Emotional intelligence and psychological characteristics in the sports performance of young elite soccer players

Inteligencia emocional y características psicológicas en el rendimiento deportivo de jóvenes futbolistas de élite

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Abstract

Introduction: Emotional intelligence (EI) has been proposed as a relevant construct for understanding psychological functioning in high-performance sport, particularly in team sports such as soccer, although evidence linking EI with competitive level and performance-related variables remains inconsistent.
Objective: This study analyzed EI and psychological characteristics related to sport performance in young elite soccer players according to competitive level and curriculum acceleration and examined the relationships between both constructs. Methodology: An observational, cross-sectional study included 750 male elite soccer players aged 18–25 years, classified by sport level and curriculum acceleration. EI was assessed using the Schutte Self-Report Inventory, and psychological performance-related characteristics were measured with the CPRD questionnaire.
Results: International players showed higher stress control and influence of performance evaluation, with small effect sizes, whereas curriculum acceleration revealed more consistent differences and moderate associations between EI and psychological characteristics.
Discussion: Findings support heterogeneous evidence on EI and suggest that early exposure to demanding competitive contexts may foster psychological and socio-emotional development.

Keywords

Soccer, emotional intelligence, psychological characteristics, talent.

Resumen

Introducción: La inteligencia emocional (IE) ha sido propuesta como un constructo relevante para comprender el funcionamiento psicológico en el deporte de alto rendimiento, especialmente en deportes colectivos como el fútbol, aunque la evidencia que vincula la IE con el nivel competitivo y las variables asociadas al rendimiento sigue siendo inconsistente.
Objetivo: Este estudio analizó la IE y las características psicológicas relacionadas con el rendimiento deportivo en jóvenes futbolistas de élite según el nivel competitivo y la aceleración curricular, así como las relaciones entre ambos constructos.
Metodología: Se realizó un estudio observacional, transversal, con 750 futbolistas varones de élite de 18 a 25 años, clasificados por nivel deportivo y aceleración curricular. La IE se evaluó mediante el *Schutte Self-Report Inventory* y las características psicológicas con el cuestionario CPRD.
Resultados: Los jugadores internacionales mostraron mayor control del estrés e influencia de la evaluación del rendimiento, con tamaños del efecto pequeños, mientras que la aceleración curricular evidenció diferencias más consistentes y asociaciones moderadas entre IE y variables psicológicas.
Discusión: Los hallazgos respaldan la evidencia heterogénea sobre la IE y sugieren que la exposición temprana a contextos competitivos exigentes puede favorecer el desarrollo psicológico y socioemocional.

Palabras clave

Fútbol, inteligencia emocional, características psicológicas, talento.

Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a potentially relevant construct for understanding performance in sport. EI has been defined as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use one's own emotions and those of others (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Goleman et al., 2012). In competitive sport contexts, emotional regulation has been shown to be related to sport performance, as emotions can induce physiological and psychological changes such as alterations in heart rate, sweating, coordination, anxiety, and cognitive processes (Boas Junior et al., 2024).

Several studies have shown that athletes with higher levels of EI tend to employ more adaptive coping strategies, manage the emotional demands of competition more effectively, and demonstrate a greater ability to maintain motivational engagement in high-pressure situations. (Balk, Adriaanse, De Ridder, et al., 2013; Coban et al., 2010).

In this regard, emotional regulation enables athletes to manage competitive anxiety and maintain optimal levels of arousal under pressure, while also supporting key cognitive processes such as attention and impulse control in adverse situations. Previous studies have shown that greater stress control in athletes is associated with higher levels of concentration and self-confidence in competitive settings (Campos et al., 2017).

In addition to emotional regulation, the role of socioemotional competencies and interpersonal processes has also been highlighted as key facilitators of performance and adaptation in collective sport environments (Muñoz et al., 2024; Villao et al., 2025). Evidence also supports the association between emotional intelligence and key adaptive outcomes in sport, such as resilience, interpersonal functioning, and the sustainability of long-term performance. (Bereded et al., 2025; Xue et al., 2024).

Regarding soccer—a team sport characterized by high contextual uncertainty, substantial tactical demands, and constant evaluative pressure—emotional intelligence may function as a key resource for regulating arousal and competitive anxiety, sustaining attentional control in high-pressure situations, and optimizing decision-making by reducing stress-related cognitive interference (Şekerci et al., 2025).

Recent research in this discipline has highlighted the importance of emotional competencies and related psychosocial variables, particularly among young soccer players. Evidence indicates that emotional training programs are associated with improvements in emotional awareness and regulation, as well as in perceived social support and psychological adaptation to the competitive environment (Berasteguí-Martínez et al., 2024).

However, the available evidence shows heterogeneous results regarding the association between emotional intelligence and competitive level or sport performance. While some studies conducted in high-level athletes have identified more adaptive psychological profiles—including dimensions related to emotional regulation—compared with amateur athletes, suggesting that these competencies may facilitate access to and maintenance in high-performance contexts (Mitić et al., 2021), other investigations have not found consistent overall differences across competitive levels or have reported that such differences are limited to specific EI dimensions or depend on the type of sport and the competitive context (Fernández et al., 2020; Mitić et al., 2021).

Along these lines, recent studies have shown that the impact of emotional competencies varies according to sample characteristics, the role performed within the sport, and the nature of evaluative demands, as observed in research involving young soccer players participating in emotional training programs (Berasteguí-Martínez et al., 2024) or in populations exposed to high evaluative pressure, such as soccer referees (Guerrero et al., 2025).

These discrepancies may be attributed to potential methodological differences across studies, such as the theoretical model of emotional intelligence adopted (trait versus ability), the assessment instruments used, the sport modality analyzed, the developmental characteristics of the samples, and the criteria employed to define and measure sport performance.

An additional and relatively underexplored factor in sport development is curriculum acceleration, understood as early exposure to competitive levels higher than those corresponding to chronological age. Accelerated trajectories may enhance technical and tactical skills, as well as promote psychological and

emotional maturation by exposing athletes to increased competitive pressure and complex decision-making demands (Kelly et al., 2021).

Recent research suggests that early exposure to demanding competitive environments may contribute to the development of adaptive psychological profiles in young athletes; however, empirical evidence in elite sport contexts remains limited (Bernate et al., 2026).

Consequently, there is a need to further examine emotional intelligence using integrative approaches that simultaneously consider competitive level, sport context, and other performance-related characteristics such as curriculum acceleration. Within this framework, the present study aims to analyze the dimensions of emotional intelligence and psychological characteristics related to sport performance as a function of competitive level. Additionally, it seeks to examine emotional intelligence dimensions and psychological performance-related characteristics according to curriculum acceleration, as well as to evaluate the relationships between emotional intelligence dimensions and psychological characteristics associated with sport performance.

Based on the evidence described, the following hypotheses were proposed: international players would exhibit higher scores in emotional intelligence dimensions, namely managing others' emotions, emotion perception, managing self-relevant emotions, and utilizing emotions, as well as in psychological characteristics related to sport performance, including stress control, influence of external assessment, motivation, mental ability, and group cohesion. Second, players who experienced curriculum acceleration were expected to present higher scores across these emotional intelligence dimensions and psychological performance-related characteristics. Finally, positive associations were anticipated between emotional intelligence dimensions and psychological characteristics related to sport performance.

Method

Study design

The present study adopted an observational, cross-sectional, comparative design, based on self-report measures. The study aimed to examine the EI and psychological characteristics related to sport level and curricular acceleration in young elite soccer players.

The independent variables were: (a) sport level (international vs. non-international players) and (b) curriculum acceleration defined as having competed for at least one full season in a higher competitive category than that corresponding to chronological age).

The dependent variables were the dimensions of emotional intelligence (emotion perception, self-emotion regulation, regulation of others' emotions, and emotion utilization) and the psychological characteristics related to sport performance (stress control, influence of performance evaluation, motivation, mental ability, and team cohesion).

Participants

The sample consisted of 750 male elite soccer players born between 1993 and 2000, recruited from 30 professional clubs competing in the First and Second Spanish Divisions. Participants were categorized according to sport level into international players (n = 253; 33.7%), defined as those selected for Spanish national youth teams during the 2014/2015 season, and non-international players (n = 497; 66.3%) (Table 1).

The inclusion criteria of our study were being an active federated soccer player at national elite level, regular participation in competitive training and official matches, and age between 18 and 25 years at the time of assessment. The exclusion criteria included current injury preventing regular training or competition, and incomplete or invalid questionnaire responses.

The relatively wide age range was justified by the study objectives, as it allowed the inclusion of players who had completed their youth development process and were already integrated into elite competitive structures, facilitating the retrospective identification of curriculum acceleration experiences during formative stages.

Potential confounding variables were registered descriptively during data collection. Although these variables were not included in the final analyses, their recording allowed a more comprehensive characterization of the sample and reduced the risk of uncontrolled contextual bias. Prior to participation, all players provided written informed consent, and the study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Procedure

Eligible clubs were identified and contacted via formal communication requesting authorization to conduct the study. After institutional approval, data collection sessions were scheduled and carried out primarily at club facilities or, when necessary, in adapted classroom settings under standardized conditions.

To ensure methodological rigor, questionnaire administration was conducted in controlled environments, minimizing external distractions, and avoiding the presence of coaching staff during completion. Fieldwork was conducted by the research team with the support of trained collaborators. Data quality was checked by independent researchers.

Participants were informed of the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study and were instructed to respond honestly, emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers. To minimize response biases, particularly social desirability and peer influence, questionnaires were completed individually, and confidentiality was reinforced verbally before administration. The completion time ranged between 30 and 40 minutes.

Instrument

Sport level (International or Non-international) and acceleration (yes or no), promote a player to a higher category, were measured descriptively. Emotional intelligence (EI) was assessed using the Spanish version of the Schutte Self-Report Inventory (SSRI) (Schutte et al., 1998), for adolescent athletes, translated by (Chico, 1999) and validated for Spanish athletes by García-Coll et al. (2013b). This instrument consists of four subscales: emotion perception (α = .77), self-emotion regulation (α = .77), regulation of others' emotions (α = .78), and utilization of emotions (α = .63). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 meaning Strongly disagree and 5 Strongly agree.

Psychological characteristics related to sport performance were measured with the Questionnaire on Psychological Characteristics Related to Sport Performance (CPRD) (Gimeno et al., 2001), composed of 55 items grouped into five dimensions: stress control (α = .88), influence of performance evaluation (α = .72), motivation (α = .67), mental ability (α = .34), and team cohesion (α = .78). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. This instrument has shown strong internal consistency (overall α = .85) and is widely used in applied sports psychology, particularly during the talent development phase (Gimeno et al., 2007; Sánchez-Alcaraz Martínez, 2013).

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics for Mac (v.20), ensuring their validity through error control and double checking. Assumptions of normality were examined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, while homogeneity of variances was assessed with Levene's test. Given that assumptions were adequately met, parametric bivariate tests were applied.

Independent samples t-tests were used to compare groups as a function of sport level and curriculum acceleration. When appropriate, ANOVA analyses were conducted, followed by Tukey or Bonferroni post-hoc tests to identify specific group differences. Pearson correlation analyses were performed to examine associations between emotional intelligence dimensions and psychological performance-related characteristics. In addition, Cohen's d effect sizes were calculated to provide a more informative interpretation of the magnitude of the observed differences, particularly considering the large sample size of the study.The choice of bivariate analyses was justified by the study's comparative and exploratory nature.

Table 1. Description of the sample as a function of sport level and curriculum acceleration

Sport level	Acceleration	Frequency	Percentage
International	yes	171	67.6
International	no	82	32.4
Non-international	yes	235	47.3
Non-international	no	262	52.7

Results

Psychological characteristics related to sport performance (CPRD)

Descriptive and inferential statistics for the CPRD dimensions according to sport level are presented in Table 2. Significant differences were observed in stress control and influence of performance evaluation, with international players showing higher scores in both dimensions. The magnitude of these differences was small (d = 0.17–0.35). No significant differences were found for motivation, mental ability, or team cohesion.

In addition, CPRD results as a function of curriculum acceleration are recorded in Table 3. Players who had experienced curriculum acceleration obtained significantly higher scores across all CPRD dimensions. Effect sizes ranged from small to moderate (d = 0.22–0.37), indicating a consistent and meaningful pattern favoring accelerated players.

Table 2. T-test for the CPRD as a function of sport level.

Characteristics	International (N=253) M ± SD	Non-international (N=497) M ± SD	t	p
Stress control	3.86 ± .59	3.76 ± .57	2.13	.033
Influence of external assessment	3.56 ± .57	3.35 ± .59	4.5	.000
Motivation	4.08 ± .53	4.03 ± .62	1.11	.267
Mental ability	3.50 ± .42	3.53 ± .42	-0.74	.455
Group cohesion	4.21 ± .57	4.16 ± .60	1.17	.242

Table 3. T-test for dimensions of the CPRD as a function of acceleration.

Characteristics	Acceleration "Yes" (N=406) M ± SD	Acceleration "No" (N=344) M ± SD	t	p
Stress control	3.85 ± .57	3.73 ± .59	2.74	.006
Influence of external assessment	3.47 ± .59	3.37 ± .60	2.11	.036
Motivation	4.10 ± .56	3.98 ± .62	2.61	.009
Mental ability	3.55 ± .42	3.48 ± .42	2.27	.023
Group cohesion	4.22 ± .55	4.13 ± .62	2.17	.030

Emotional intelligence (SSRI)

Descriptive and inferential results for the SSRI according to sport level are shown in Table 4. No statistically significant differences were found between international and non-international players in any EI dimension. Mean differences were negligible, with trivial effect sizes (d < 0.10).

In contrast, when comparing players as a function of curriculum acceleration (Table 5), significant differences emerged in managing others' emotions and emotion perception, with higher scores observed in players who had experienced acceleration. These differences showed small effect sizes (d = 0.24–0.30). No significant differences were found in managing self-relevant emotions or utilizing emotions.

Table 4. T-test for the dimensions of the SSRI as a function of sport level

Dimensions	International (N=253) M ± SD	Non-international (N=497) M ± SD	t	p
Managing others' emotions	3.94 ± .52	3.94 ± .55	.035	.972
Emotion perception	4.11 ± .57	4.14 ± .59	- .718	.473
Managing self-relevant emotions	3.72 ± .58	3.77 ± .58	.915	.273
Utilizing emotions	3.93 ± .56	3.96 ± .61	.308	.469

Table 5. T-test for the dimensions of the SSRI as a function of acceleration.

Dimensions	Acceleration "Yes" (N=406) M ± SD	Acceleration "No" (N=344) M ± SD	t	p
Managing others' emotions	3.98 ± .02	3.88 ± .03	2.639	.008
Emotion perception	4.18 ± .02	4.07 ± .03	2.402	.017
Managing self-relevant emotions	3.78 ± .02	3.73 ± .03	1.218	.224
Utilizing emotions	3.98 ± .02	3.91 ± .03	1.606	.109

Correlations between the variables of the CPRD and the SSRI

Overall, moderate to strong positive correlations were observed between emotional intelligence and psychological characteristics related to performance (table 6). The strongest associations were found between emotion perception and stress control, motivation, and group cohesion. The weakest relationship was observed between utilizing emotions and influence of performance evaluation ($r = .090$, $p < .05$).

Table 6. Correlation between the CPRD and the SSRI

	Stress control	Influence Assessment	Motivation	Mental ability	Group cohesion
Managing others' emotions	.292**	.209**	.351**	.332**	.385**
Emotion perception	.419**	.301**	.416**	.345**	.371**
Managing self-relevant emotions	.255**	.176**	.260**	.280**	.238**
Utilizing emotions	.204**	.090*	.274**	.284**	.291**

* The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (bilateral); ** The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral)

Discussion

EI and psychological characteristics based on sport level

The study aimed to examine EI and psychological characteristics related to sport performance in young elite soccer players as a function of sport level and curriculum acceleration, as well as to analyze the relationships between both constructs. Regarding sport level, our findings indicate that international players showed significantly higher scores in stress control and influence of performance evaluation compared with non-international players.

These results are consistent with previous research indicating that stress regulation and the ability to cope with evaluative pressure are relevant psychological resources in elite sport contexts, likely strengthened through repeated exposure to high competitive demands (Gimeno et al., 2007; Molina et al., 2014).

In contrast, no significant differences were observed between international and non-international players in any EI dimension, a finding aligned with research in competitive soccer showing that emotional intelligence assessed through self-report measures does not systematically differ across performance levels (Bekendam Blanco, 2013).

Similarly, studies examining emotional intelligence and competitive anxiety across sports have reported that differences in emotional attention, clarity, and regulation are more strongly associated with anxiety profiles and gender than with competitive level, supporting the view of EI as a contextual modulator of emotional responses rather than a direct marker of performance (Fernández et al., 2020).

EI and psychological characteristics based on curriculum acceleration

Curriculum acceleration emerged as a more consistent differentiating factor than sport level. Players who had competed in higher age categories obtained significantly higher scores across all CPRD dimensions, with small-to-moderate effect sizes. These results are in line with studies suggesting that early exposure to more demanding competitive environments can foster the development of psychological resources such as stress control, motivation, and mental skills (Aixa-Requena et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2021). Competing above one's chronological age involves greater tactical complexity, faster decision-making, and heightened evaluative pressure, which may promote adaptive psychological maturation.

With respect to EI, accelerated players also showed higher scores in emotion perception and managing others' emotions. Although effect sizes were small, these findings are consistent with previous research indicating that early immersion in complex social and competitive contexts may facilitate the development of socio-emotional competencies, particularly those related to interpersonal functioning and emotional awareness (Berastegui-Martínez et al., 2024).

Relationships between emotional intelligence and psychological characteristics

Correlation analyses revealed moderate to strong positive associations between EI dimensions and psychological characteristics related to sport performance. Emotion perception was consistently related to stress control, motivation, and group cohesion, reinforcing the interconnected nature of emotional and psychological processes in elite soccer. These results are consistent with previous studies highlighting the role of emotional competencies as facilitators of adaptive psychological functioning in sport, particularly in relation to stress regulation and interpersonal dynamics (Balk, Adriaanse, de Ridder, et al., 2013).

Importantly, these associations should be interpreted as contextual rather than causal. The present findings do not support EI as a determinant of performance per se, but rather as a resource that interacts with other psychological characteristics within the performance environment (Kopp & Jekauc, 2025).

Limitation

The main limitations of this study include its cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inferences, and the exclusive use of self-report measures, which may have introduced response biases. Additionally, although several contextual variables were recorded, they were not included in multivariate analyses, and the limited internal consistency of some CPRD subscales may have affected measurement precision.

Practical implication

From an applied perspective, the findings highlight curriculum acceleration as a relevant contextual factor in talent development, suggesting that structured exposure to higher competitive demands may foster psychological and socio-emotional skills when accompanied by adequate monitoring. Future research should employ longitudinal and multivariate approaches and incorporate behavioral and contextual indicators to better understand the role of emotional intelligence in elite sport settings.

Conclusions

The results confirm significant differences in psychological characteristics associated with sport performance based on competitive level. International players achieved notably higher scores than non-international players in stress control and the influence of external evaluation. Similarly, athletes who experienced curriculum acceleration scored higher across all CPRD dimensions compared to those who did not, indicating that early exposure to higher-level competitive demands may enhance key psychological attributes.

With respect to EI, while the competitive level itself did not influence overall EI, players who underwent acceleration measures displayed significantly better performance in managing others' emotions and in emotion perception. This suggests that the process of accelerating talent development not only improves traditional psychological characteristics but also enhances adaptive emotional skills. Furthermore, the strong positive relationship observed between the dimensions of EI and the various CPRD scales apart from a moderate association between utilizing emotions and external evaluation demonstrates the close interrelation of these variables, underscoring their fundamental role in elite sport performance.

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