

**THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING IN ENHANCING
ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW****Rahul Dev Choudhury¹**

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ABSTRACT

Sports psychology is an important field of study, as it focuses on the psychological aspects of performance and the general well-being of both body and mind in all types of athletes. This study explores important psychological factors (motivation, resilience, and stress management and their influence on athletic performance) through various intervention methods (cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness, self-talk, and visualization). Using theoretical frameworks such as Achievement Goal Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory, it explores techniques to enhance concentration, confidence, and goal-setting skills. This study adopts a qualitative narrative approach and then synthesizes the literature to show that psychological skills training is effective. It also looks at use cases in athlete management, such as recovering from injury, preventing burnout, and creating positive athlete-coach relationships. The challenges faced including stigma, qualified professionals' accessibility, and individual differences are discussed, with recommendations for tailoring interventions and wider integration with coaching practices. The connection between sport psychology and performance enhancement is key to the overall mind-body development of athletes.

Keywords:

Sport psychology, Athletic performance, psychological processes, Mental skills training, Motivation, Resilience

INTRODUCTION

The field of sport psychology is a specialized branch of psychology that investigates the ways in which (and how much) psychological processes impact athletic performance, and how much sports impact an individual's psychological and physical health. It examines what factors in the psychology of sports, like motivation, confidence, focus and resilience, can help or hinder an athlete's performance. Furthermore, sport psychology looks at how emotions such as stress and anxiety can affect a sportsperson and what can be done to manage that effectively in a high-pressure competitive environment (Endo et al., 2023). The field also looks beyond performance enhancement and considers the broader impact of sports on psychological well-being, including enhanced mood, self-esteem, and stress management skills and transfers the benefits this creates into athletes' day-to-day lives. Through mental skills training, sport psychologists help athletes to achieve peak performance and maintain a healthy margin between physical and emotional, focusing both on resilience, consistency and other aspects of working oneself out. Modern sports could not function without this field and without it athletes are not reaching their full potential.

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the study is to identify the

1. Discuss the role of sport psychology in athletes' performance management
2. Examine psychological processes and intervention methods that impact athletic performance
3. Explore various intervention techniques and analyze key areas in sport psychology for athletic performance
4. Investigate and examine the impact of psychological factors on athletic performance, including mental toughness and cognitive-behavioural approaches.

METHODOLOGY

This narrative research employed a qualitative methodology to explore the role of psychological skills training in enhancing athletic performance. This study employs a narrative research methodology, focusing on synthesizing and analyzing existing literature on sport psychology. The narrative approach allows for a comprehensive and interpretive examination of the field, integrating multiple perspectives and theoretical frameworks. Data collection for this study involved a comprehensive review of peer-reviewed academic journals, books, and scholarly publications focused on sport psychology. Sources were selected based on specific criteria: they had to be peer-reviewed, empirical research studies, or contain relevant theoretical frameworks. The search was limited to publications from reputable sport psychology journals and studies published in the last 10-15 years, using databases such as PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. This rigorous approach ensured the inclusion of high-quality research focusing on psychological interventions in athletic performance. Data analysis was conducted using thematic and comparative analysis methods to identify recurring themes and compare intervention strategies across studies.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Therefore, the aim of this review is to discuss the role of sport psychology for athletes' performance and for its management focusing on psychological processes and methods for intervention. It seeks to understand how information about mental skills training, motivation, stress management and building of resilience will help in boosting performance in sports and health of the athletes.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This paper will discuss major areas in sport psychology that have implication on sportsmen and women. It will also discuss motivation, looking at the different factors that can either be intrinsic or extrinsic in nature and which influence athletes. Self- management of stress will be the focus of this paper with more emphasis on how to deal with pressure from competition. The concept of willpower and personal strength will be discussed as critical aspects of withstanding trial. Lastly, the review will discuss different intervention strategies which are visualization, goal setting, and verbal encouragement to increase focus, confidence and performance. Stress management will be discussed, highlighting techniques to cope with competitive pressure. Resilience and mental toughness will be explored as essential traits for enduring challenges. Lastly, the review will delve into various intervention techniques, including mental imagery, goal-setting, and self-talk, which are used to enhance focus, confidence, and performance.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

1. Achievement Goal Theory

Drawing on the Achievement Goal Theory (AGT), this theory argues that motivation of an individual is a function of their goals and 'what it means to be successful and competent' Ego oriented and task oriented. Posits that an individual's motivation is influenced by their goals and how they define success and competence. In sports, AGT distinguishes between two primary goal orientations: task-oriented and ego-oriented. Success is viewed as achieving personal goals or mastery of a skill, and personal improvement, mastery and effort are the focus (Russell, 2010). At the other end are ego-oriented athletes who view success in relative terms through comparison with others and who want to achieve success through social recognition, including outperforming their rivals. This theory can be used to explain how athletes' goal orientations, such as task orientation, relate to their persistence, effort, and enjoyment in sport, and task orientation typically is associated with better functioning, such as more positive attitudes, and motivation over time.

2. Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. posits that motivation is driven by three fundamental needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Based on SDT, intrinsic motivation occurs in the context of more autonomous regulation when athletes feel a sense of control over their action (autonomy), believe those abilities exist (competence), and feel connected to others (relatedness), and consequently are more likely to engage in sports for enjoyment and personal fulfilment. The second form of motivation called extrinsic, is the motivation that is created by outside rewards or pressures. As a highly effective approach for enabling sustained motivation in sports, SDT emphasizes that athletes with a high intrinsic form of motivation experience greater persistence, creativity, and wellbeing than athletes with different approaches to motivation ("Self-Determination Theory Basic Psychol. Needs Motiv. Dev. Wellness," 2017).

3. Social Cognitive Theory

According to Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) the explanation for athletes' motivation and behavior comes through the interaction among personal factors, environmental influences, and behavioural attributes. Self-efficacy or belief that one can succeed in a particular situation is central to SCT. Between personal factors, environmental influences, and behaviors. Central to SCT is self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations. Self-efficacy has a direct influence on an athlete's confidence, goal setting and ability to bounce back from pressure situations. Observational learning and modelling are also stressed by SCT as athletes learn skills and strategy by observing other people. Influences, and behaviours. Central to SCT is self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations. For athletes, self-efficacy impacts confidence, goal setting, and resilience under pressure (Martinez et al., 2020). SCT also stresses the importance of observational learning and modelling, where athletes develop skills and strategies by observing others. SCT explains how these factors interact reciprocally and exemplify how athletes learn, set goals, adapt behaviors based on feedback from environment, and this final process in turn affects the motivation and performance of athletes.

IMPACT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS ON ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE

1. Mental Toughness

One definition of mental toughness is an athlete's ability to stay focused, stay confident, stay composed, even when there's external pressure, adversity. Mentally tough athletes can keep their emotions in check, keep self-discipline and stay focused under the heaviest competition. That means they'll approach important situations without panicking, reduce negative self-talk and keep going despite feeling mentally and physically tired. Mentally tough athletes, for example, can navigate their way through the sound of the crowd in a close game or a high stress moment, keep tuned in to the present, and make their best effort. This is a trait associated with greater resilience to stress, quicker recovery from mistakes, faster optimizing when performance is most important

2. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

In competitive environments where the pressure to perform can result in incredible stress and anxiety, there is a need for athletes to manage stress and anxiety. Unmanaged, these can adversely affect focus, choice, and overall performances and mindfulness, both effective stress and anxiety management techniques help athletes to manage their mental state and perform to their best abilities, impact focus, decision-making, and overall performance. Effective stress and anxiety management techniques, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness, help athletes control their mental state, allowing them to perform at their best.

CBT is one structured evidence-based approach that attempts to change these negative thinking and behavior patterns related to anxiety. CBT in sports teaches athletes to identify and replace unhelpful athletic thoughts (fear of failure or self-doubt) with positive, constructive athletic thoughts. CBT helps athletes to think differently, to develop like, and to stay calm when stuff goes downhill. However, cognitive restructuring and other positive self-talk techniques enable athletes to break negative thinking cycles and decrease their anxiety levels and their focus and emotional stability (Nakao et al., 2021). lings can negatively impact focus, decision-making, and overall performance. Effective stress and anxiety management techniques, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness, help athletes control their mental state, allowing them to perform at their best.

CBT is a structured, evidence-based approach that focuses on changing negative thought patterns and behaviors associated with anxiety. In sports, CBT helps athletes recognize unhelpful thoughts—such as fear of failure or self-doubt—and replace them with positive, constructive thinking (*Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in Sports Psychology*, n.d.). Through CBT, athletes learn to reframe their thoughts, build confidence, and maintain perspective during challenging situations. Techniques like cognitive restructuring and positive self-talk allow athletes to break cycles of negative thinking, reducing anxiety and improving focus and emotional stability.

3. Mindfulness

In high pressure sports environments, mindfulness is about staying presently and aware without judgement and that can be helpful. Athletes practice mindfulness, and that means they learn to be aware of their thoughts and emotions without immediately acting out of instinct, so they don't get over stimulated. Mindful breathing, body scans and meditation demonstrate how athletes can control thinking; can stay grounded in their environments. By practicing mindfulness, athletes learn to observe their thoughts and emotions without reacting impulsively, helping them remain calm under stress (Wang et al., 2023). Techniques such as mindful breathing, body scans, and meditation teach athletes to control their focus and stay grounded. Mindfulness has also been found to be

useful in competitive contexts — it can help an athlete deal with pre competition nerves, control performance anxiety and have a recovery mindset underperforming conditions, with an openness and resilience mentality. Practical tools they can use to manage stress and anxiety mindfulness and CBT both equip athletes. We can actually improve our ability to concentrate, stay composed and just come and perform consistently at that top percent, regardless.

4. Motivation and Goal Setting:

Athletes are motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, but they are not the same. Athletes interested in playing sports sometimes have an intrinsic motivation for doing so, i.e. feeling personally satisfied, having fun, and seeking personal improvement, with the end effect being long-term commitment, and resilience with the activity. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation comes from such things as medals, recognition or financial incentives, which might prompt effort for a short period, but on the downfall of the reward lead to less persistence. The strategies for goal setting are helpful in enhancing success of both types of motivation, while process and performance goal seem not only intrinsically motivating by focusing on improvement and mastery, but also extrinsically motivating by paying attention to measurable achievements which helps athletes keep motivated and focused. Motivation stems from external rewards like medals, recognition, or financial incentives, which can boost effort in the short term but may reduce persistence if the reward is removed. Goal-setting strategies enhance both types of motivation; process and performance goals often support intrinsic motivation by focusing on improvement and mastery, while outcome goals cater to extrinsic motivation by focusing on measurable achievements, helping athletes stay motivated and focused (Fishbach & Woolley, 2022).

Focus and Concentration: Keeping up concentration is very important for maintaining peak performance in sports, and several ways can be practiced by the athletes to stay focused in any high-pressure situation. Two key techniques you need to also master are self-talk and visualization. Performance in sports, and several techniques can help athletes stay concentrated during high-pressure situations. Two key techniques are self-talk and visualization.

5. Self-Talk:

Athletes 'self-talk' that internal dialogue that athletes engage and have internal dialogue with themselves and that can have a real influence on focus and performance. Positive self-talk is a form of talking to yourself in a positive way, changing negative or distracting thoughts to positive, motivating statements, focus and performance (Nedergaard et al., 2021). Positive self-talk involves replacing negative or distracting thoughts with constructive, motivating statements. Such as if an athlete would say to themselves "I am ready and can" or "Stay calm and focus." Self-talk also helps to block out distractions, help reduce anxiety and maintain confidence. Positive short affirmations help repeat resistance and stay mentally engaged, and resilient, especially in challenging moments.

6. Visualization:

Visualization or mental imagery is imagining yourself successfully doing things or achieving goals. This technique is employed by athletes to assist in mental rehearsal of optimal performance; this involves visualizing an optimal shot, pass or play. This increases concentration by allowing athletes to mentally rehearse movements, visualize the challenges and increase self-efficacy. Visualization is also able to reduce pre competition anxiety by enabling the athlete to mentally experience success and practice high stakes performance, aiding the athlete in staying calm, focused, until actual performance (Firănescu et al., 2020).

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS AND TECHNIQUES IN SPORT

Psychological interventions and techniques play a vital role in enhancing athletes' mental skills, improving performance, and reducing anxiety, especially in high-pressure situations. Three commonly used techniques are mental imagery and visualization, self-talk, and relaxation

1. Mental Imagery and Visualization

Sport players use- a method called mental imagery, or visualization. They picture themselves doing certain actions or winning. By doing this in their minds, sport players can perform better and feel more confident. This mental practice helps the brain act like its doing physical tasks, which helps with remembering movements and getting better at coordination. Seeing different game situations in their minds can also help players feel less nervous. It helps them prepare for games and feel less stressed out. Through this method, they can see themselves doing everything right, having great results, and winning. This helps them stay focused and believe in themselves.

2. Self-Talk

The internal dialogue athletes have with themselves that goes on in their heads is known as self-talk and can have a really big influence on their confidence and motivation. Self-talk is positive throughout the game keeping you motivated, helping an athlete get through those tough times and get your attention refocused. Athletes can counteract these negative thoughts by choosing statements like 'I can do this,' or 'I am in control.' On top of that, self-talk is extremely important because it helps an athlete believe in what they can do, keeps them concentrating, keeps them in control of their emotions and keeps them motivated to do it when they are tired or not making progress.

3. Relaxation Techniques

Pre competition anxiety and stress can be well managed with relaxation techniques including deep breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation. Athletes use deep breathing to slow their heart rate, relieve their nerves, and regain control over their physiological state. pre-competition anxiety and stress. Deep breathing helps athletes slow their heart rate, calm their nerves, and regain control over their physiological state. It slows down, controlled breathing is activated, parasympathetic nervous system takes a hold, anxiety eases and relaxation is promoted (Toussaint et al., 2021). PMR is a method of systematic muscle tension and relaxation to reduce physical tension and mental stress, anxiety and stress. Deep breathing helps athletes slow their heart rate, calm their nerves, and regain control over their physiological state. Slow, controlled breaths activate the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing anxiety and promoting relaxation. Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) involves systematically tensing and relaxing muscle groups to release physical tension and mental stress. Both techniques allow the athletes to release negative emotions, relax and improve focus, so that they are able to put in their best performance, even in the pressure of the external world.

Combing together these psychological techniques help athletes develop the capacity to bolster their mental resilience, maintain peak performance, and manage stress all of which in turn results in more effective performance.

APPLICATION OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IN ATHLETE MANAGEMENT

1. Athlete-Coach Relationships

The basics for motivating, communicating and maximizing athletes' performances are a strong, supportive relationship between athletes and coaches (Kim & Park, 2020). In these relationships sport psychologists stress the importance of trust, mutual respect, and open communication. If athletes feel supported and understood by their coach, they will be more willing to get motivated, committed and ready to put in consistent effort. It is in positive coach athlete dynamics that athletes can feel free to raise issues and receive constructive feedback and grow in confidence. This also means that coaches can design training programs to the individual's psychological need and work simultaneously to improve both the physical and mental aspect.

2. Team Dynamics and Cohesion

In group sports success requires team cohesion. These strong team dynamics, i.e. trust, shared goals and open communication lead to greater levels of cooperation and performance. Team building exercises and psychological strategies are commonly employed by sport psychologists to foster positive relationships among teammates and develop collective responsibility and mutual support among teammates. Cohesion allows for better individual performance and better team synergy because athletes must work together better as well as find motivation when ups and downs occur (Rovio et al., 2010). With fostering a culture of respect and collaboration, athletes can increase not only their performance but also their well-being.

3. Injury Rehabilitation

The recovery process from an injury to an athlete requires a psychological aspect to their recovery. A variety of psychological strategies exist to help athletes deal with some of the emotional elements of recovery, like frustration, fear of reinjury or the loss of their identity from being away from their sport for an extended period. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), relaxation training, and setting personal goals can be used to encourage positive thinking and rebuild self-confidence. Personal challenges of recovery, such as frustration, fear of reinjury, or loss of identity due to time away from their sport (Arden et al., 2022). Techniques such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), relaxation training, and goal setting can aid in promoting a positive mindset and rebuilding confidence. Recovering faster, stress less, and prevent setbacks, developing resilience through mental training, along with physical rehabilitation. Furthermore, coaches, teammates, and family support, which is also part of the social support, plays a crucial role in keeping athletes motivated and emotionally stable in their recovery journey.

4. Burnout Prevention

There is a risk for athletes, especially if they have to compete at high levels, are training repetitively and at a very high level as well. It is characterized by physical and mental exhaustion, a loss of motivation to play, and a detachment from the sport. Recognizing early signs of burnout (like increased emotional fatigue or a decrease in performance), is key as psychological support, since it is rare to be able to pinpoint precise steps for success in academia. Athletes work with sport psychologists to build strategies to cope, such as relaxation techniques, mental recovery, and time management. Assessment of workload, stress levels and emotional health on a regular basis combined with maintaining a healthy balance in your lifestyle can help to prevent burning out and keep athletes in the sport they have invested so much time and effort into for longer (Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2024). Early intervention and supportive strategies will allow athletes to continue to perform optimally by not sacrificing their mental and emotional wellbeing in the process.

Overall, the integration of sport psychology into athlete management is essential for enhancing performance, promoting well-being, and ensuring that athletes remain resilient, motivated, and healthy both physically and psychologically.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS IN SPORT PSYCHOLOGY APPLICATION

While sport psychology offers numerous benefits to athletes, its application faces several challenges and limitations that can hinder its widespread use and effectiveness.

1. Stigma and Athlete Perception

Understanding how stigma affects athletes' personal experiences and perceptions is imperative. Stigma can lead athletes to internalize negative stereotypes that can negatively impact performance due to decreased self-esteem and increased performance anxiety (Jahn et al., 2020) addition, how athletes perceive stigma and the interaction between stigma experience and the various formats of stigma can significantly impact coping responses resulting in mental health, and social relations in the clinic and at play. Stigma can have effects on athletes which can go beyond the individual level which can affect team dynamics and sports culture overall. The stigma has negative outcomes, and coaches and sports organizations can have an important impacting role by educating, providing support systems, and promoting inclusivity policies. Media portrayal also plays a larger role in the visibility of athletes with disabilities either perpetuating stigmas or combating them under current discussions and highlighting the importance of responsible journalistic reports and actions surrounding the sports community.

2. Access to Qualified Professionals

It's one of the challenges; there is limited access to qualified sport psychologists. At lower levels of many sports organizations, there may not be sufficient resources available with which to hire trained professionals, or in general there may not be the psychological support in place for athletes. This is even more true in other less mainstream sports or if your budget is smaller. Additionally, athletes might not have access to mental health professionals if needed in the heat of the moment for instance in peak of competition or recovery from injuries and hence cannot deal with stress or anxiety, as well as performance problems appropriately. For support to be timely and effective, sport psychologists need to be integrated into multi-disciplinary teams within sports organizations.

3. Individual Differences

Finally, the dilemma of application of sport psychology arises from the individual differences amongst athletes. Athletes do not respond the same to psychological interventions, and some athletes are more psychologically receptive than others to mental skills training. They may be on board when it comes to psychological support, or they may not; it can depend on their personality, their cultural background, their previous experience with mental health, their competitive mindset. Given that sport psychologists are required to tailor their interventions to specific athletes with their own individual needs and preferences based in the face of the organismic ally defined contextual variables, the process becomes more time consuming and complicated (Carr, 2006).

Lastly, these challenges underscore the need to continue to educate all people about the importance of psychological wellbeing in sports, bolster access for people to promotive resources of mental health, and to assist with developing targeted interventions tailored to individuals. Solutions to these issues will optimize the effectiveness of sport psychology and promote athlete performance and wellbeing.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enhanced Access to Sport Psychology Services: Recommend increasing the availability of qualified sport psychologists for athletes at all levels.

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- Research on Intervention Effectiveness: Call for further research on the long-term impact of specific psychological interventions on athletic performance.
- Integration with Coaching: Suggest the integration of psychological training as a part of the standard coaching process.
- Tailoring Interventions: Emphasize the need for individualized psychological plans that consider personal factors like personality, cultural background, and athletic discipline.

CONCLUSION

Sports psychology is crucial for increasing athletic performance, developing mental resilience, and improving overall well-being. It assists sportsmen in achieving their desired development by concentrating on the crucial components of motivation, stress management, mental toughness, and focus. Techniques such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and goal setting are essential for fostering confidence and managing the stresses of competition. While challenges such as limited access and personal differences exist, incorporating sports psychology into athlete development has shown significant benefits. Ongoing investment in this field, customized strategies, and its inclusion in coaching will support athletes' continuous growth and long-term success.

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