



An overview of the psychological complexities in sports performance

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ABSTRACT

Our special issue comprises a diverse collection of ten research and review articles, each offering unique insights into the psychological dimensions of athletic performance. From studies examining the role of resilience in overcoming extreme score shifts to explorations of the mental toll caused by external crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical conflict, these papers provide a broad spectrum of perspectives. The issue digs into critical topics such as the influence of crowd dynamics, athlete-coach relationships, and the psychological challenges of breaking long-standing records, all while highlighting innovative methodologies like ecological approaches and creative non-fiction. Together, these ten papers underscore the complexity of the psychological factors that impact athletes' success and well-being, offering both theoretical advances and practical applications for the sporting world.

Athletic performance is a multifaceted pursuit, shaped not only by physical capabilities but also by the psychological resilience and adaptation required to excel in high-pressure environments (Gupta & McCarthy, 2022; Samuel et al., 2024). Competing at elite levels demands more than just talent; it requires athletes to navigate psychological complexities such as maintaining focus, managing stress, and responding to adversity (Sarkar et al., 2015). Recent research emphasizes the critical role of sport psychology in optimizing performance and well-being, as athletes increasingly benefit from the guidance of sports psychologists, coaches, and mental performance experts to cultivate mental skills, cope with pressure, and maintain emotional balance (Wadsworth, McEwan et al., 2024). These psychological factors are at the heart of this special issue, which investigates into the nuanced mental and emotional challenges athletes face in their pursuit of excellence, offering new research and practical insights into how these variables can be managed and optimized for better performance outcomes (Bird, Swann, et al., 2024).

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innovative methodologies like ecological approaches and creative non-fiction. Together, these ten papers underscore the complexity of the psychological factors that impact athletes' success and well-being, offering both theoretical advances and practical applications for the sporting world.

The opening article by Kristin Mauldin, Bailey Thompson, and Nadav Goldschmied explores one of the most exciting phenomena in competitive sports—extreme score shifts and comebacks. By analyzing data from NBA games, the authors shed light on the role of team resilience in reversing seemingly insurmountable deficits. Their findings provide critical insights into how teams can cultivate this resilience, not just in games but through targeted training interventions. As the concept of mental toughness continues to gain traction as a key determinant of athletic success, this study offers a timely contribution to the broader conversation on the psychological factors that enable athletes to persevere in the face of adversity.

The psychological impact of environmental factors also emerges in Alex Krumer, Offer Moshe Shapir, and Yifei Zou's study on crowd size and home advantage in football. Analyzing data from the Chinese Super League, the authors contribute to the ongoing debate about how crowds influence athlete performance. This research uncovers how varying crowd sizes can affect home advantage, offering practical implications for teams and coaches as they prepare for matches in different contexts. More broadly, the study reminds us that external conditions—such as fan presence—are not merely logistical details but psychological stimuli that can potentially affect an athlete's mindset and subsequent

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performance.

Building on this theme of external influences, Robert Schinke and his co-authors present a compelling case for integrating ecological methods into sport psychology research. Their article argues for studying athletes in their natural environments, where psychological challenges arise in real time, as opposed to controlled laboratory settings. By focusing on the real-world contexts in which athletes operate, the ecological approach provides more practical, applicable insights. This push for a science-practice dialectic emphasizes the need to bridge the gap between theoretical research and the lived experiences of athletes, ensuring that sport psychology remains relevant to the day-to-day challenges athletes face in competitive settings.

The intersection of sport, psychology, and external crises is vividly illustrated in Roy David Samuel, Gershon Tenenbaum, and Yair Galily's article on the impact of the 2023–2024 war in Israel on athletes' careers. Their analysis provides a unique perspective on how geopolitical conflicts and crises can disrupt athletic performance and career trajectories, forcing athletes to contend with not only physical and emotional challenges but also the uncertainty and instability wrought by external events (see also Samuel et al., 2020; 2024). This review article explores how these external stressors can shape athletes' mental health and adaptation, offering a stark reminder of the profound psychological toll that such crises can have on those in the sporting world.

Rachel Shinnick and Edson Filho's study adds to the conversation by examining the relationships among athletic identity, anxiety, COVID-specific worries, and resilience in collegiate student-athletes. Their research highlights the complex interplay between these psychological variables during the unprecedented disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings, which show that higher anxiety can lead to stronger athletic identity while resilience mitigates some of the negative mental health impacts, underscore the importance of supporting athletes through periods of transition and crisis. This study is a poignant reminder that external disruptions, whether global pandemics or personal crises, can significantly impact the mental and emotional well-being of athletes (as well as fans, see for example Galily et al., 2023) influencing their sense of identity and performance in ways that are not always immediately visible.

In a more intimate exploration of athlete psychology, Kerry McGannon and Jenny McMahon's article takes a creative approach by examining the psycho-social tensions experienced by "mother runners" – female athletes who balance the demands of parenthood with their training and competition schedules. Using non-fiction advice letters, the authors offer insights into the strategies these women use to navigate the unique challenges they face. This article humanizes the psychological complexities of sport by focusing on a demographic that is often underrepresented in sport psychology research (see also Betzer-Tayar et al., 2017) providing valuable lessons on resilience, balance, and the socio-cultural pressures that impact athletic performance.

Roy David Samuel and Yair Galily further explore the psychological weight athletes carry, in their article on breaking sports records. Using the case of LeBron James and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar among others, the authors examine the emotional and psychological toll that comes with surpassing legendary figures in sports. Beyond the technical achievement, breaking long-standing records involves navigating the narratives, expectations, and pressures (see also Galily, 2019) that come with challenging greatness. Their work offers a new perspective on the construction of athletic legacy and the psychological endurance required to bear the weight of such historic accomplishments.

The role of coaches in shaping athlete performance is also addressed in Evelyn Su Jara-Pazmino, Bob Heere, Emily Newell, and Simon Pack's study on coach onboarding strategies. By developing a scale to assess the psychological impact of onboarding processes, the authors underscore the importance of smooth coaching transitions in maintaining team cohesion and individual athlete performance. Their findings highlight

the psychological components of effective coach-athlete relationships, offering practical recommendations for teams and organizations aiming to optimize these transitions and minimize disruptions.

Mindfulness and acceptance-based interventions continue to gain traction in the sport psychology field, and Tomer Gutman, Stav Haran, and Dalit Lev-Arey's article explores their integration into coaching practices. By combining these interventions with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) principles, the authors present a comprehensive approach to fostering athlete autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This study provides valuable insights for coaches on how to adopt mindfulness, acceptance, and commitment-based techniques to enhance both the psychological well-being and performance of their athletes.

Finally, burnout, a common issue in competitive sports, particularly among young athletes, is explored in Kelly Barcza-Renner, Amber M. Shipherd, and Itay Basevitch's examination of the relationship between burnout and grit in college athletes. Their findings suggest that while grit can help athletes persevere through challenges, it can also lead to burnout if not carefully managed. This article offers practical strategies for balancing the psychological demands of perseverance with the need for mental health preservation, contributing to a more holistic understanding of athlete well-being.

In conclusion, the diverse articles in this Special Issue of the *Asian Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* highlight the intricate psychological and psychosocial factors that underpin athletic performance. From resilience in the face of game-changing comebacks to the mental toll of geopolitical conflict, breaking records, and external crises, the research presented here offers a comprehensive exploration of the psychological dynamics athletes must navigate. As the field of sport psychology continues to evolve, these insights provide actionable strategies for athletes, coaches, and practitioners working to optimize both performance and mental health. As guest editors, we are delighted to present this collection, which we hope will inspire further research and innovation in our domain, enhancing the lives and careers of athletes around the world.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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