



Assessing the Contribution of Psychological Readiness to Performance Enhancement in Athletics: Analysing Cognitive and Emotional Factors Influencing Athletics Achievement and Developing Interventions for Optimal Performance in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT:

Athletics includes a variety of sports events, such as running, jumping, throwing, and walking. The most popular athletic competitions are track and field, road running, cross-country running, and race walking. Due to its simplicity and low equipment costs, athletics is one of the most widely practiced sports worldwide. In Sierra Leone, it is the second most popular sport after football.

Valuable insights were obtained from a range of sources using different data collection techniques, such as interviews and survey guides. Additionally, a comprehensive review of relevant literature strengthened the study's foundation. The findings revealed the presence of self-talk, distraction, motivation, and anxiety in both male and female elite athletes. These results point to the need for specialized motivational approaches for female athletes and



emphasize the importance of addressing the prevalent anxiety issue, which should be a major focus for the Sierra Leone Athletics Association.

KEYWORDS: Athletics, Performance, Training, Motivation, Psychological Readiness

INTRODUCTION

Athletic performance is a complex concept shaped by numerous factors, among which psychological readiness plays a critical role. In Sierra Leone, the development and support of athletics have gained momentum through the efforts of the Sierra Leone Athletics Association (SLAA). Despite the increasing focus on physical training and technical skills, the significance of psychological readiness in optimizing athletic performance remains underexplored within this context.

Psychological readiness encompasses a range of cognitive and emotional factors that prepare athletes for competition, including mental resilience, focus, motivation, and emotional regulation (Payne C. M 2023). In Sierra Leone, where the sports infrastructure and resources are continually evolving, understanding and leveraging these psychological components could significantly enhance athletic outcomes. As athletes strive to reach their full potential, psychological readiness can be a determining factor in their ability to perform under pressure, recover from setbacks, and achieve consistent success.

This research aims to assess the contribution of psychological readiness to performance enhancement in athletics within Sierra Leone. By analyzing the cognitive and emotional factors that influence athletic achievement, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how mental preparedness impacts performance. Furthermore, it will explore the development of targeted interventions to foster psychological readiness among Sierra Leonean athletes. By bridging the gap between psychological theory and practical application, this research endeavors to support the SLAA in enhancing the performance and overall development of its athletes, thereby contributing to the growth and success of athletics in Sierra Leone.



LITERATURE REVIEW:

Factors like motivation, confidence, concentration, and the desire to win all influence success or failure in competitions. Athletes with low motivation may underperform, while those who are overly motivated can struggle with discipline and self-control, making them a weak point. Striking the right balance is crucial. Strong psychological skills can be the deciding factor between two teams with equal physical and tactical abilities (Johnson R. T, 2024). Analyzing athletes' character traits can provide valuable insights. The emerging field of sports psychology has produced numerous studies on the impact of emotions and mood on athletic performance. Athletes often experience a range of emotions before competitions, which can affect how they perform. Anxiety is a common emotion in this context. For athletes, anxiety is a sense of imbalance between their abilities and the expectations placed on them (Craft et al., 2003). While moderate anxiety before a competition can enhance performance, excessive anxiety may negatively impact it (Mottram D.R., 2005).

Motivation

Motivation is a key topic in sports psychology, defined as the drive to engage in purposeful behavior, though it may not always be efficient or effective (Parker A., 2000). Coaches frequently express frustration when athletes, despite having the physical and technical abilities to excel, lack motivation-often arriving late or putting in minimal effort during training. Adequate motivation not only enhances physical performance but also aids in learning physical skills, which ultimately impacts overall performance. Motivation can be categorized into two types: intrinsic and extrinsic. Athletes driven by intrinsic motivation engage in activities for the inherent satisfaction and are motivated by the internal desire to achieve high skill levels. In contrast, athletes with extrinsic motivation perform activities for external rewards (Sheard M. & Golby J., 2011). Intrinsic motivation is generally preferred, as it is linked to higher persistence and commitment (Parker A., 2000).



Mental Imagery

Mental imagery is a technique where athletes engage as many senses as possible such as sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell to mentally recreate a sporting experience (Vast et al., 2010). Unlike visualization, which focuses solely on the visual sense, mental imagery is often seen as more effective (Sheard M. & Golby J., 2011). This technique helps reinforce effective competition strategies and strengthens the nerve pathways used during training and competition (Vast et al., 2010). Mental imagery can enhance performance by improving the learning and execution of physical skills, which is particularly beneficial for less skilled individuals or teams. An important element of imagery is the use of word triggers. For instance, golfers may use specific words to mentally program a slow backswing and a powerful downswing. Additionally, imagery can help beginners by providing a mental framework for learning new skills (Sheard M & Golby J 2011).

Confidence

Confidence is essentially a belief in one's own abilities, characterized by a sense of expectation for success (Parker A., 2000). To foster confidence and enhance self-belief, athletes can take several steps: (a) Engage in positive self-talk, using affirmations like "I am going to do well" or "I have put in the effort" to boost self-confidence. (b) Implement the thought-stopping technique, where athletes say "STOP" whenever a negative thought arises and replace it with something positive. (c) Utilize confidence modeling by watching videos of themselves or others excelling in their performance to enhance confidence. (d) Practice imagery by visualizing oneself executing a skill confidently and accurately to further strengthen confidence.

Concentration

Concentration is a key component of attention, referring to the ability to focus mental effort in a specific situation. Extensive research has highlighted the benefits of mental skills programs, including concentration techniques, on athletes' performance (Fischer et al., 2008). While it's beneficial to incorporate these strategies into one's game plan, various factors during competition can influence confidence levels, both positively and negatively. In their study on



the perceived effects of emotion on concentration, attention, and performance, researchers found that positive emotions, such as excitement and happiness, are more likely to enhance performance-related concentration compared to negative emotions like anxiety and anger. They also noted that the intensity of the emotion correlates with its impact (Willis J., 2009).

Sleep

It's clear that the body requires sleep to operate at its optimal level. Due to their busy competition schedules, rigorous training sessions, and demanding commitments, athletes often struggle to get sufficient rest (Underwood T., 2010). While we sleep, the body eliminates unnecessary information from the brain, recovers, and replenishes energy for the following day's activities. A good night's sleep is crucial for improving performance (Craft et al., 2003). The central nervous system regulates all aspects of sports performance, including precise biomechanical movements, reflexes, reactions, and skill execution (Oliver et al., 2009). When athletes do not achieve a full night's sleep, their performance can decline due to increased drowsiness.

Anxiety

The emerging field of sports psychology has led to numerous studies examining the effects of emotions or mood on athletic performance. Athletes often experience a variety of emotions before a competition, which can influence their performance. One common pregame emotion is anxiety, which arises when an athlete perceives a discrepancy between their abilities and the expectations placed upon them (Davenne D., 2009).

Anger

Anger is often linked to experiences of poor performance or loss, classifying it as a post-performance emotion. However, it can also impact athletes before and during competitions. A literature review from 2004 on mood responses in sports found that negative emotions like anger are connected to lower performance levels. Generally, athletes with reduced levels of anger tend to perform better (Mellalieu et al., 2009).



Stress

Stress can manifest in various forms, not all of which are directly related to an athlete's competitive ability. Many stressors faced by elite athletes arise from their team organization rather than the competition itself (Gucciardi et al.). They found that multiple organizational stressors impact athletes, with significant stress stemming from the competitive environment and how it is managed. An athlete's role within the team structure and the level of team cohesion were also identified as sources of stress. Additionally, the involvement of team management contributed to an athlete's perceived stress (Gucciardi et al.). While organizational stressors may not continuously escalate, they are consistently present and affect athletes. The study also examined competition-related stressors, which included concerns about physical readiness, internal and external expectations, an athlete's public image, and the performance of current opponents (Gucciardi et al.).

Mental Toughness

Stress can manifest in various ways, but the mental toughness of players can significantly influence the outcome of a game when teams have similar performance levels. Research indicates that teams with greater mental toughness tend to win more frequently than those with weaker mental resilience (Mellalieu et al., 2009). Coaches play a crucial role in either promoting or hindering the development of mental toughness in athletes.

They can cultivate mental toughness through several methods, including fostering positive coach-athlete relationships, creating training environments that consistently challenge athletes and expose them to new difficulties, and utilizing specific techniques that encompass effective coaching behaviors and situational awareness (Mellalieu et al., 2009).

Athlete Cohesion

Teammate support is crucial not only for developing mental toughness but also for achieving strong performance (Johnson et al., 2011). Research has shown that performance is positively linked to group cohesion. Additionally, team cohesiveness impacts athletes' moods, which can influence individual and overall group performance. Therefore, teams that maintain a positive



atmosphere regarding cohesiveness are likely to achieve greater success. Teams that establish goals and collaborate to reach them also demonstrate higher levels of group cohesion (Johnson et al., 2011).

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the study's objectives, valuable information was collected from multiple sources using various data collection methods, including interviews and survey guides. A thorough review of related literature was conducted to provide empirical knowledge that supports the study.

The research design

The primary objective of this study was to assess the performance of elite athletes and Athletics Clubs in Sierra Leone, focusing on their ability to enhance performance. A mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative designs, was utilized for this research.

The quantitative component examined the relationships among variables and provided a numerical description of data trends to answer the research questions and test hypotheses. Meanwhile, the qualitative approach aimed to explore the behaviors, perspectives, and feelings of athletes, emphasizing a deeper understanding of these aspects. This design sought to uncover the "what" and "why" from a subjective standpoint. To interpret events and understand the meanings individuals assign to them, qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings.

Characteristics of the study population

The characteristics of the study population were analyzed based on sex, designation, and age, using responses gathered from the personal data section of the questionnaire. The analysis and data are presented in the following table:



Table 1: Responses to Psychological Situations (Items 1-4)

No	Items: 1-4	No. of Athletes (N=35)			
		Male	%	Female	%
1.	Do you engage in self-talk during training or competition?				
	Yes	2	5.71	8	22.85
	No	18	51.42	7	20
2.	Do you think about anything other than training while you're practicing?				
	Yes	17	48.57	13	37.14
	No	-	2	-	-
	Sometime	3	8.57	2	5.71
3.	Have you been motivated by your athletics club or camp				
	Yes	10	28.57	2	5.71
	No	10	28.57	13	37.14
4.	Do you worry during training?				
	Yes	16	45.71	14	40
	No	4	11.42	1	2.85



Statistical Analysis of Psychological Situation of Athletes

This study aims to analyze the psychological responses of 35 elites athletes (both male and female) to four key items related to their mental state during training and competition. The athletes were asked about their self-talk, focus during training, motivation from their athletics club, and their concerns during training. The responses were categorized based on gender (male and female), and percentages were calculated to better understand the distribution of responses. Below is a detailed statistical analysis of the responses.

Item 1: Do you talk alone during training and/or competition?

Male: Out of 20 male athletes, only 2 (5.71%) responded affirmatively, while the majority, 18 athletes (51.42%), indicated they do not talk to themselves during training or competition.

Female: Of the 15 female athletes, 8 (22.85%) admitted to self-talk, whereas 7 (20%) reported that they do not engage in this behavior.

Item 2: While training, do you consider any topics unrelated to training?

Male: Among male athletes, 17 (48.57%) reported that they often think about other issues during training, 3 (8.57%) mentioned that they sometimes do, and none responded with "No."

Female: In contrast, 13 females (37.14%) admitted to thinking of other issues during training, while 2 (5.71%) occasionally did so. Interestingly, 2 females indicated that they do not think about any other issues whatsoever.

Item 3: Have you been motivated by your athletics club or camp?

Male: Among the male athletes, 10 (28.57%) felt motivated by their athletics club or camp, while an equal number (10, 28.57%) stated that they did not receive any motivation.

Female: Only 2 females (5.71%) reported feeling motivated, while 13 (37.14%) stated that they had not been motivated by their club or camp.



Item 4: Do you worry during training?

Male: Out of the 20 male athletes, 16 (45.71%) reported experiencing worry during training, while 4 (11.42%) said they did not worry.

Female: Among the female athletes, 14 (40%) admitted to worrying during training, whereas only 1 (2.85%) said they did not.

RESULTS

Observations were conducted for six hours each week, with one hour dedicated to each session on different days. The results indicate that females are more inclined to engage in self-talk during training and competition than their male counterparts. A higher proportion of males indicated that they do not engage in this behavior, highlighting a potential gender difference in coping mechanisms or focus strategies during training.

This item shows that a significant portion of both male and female athletes experience distractions during training. However, male athletes report a higher rate of distraction (48.57%) than female athletes (37.14%). The female respondents also demonstrate a more balanced distribution of responses between "Yes," "No," and "Sometime."

The responses to this item suggest that male athletes are more likely to perceive motivation from their athletics club or camp compared to females. The fact that only 5.71% of females felt motivated, compared to 28.57% of males, points to a potential disparity in the support systems available or the way motivation is perceived by different genders.

Both male and female athletes expressed significant levels of worry during training, with 45.71% of males and 40% of females experiencing some level of concern. The low percentage of athletes who reported no worry (11.42% of males and 2.85% of females) indicates that anxiety or concern during training is common across genders.



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the data, several key insights emerge regarding the psychological situation of athletes in Sierra Leone:

Self-Talk: Female athletes are more inclined to practice self-talk during training and competition compared to males, suggesting a potential difference in coping or concentration techniques between genders.

Distraction: Both male and female athletes experience distraction during training, with a higher incidence among males. This could indicate a need for enhanced mental focus strategies during training sessions, particularly for male athletes.

Motivation: Male athletes reported higher levels of motivation from their clubs or camps than females, pointing to a possible gap in the support structures for female athletes. This finding highlights the need for targeted motivational interventions for female athletes.

Worry: A significant proportion of athletes, both male and female, reported feeling worried during training, suggesting that anxiety is a prevalent issue that should be addressed by coaches and support staff.

This study highlights important gender differences in the psychological aspects of training, which could inform future interventions aimed at improving the mental well-being and performance of athletes. Addressing these psychological factors may enhance focus, reduce anxiety, and foster motivation among athletes, ultimately improving their overall performance in national and international competitions.



Conflict of Interest Statement:

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding this title: **“Assessing the Contribution of Psychological Readiness to Performance Enhancement in Athletics: Analyzing Cognitive and Emotional Factors Influencing Athletics Achievement and Developing Interventions for Optimal Performance in Sierra Leone”**

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