

# Coping Strategies That Football Players Use During Ramadan Fasting: Turkish Super League Sample

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**Abstract.** *Study Objectives:* This study aimed to investigate the self-created coping strategies of Muslim Turkish football players actively playing football in the Turkish Super League about fasting during the month of Ramadan. Because there were very few studies examining the subjective experiences of professional football players about fasting in Ramadan by using a qualitative method. *Methods:* 10 professional Muslim Turkish football players voluntarily participated in the study. The football players responded to an open-ended question about the coping strategies they applied during Ramadan. The responses given were interpreted in order to organize the subjective experiences of the football players about fasting. In the research, phenomenology design, which is one of the qualitative research methods, was used and inductive content analysis was performed. *Results:* The coping strategies of the football players were categorized in four dimensions as training, nutrition, lifestyle, and mental changes. These four general dimensions were classified into various sub-themes within themselves. It was also determined that the most frequently used strategies of the football players were the changes in training and nutrition. *Conclusion:* The coping strategies used by football players are not dependent on a specific scientific or philosophical model since they are based on subjective experiences. It is recommended that professional football players who fast during Ramadan should work with a mental trainer to be able to develop more effective coping strategies appropriate for their specific individual needs.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Ramazan, antrenman, rekabet, psikolojik başa çıkma, öz kontrol, alışkanlık

**Key Words:** Ramadan Fasting, Psychological Coping, Objective Experience, Football Player

## Introduction

Coping is a situation that is considered a useful strategy before stress arises. These involve the coping strategies that function prospectively, preventively, and proactively (1). In 1966, Lazarus introduced the transactional theory of coping. According to Lazarus, stress is more complex than defining it as a stimulus or reacting to an event (2). When it comes to the transactional theory of coping, the stress process is composed of the existence of coping outcomes stemming from the interactions between the appreciation of the situation and individual responses. The coping strategies that are

commonly used are divided into two as problem-oriented coping, which aims to reduce the stress-related symptoms of the athlete or alleviate the stimulus that causes stress, and emotion-oriented coping, in which the athlete tries to regulate his/her emotions (3). In problem-oriented coping, if the athlete believes that it is the right time to solve the problem, (s)he takes action. If (s)he thinks that it is not the right time, (s)he acts emotion-oriented and tries to regulate his/her emotions. In order to achieve this, it is recommended to control oneself, meditate, worship, and make positive evaluations.

Fasting, which is being voluntarily away from eating and drinking anything, is an essential part of all the

major cultures in the world. However, fasting patterns and being committed to fasting can vary greatly (4). According to a study conducted by Djemai et al. (5), athletes develop self-adjusting strategies to withstand the effects of fasting because the behavioral changes that accompany fasting during Ramadan are generally associated with some of the changes in the metabolic, physiological, and psychological responses of the athletes that may affect their performances (6).

Football is played in environments with many different variables such as hot weather, cold weather, high altitude, travels between different time zones. These situations are considered as stressors that can alter performance. Athletes, trainers, and sports scientists can make strategic plans and programs since these situations may have negative influences on performance. Similarly, such a plan can also be developed to reduce the negative stress of the athletes fasting during Ramadan (7). Therefore, Ramadan, the month of fasting is not a uniquely stressful period for the training and competitions of the athletes.

Since most sports calendars do not consider religious ceremonies, competitive Muslim athletes continue to train and/or compete while fasting in Ramadan. For this reason, the lack of food and drink intake during the training and competition can have significant effects on physical performance (8), because Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan every year. In countries with a tropical climate like Turkey, the fasting period can even be around 14 hours.

Fasting can cause not only physiological but also psychological reactions. However, there is no clear understanding of how the fasting experiences in the past affected people's responses to fasting today (9), because the coping strategies can have different results between people and situations (2). Therefore, the variables such as the changes in the mental structure of people and the fact that Ramadan is experienced at a different time each year can also affect the changes in the coping strategies.

Even the slight decreases in the training performance of elite athletes are not welcomed by trainers and athletes (10). Just as in many other countries, the sports events in Turkey are often played also in the fasting month of Ramadan. For this reason, it is

important to understand the coping strategies that athletes adopt during Ramadan fasting and be able to design specific interventions that can help them. Thus, Muslim athletes can control and manage themselves better while training and playing matches during fasting in Ramadan. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the coping strategies used by Muslim football players while training and playing matches during fasting in Ramadan.

## Materials and Methods

### *Participants*

10 Muslim Turkish professional football players aged between 24 and 33 participated in the research. All of the participants were men and played football in the Turkish Super League. Another feature of the participants was that they qualified as being a National Team player in their careers. They also had at least 6 years of football experience. The mean age of the participants was 28.4 and all of them participated in the study voluntarily. A purposeful sampling method was used since the participants were selected from among the football players who were fasting during Ramadan.

### *Experimental Design*

Phenomenology design, which is one of the qualitative research methods, was used in the research. In determining the study group of the research, the criterion sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods, was utilized. The research was conducted during the Ramadan month of 2021.

As the data collection tool in the research, the interview form was used in accordance with the semi-structured approach, which is one of the interview approaches. The semi-structured interview form chosen in order to be able to obtain comparative results was developed by the researcher to reveal the coping strategies of the football players about fasting. Research questions were formed in accordance with the information in the literature. Furthermore, the interview questions were prepared by taking into consideration such principles as the fact that the questions are easy

to understand, and that they are not multidimensional, responding, or directing (11).

The interview form was composed of two sections. In the first section, there were questions about the demographic information of the football players. In the second section, they were asked to respond to the following question regarding the coping strategies they used while fasting during Ramadan: "Which coping techniques do you use to reduce the effect of Ramadan fasting on your training and match performance?"

Before applying the interview form, the questions were examined by an expert in qualitative research and coping strategies to check their understandability and appropriateness. Afterward, a professional football player who was fasting was made to read the questions. After the football player stated that the questions were clear and understandable, the questions were applied to the participants.

Since the data of the research was obtained during the pandemic process, the interviews were conducted via telephone by taking the health of the interviewees and researchers into consideration. All the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured about the confidentiality of their responses. In order to be able to ensure that the coping techniques were clearly understood and allow flexibility in the content of responses, the interview form was sent to all the participants via WhatsApp one day before the interview. Thus, a period was provided for the participants to answer the questions. Following this, the interview questions were asked, and their responses were obtained in the form of both voice recording and note taking.

The descriptive analysis method was used in the analysis of the research data (12). The data obtained from the forms were first transcribed into the Office program, and then they were read several times and coded. Afterward, the codes were brought together to create themes, and descriptive analysis was performed.

#### *Validity and Reliability*

In the study, both methodological reliability and theoretical validity were strongly established. Thus, the descriptive, interpretive and theoretical validity of the

study was ensured. At the same time, the generalizability of the study was ensured by the way the results were presented (13). Besides, by providing the harmony between the research questions, data collection, and data analysis techniques, by using appropriate data collection and data analysis methods, by obtaining credible findings when compared to those in the literature, by reaching valuable results that could be used in practice, and by using all the criteria in harmony, the validity of the study was increased (14).

In addition to all these, the reliability of the study was increased by ensuring the credibility of the findings through their compatibility with reality, the transferability of the findings through their high adaptability to other contexts, and the confirmability of the study through demonstrating that the findings stemmed from the experiences and views of the participants (15).

## **Results**

Information about the results of the research was given below.

In Figure 1, the main themes created according to the data obtained in the research were presented. During the theme creation phase, all the documents involving the responses of the football players were read and independent sub-themes were first created. As a result of the analyses performed, it was found that the coping strategies of the football player's about fasting in Ramadan were classified into four main themes as training change, nutrition change, lifestyle change, and mental change.

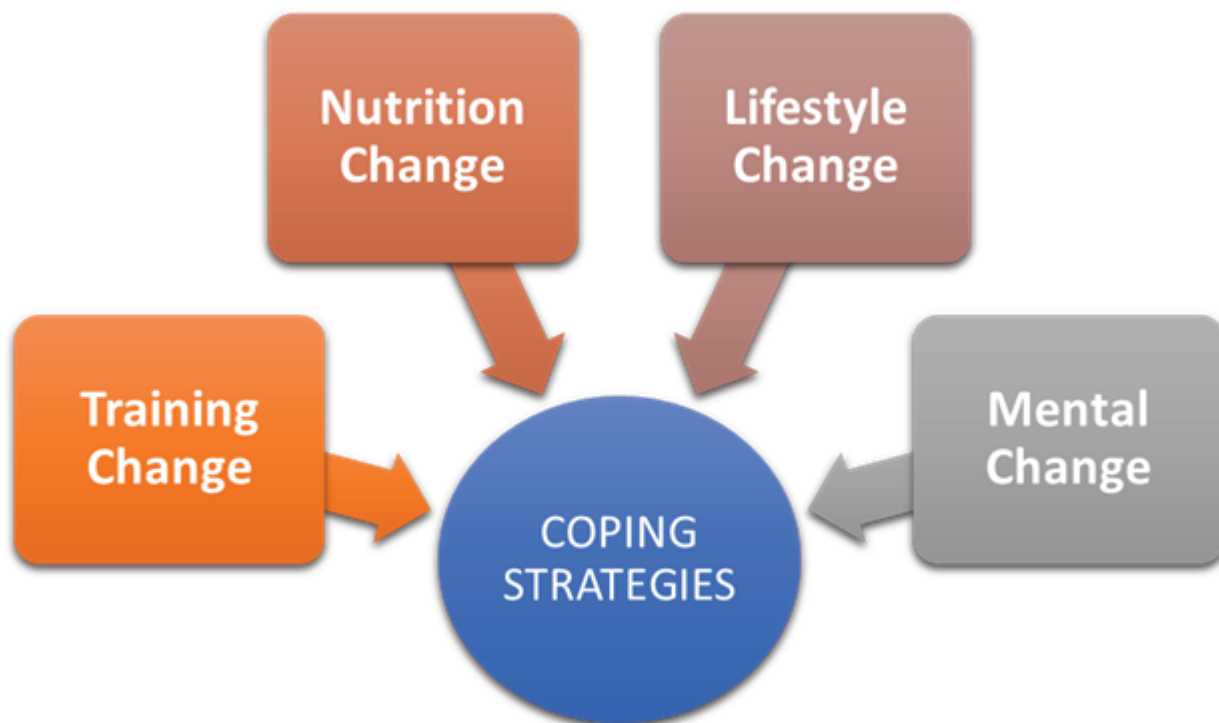
### **Training Change**

The changes regarding the training theme involved two sub-themes. These were the changes in training time and training duration. Regarding these coping strategies, the football players expressed the changes about training time with the following views:

*"I do my training in the evenings."*

*"We talk to the coach and ask him to take the team training just close to the end of the fasting time."*

*"I try to do strength training after I break fasting."*



**Figure 1.** Coping Strategies of the Football Players Regarding Ramadan Fasting

*"If there will be double training, we ask the coach to do the first training in the early morning after sabur (the meal before dawn during Ramadan)."*

The football players also emphasized the changes in training duration during the month of Ramadan. Some of the views of the athletes about this issue were as follows:

*"I keep my training in the evenings as short as possible."*

*"I'm talking to the coach and ask for permission for the training outside of the core training period."*

*"I train less if I am suspended that week."*

### **Nutrition Change**

The changes in the nutrition theme often involved the changes in the habits. The coping strategies used by the football players in terms of nutrition were grouped under three sub-themes. These were

increased food intake, food supplement intake, and increased liquid consumption. For example, the athletes used the following statements about increased food intake:

*"I eat an additional meal later in the evening after I break fasting."*

*"I eat more at sabur than I normally do."*

Some football players expressed that they changed their eating habits during Ramadan and reported that they took additional food supplements specifically for the month of Ramadan. Some of the statements of the football players on this issue were as follows:

*"I take healthy supplements."*

*"I eat more carbohydrate-containing food at the beginning of fasting."*

*"I take low-fat food."*

*"I take vitamin pills."*

The views of the football players regarding increased liquid consumption as a coping strategy were as follows:

*"I consume drinks like juice or mineral water at short intervals."*

*"I drink water every hour between fasting break and sahur."*

*"As the weather starts to get hotter, I drink plenty of water yoghurt in order to increase my liquid consumption."*

## Lifestyle Change

The coping strategies of the football players under the lifestyle change main theme were categorized into three sub-themes. These were the sub-themes of sleeping, resting, and hanging out. The football players stated that they used more sleeping, more resting, and less hanging out as coping strategies.

For example, the statements of the football players regarding sleeping were as follows:

*"I sleep more during Ramadan."*

*"I stay awake until sahur. I sleep after the morning azan (morning prayer time) and wake up in the afternoon."*

*"Sleeping and waking up again at sahur disrupts my sleeping quality. That's why I watch TV and stay awake until sahur."*

For example, the statements of the football players regarding resting were as follows:

*"I rest more than I do at other times."*

*"I lie and stay in bed for longer periods."*

For example, the statements of the football players regarding hanging out were as follows:

*"I go out less in Ramadan than I do in other months."*

*"I participate very little in the socializing activities because I fast."*

*"I spend time with my teammates at the facilities rather than spending time outside."*

## Mental Change

The theme of mental change involved the mental willingness and readiness of the football players to follow their daily routine training, even while they were fasting. This theme was categorized into two sub-themes: self-control and religious indoctrination.

As examples of self-control sub-theme, the football players used the following statements:

*"I'm trying to prepare myself for fasting mentally."*

*"I keep on remaining mentally strong and energetic throughout the day."*

*"I am changing my daily attitudes and routines."*

*"I try to remain patient while I am fasting."*

On the issue of religious indoctrination, the football players used the following statements:

*"I read the Quran on all occasions."*

*"I watch religious programs on TV about fasting."*

*"I make my evaluations about the spiritual aspect of Ramadan fasting."*

*"I chat with my friends about religion whenever I have the opportunity."*

## Discussion and Conclusion

In Turkey and many parts of the world, Muslim football players have been experiencing the situation of constantly training and playing matches while they are fasting during Ramadan. In this regard, this study is deemed important since it is the first research to reveal that Muslim Turkish professional football players use various coping strategies against the difficulties of training and playing matches while they are fasting during Ramadan. According to a study conducted, Muslim athletes who fast during Ramadan should adopt coping strategies that allow them to protect and sustain their physical and mental fitness to perform at the highest level (6).

In this study, the coping strategies revealed by the football players were categorized into four main themes as training change, nutrition change, lifestyle change, and mental change. In a study conducted with the athletes from different branches, the coping strategies of the athletes about Ramadan fasting were grouped under five dimensions. These were; training changes, diet habits, psychological, self-control, rest, and recovery (16).

In the current study, the football players stated that they tried to adjust the duration and time of the training in order to be able to cope with the difficulties of training in Ramadan. According to a study conducted on the self-coping strategies, it was determined

that the athletes changed their training time for quality training rather than quantity (5). Therefore, reducing the stress caused by training in Ramadan by decreasing the frequency, duration, and intensity of training is accepted as a coping strategy (17).

Some of the football players in this study stated that they focused on the quality of the training instead of the duration of the training. The fact that the football players reported they talked to the coach about rearranging the training time just close to the end of the fasting time makes sense because the athlete will not suffer from hunger and thirst as there will just be little time left to break fasting after the training. Besides, the physical stress of the training will be felt more since training in earlier hours will prevent the football players who are fasting from taking adequate liquids, especially water, before, during, and after the training. According to a study conducted, any training done early in the day is perceived as more difficult for an athlete who is fasting when compared to the training done at later hours within the day (18).

The fact that a professional football player is fasting can affect his/her daily training performance, especially on the days when there are double training. In this regard, the football players who participated in the research reported that they ate more during Ramadan and increased the frequency of eating, that they were conscious about the quality and type of food, and that they even took food supplements. The purpose of all these is to compensate for the lack of food that can be felt while fasting because the Muslims who are fasting do not consume food or drink each day of Ramadan, between sunrise and sunset. In a study conducted, it was revealed that fasting can cause many effects on the individual's physiology, biochemistry, and behaviors (19). According to another study conducted, the athletes who received nutritional counseling during the training period were more successful in reaching their weight goals when compared to other athletes (20). Therefore, diet changes and receiving assistance from an expert can be considered as an important coping strategy in terms of fasting in Ramadan.

In the current study, it was determined under the theme of nutrition change that the participants increased their liquid consumption. According to a study conducted, not having enough liquid during the

daytime can have negative physiological consequences on exercise performance because dehydration can directly affect the athlete's ability to regulate his/her body core temperature optimally during exercise (19). Therefore, increasing the liquid consumption of the participants can be regarded as a useful coping strategy.

Another coping strategy observed in the current study was lifestyle change. Getting enough sleep, staying inactive longer than usual and resting, and hanging out less were the prominent changes in this theme. According to a study conducted, the athletes expressed that they associated self-coping strategies with longer resting time (5). In another study, it was determined that in the first days of fasting, fatigue increased significantly (9). For this reason, if no precautions are taken, permanent fatigue may be a negative effect resulting from fasting. Therefore, the fact that the participants acted sensitively and responsibly in terms of sleeping, resting, and hanging out during Ramadan is thought to be in line with the results of other researches.

Professional football players expressed that on the days when there was no morning training, they did not sleep in the evening and wake up for sahur meal just like what other Muslims were doing. For this reason, the participants stated that they did not sleep until sahur, but slept after sahur and woke up in the afternoon. In a study, it was found that insufficient sleep was more challenging than thirst or hunger in affecting daytime working capacity (21). Despite this, the sleeping studies on the athletes fasting during Ramadan are very rare. In the studies conducted, most of the athletes expressed that their sleeping duration decreased and sleeping timing changed during this month (22).

The participants also stated that they spent more time in their rooms at home or in the facilities during the day when compared to other times of the year, and that they effectively reduced their daily hours of hanging out. In a study, it was revealed that professional football players regarded sleeping, resting, and hanging out less as preventative coping strategies against Ramadan fasting and that they tended to extend their sleeping hours until the afternoon (23). For this reason, a coping strategy that includes a change in the lifestyle which is composed of sleeping, resting, and hanging out is deemed important for football players to protect their sources of energy.

The data obtained in the current study revealed that the coping strategies of the football players also included the coping processes under the theme of mental change. These included the ability to self-control and religious indoctrination. In a study conducted, it was revealed that the athletes who were fasting understood it was not easy to be patient with other people because their blood sugar level reached the lowest level of the 24 hours just before the meal to break fasting (24). Therefore, the first thing that comes to mind in self-control skills is the feeling of patience. Thanks to this feeling, the probability of the football players having a positive mental structure may increase. Since mental change is considered as one of the proactive coping strategies to prevent the strain that fasting in Ramadan causes in football players, it is estimated that it can also help the individual to experience a sense of competence (1).

From a religious point of view, the fact that the participants, as Muslim individuals, performed their daily prayers, read the Quran, watched religious programs on television, and talked about religion with their friends during the month of Ramadan is considered as desired and expected attitudes since the month of Ramadan brings together with some changes in the nutrition habits, sleeping pattern and socio-cultural and religious events (25).

This study has several limitations. Although the football players completed the questionnaire during the month of Ramadan, the study is based on the subjective experiences of the athletes. The results do not offer any explanations for the functional implications of the coping strategies for football players. Furthermore, the results are limited to Muslim football players living in Turkey. For this reason, because the traditions among Muslims living in different parts of the world differ, the attitudes towards fasting may also be different from each other. Despite all these, this research is thought to involve valuable information in terms of the coping strategies used by Muslim football players while they are fasting during Ramadan.

The findings of the research provide some practical implications for the football players and the trainers and managers who are effective and authorized on them. First of all, the training time should be adjusted so that it is appropriate for the football players who are

fasting. Training should be done in the coolest hours of the day and just close to the time of breaking fasting. Training time should be shortened so that it suits the requirements of the football players. The focus should be on quality, not on quantity. Second, in order to avoid the lack of food and liquids while fasting, football players should take enough additional liquids and food before fasting, and the authorities should encourage them in this regard. Third, long resting periods and sleep have been a preventive coping strategies among athletes during Ramadan. For this reason, it may be recommended that football players should reduce their hanging out and socializing activities. It can be encouraged that football players stay awake until sahur time, sleep after sahur and wake up in the afternoon as much as possible. Fourth, the ability to self-control is one of the important coping strategies for football players. For this reason, training should be given to football players in terms of willpower, perseverance, patience, calmness, peace, and tranquility. Due to the fact that the month of Ramadan is a holy month for religion, encouraging the football players that are fasting to verge themselves towards religious knowledge and congratulating their willingness in this regard is deemed important in terms of religious indoctrination as a coping strategy.

The findings obtained from the research exhibit that football players have plenty of coping strategies in terms of fasting in Ramadan. Most of the coping strategies that football players create themselves are problem-oriented strategies. During the month of Ramadan, football players use strategies that involve the training, nutrition, lifestyle, and mental changes in response to the difficulties experienced during training and matches. It is also estimated that professional football players who are fasting during Ramadan will also be able to benefit from working with a mental trainer to develop broader coping strategies that are appropriate for their specific individual needs.

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