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Men 'choke' more than women in sports, says study

• By JUDY SIEGEL

Male athletes are much more likely to fail at crucial moments than their female counterparts, according to research from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev that compared men and women in Grand Slam tennis tournaments.

In a paper recently published on the university's website, *Choking Under Pressure and Gender* (in which "choking" is American slang for collapsing mentally in critical competition), researchers described the games as "a unique setting in which two professionals compete in a real-life contest with high monetary rewards."

"Our research showed that men consistently 'choke' under competitive pressure, but with regard to women the results are mixed," said Dr. Mosi Rosenboim of BGU's management department. "However, even if women show a drop in performance in the more crucial stages of the match, it is still about 50% less than that of men."

The aim of the study was to shed additional light on how men and women respond to competitive pressure and use its conclusions to better understand the labor market," explained Dr. Danny Cohen-Zada, of the university's economics department. "For example, our findings do not support the existing hypothesis that men earn more than women in similar



MOSI ROSENBOIM
(BGU)

jobs because they respond better than women to pressure."

"For this purpose, we used game-level tennis data on all the first sets of all four Grand Slam tournaments in 2010 and examine, within each tennis match, whether and how much each gender deteriorates or improves at crucial stages of the match," said Cohen-Zada.

The study - which was based on 4,127 women's and 4,153 men's tennis games - explained that caution should be used in applying its findings directly to the labor market.

"For one thing, while we analyzed how female tennis players respond to pressure in a contest that is homogeneous with regard to gender, in the labor market women are required to respond to competitive pressure in a different setting where, for example, they compete with men," said

coauthor Dr. Alex Krumer of the Swiss Institute for Empirical Economic Research at the University of St. Gallen.

"In addition, tennis players may have different preferences and characteristics that may not necessarily make them a representative subject. Nonetheless, the fact that we have uncovered such robust evidence that women can respond better than men to competitive pressure, calls for further investigation in other real-life tournament settings," he said.

According to the study, stress that is influenced by heightened cortisol levels is one possible culprit. Other sports-centered studies have already shown that high amounts of cortisol correlate with poor second serves in tennis and worse performance in golf.

"This literature indicates that, in response to achievement challenges, cortisol levels increase more rapidly among men than among women, and that high levels can harm the mind's critical abilities," concluded paper coauthor, Dr. Offer Moshe Shapir of the Center for Business Education and Research at New York University's Shanghai campus.