, and because of the different relationship between the coach/players, and sport psychologists/players. For example, soccer players may be more open in discussing their difficulties concerning psychological aspects with the sport psychologist, because he does not sit in judgment regarding who stays on the team and who gets to play. Thus, the collaboration between Portuguese soccer coaches and sport psychologists seems to be extremely beneficial to improve the psychological preparation of soccer players and teams. For Thomas (2001), the psychological interventions are usually more effective when the psychologist and coach work together.

The soccer coaches have a great influence on their players and consequently they should be fully involved in the PST process (oriented by the sport psychologist). They should always point out the importance of PST in both training and competition settings. The coaches spend a great amount of time with their players and have the opportunity to remind them to use psychological techniques (Frey et al., 2003). For example, the coaches should highlight that the warm-up period is an optimum moment, not just for players to prepare physically, but also psychologically in training and competition, utilizing specific psychological techniques such as imagery, self-talk and others.

Therefore, the ideal situation seems to be, that the soccer coach works closely with these experts, but also has a general understanding of PST principles. The soccer coaching courses promoted by the Portuguese

Soccer Federation are the only source of formal psychological education for the majority of the soccer coaches in Portugal consequently these courses should deliver the appropriate psychological education to the coaches. However, doubts can be raised regarding soccer coaches psychological education in these courses. In fact these courses seem to give little importance to the sport psychology factors, which can be proved by the content and reduced number of hours, attributed to the sport psychology module. Consequently, a suggestion would be to enhance the quantity and the quality of the sport psychology education in these courses in order to better educate coaches in the PST concepts and, importantly to stimulate their collaboration with sport psychologists.

Conclusions

The present study has revealed that the coaches from the Portuguese Premier League clubs employed a considerable set of strategies, activities and exercises in training, competition and outside both locations, to prepare their players and teams psychologically. However, when we analyzed the use of psychological techniques in their coaching routines, our findings revealed that their use was limited, specifically in the practice setting. We do not intend to undervalue the psychological intervention of our coaches. However, it is important to highlight that their intervention was mostly based on their vast experience (as coaches as well as during their playing careers), which is not the same as a systematic PST intervention. We believe that if the Portuguese Soccer coaches enhance their PST knowledge and if they work more closely with the sport psychologists, the psychological preparation of the soccer players and teams could be improved.

The physical, technical and tactical training of the elite Portuguese soccer players and teams is actually very similar and consequently the psychological preparation could make an important contribution to achievement success. In this sense, the present study raises a number of significant issues for soccer coaches that could enhance the psychological preparation of their players and teams.

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