



The Myths and Magic Behind Psychological Skills Training: A Narrative Review

**Puja Khatri
Atul Shiva
Vidushi Dabas
Harshteen Kaur Duggal**

Abstract

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, the sports sector has been profoundly challenged, with sportspersons' physical and emotional health suffering the most. Sportspersons have been confronted with challenges of social isolation, career disruption and restricted access to training amenities that negatively impact their physical and mental well-being and result in sub-par performance. The need for coherent measures to resume sporting activities, prioritizing the well-being of sportspersons, is clear. Our research aims to understand how the spread of Coronavirus and its aftermath has affected the mental health of sportspersons and how it can be improved with the help of appropriate psychological skills training.

Keywords: Psychological Skills Training, Mental Training, Mental Health, Sports

Introduction

Since its emergence, the COVID-19 outbreak metasized to nearly every nation on Planet. In an attempt to halt the virus's spread, lockdowns of companies, schools, and other public places become frequent. Myriad of daily life aspects were impeded by these restrictions, particularly sports (United Nations, 2020). Covid-19 tampered with routine sporting events and practices, forcing the rescheduling of prominent sporting events, including the 2020 Olympics (Dagnall et al., 2021). In a never-seen-before incident, the Olympics were rescheduled from 2020 to 2021, disrupting the traditional 4-year cycle for the first time in history as a consequence of the Covid-19 outbreak. Nobody could have predicted such far reaching consequences, such as rescheduling of Olympics and disruptions in trainings, of the global pandemic on sports persons. Due to these unanticipated circumstances, the COVID-19 outbreak is also referred to as a catastrophe filled with uncertainty. This unpredictability has been distressing for sports persons and their coteries (Leisterer et al., 2021).

Thus, our study aims to understand how the spread of Coronavirus epidemic is affecting the mental health of sports persons and how it can be improved with the help of appropriate psychological skills training. Covid-19 has not only caused physical health concerns but has also lead to severe psychological issues to people around the world (Fu et al., 2021). Suspension of sporting events has impeded individual and team training of players and has adversely affect the mental health of sports persons during their time in isolation and transition to return to competition (Mulcahey et al.,

2020). The most prevalent psychological effects to COVID-19 have been reported as anxiety, depression, and increased stress (van Agteren et al., 2020). The prime example of the psychological distress experienced by sportspersons is the world champion American gymnast Simone Biles. At the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the four-time gold medalist gymnast Simone Biles decided to drop out early owing to her mental health (Maine, 2021), corroborating that sports persons confronted with challenges of social isolation, career disruption and restricted access to training amenities faced a negative impact on their well being, resulting in sub-par performance (Mulcahey et al., 2020).

Mental training is an essential integrant of any sporting tutelage (Mudian et al., 2021), and sport psychology practitioners are well placed to assist sports persons in dealing with these unexpected challenges (Leisterer et al., 2021). Fear and pressure in sports persons often lead to overthinking which impairs their performance (Ninan, 2022). As a result of high perceived stress, this performance anxiety, sometimes known as “choking,” debilitates sports performance. Sports persons who choke and succumb to performance pressure must realize that this perception and idea can be shaped via suitable mental training (Palazzo & Arnaud, 2013). For sports persons, the ability to “Switch Thoughts” is a vital mental capability (R., 2022). People place too much emphasis on players’ physical abilities, failing to see that mental capabilities are as important. If not more, the mental aspect of sports is as crucial as the physical part of the game (Hansen, 2015). Psychological skills training (PST) is just as vital as physical training for sports persons, and it can account for 50-90 percent of sports performance. The four most common PST approaches used by sports persons are goal setting, self-talk, mental imagery, and relaxation. They must be studied, developed, and exercised by the player, much as technical or tactical parts of a sport (Singh et al., 2020).

Psychological and emotional factors determine whether a player gains or loses momentum. In a matter of seconds, a player might restore or lose psychological control. This psychological volatility can be avoided with good psychological training and emotion regulation in order to deal with unfavourable stimuli (Athletics Training, 2022). Studies on Psychological Skills Training (PST) reveal that PST ameliorates mental resilience while also amplifying perceived self efficacy, positive affect, and self esteem in sports persons. This lends credence to the beliefs that Mental Toughness is teachable and that PST can enhance psychological well-being (Dagnal et al., 2021). Because each sports person has unique sports requirements, psychological skill development, orientations, and experience, each PST programme must be tailored to that player (Chee, 2018). Appropriately designed intervention packages can further improve one’s emotional intelligence. Sports persons with better emotional intelligence may change

their emotional state to comply with whatever is needed for the situation at present (Margolies, 2022).

Mental resilience is a key factor for any player to achieve a gold medal performance; it is something a sports person dthe pandemic and its aftermath on sports persons' psychological health is therefore an issue that merits research. Mental Health has traditionally been a taboo subject for sports persons. Many sports persons are of the opinion that being silent about their psychological issues is preferable to rejection and worries about their performance (Malvone, 2021). COVID-19 virus, and any other crisis that follows, has had, and will remain to have extremely significant consequences on the sports industry and on physical and mental wellbeing of sports persons (United Nations, 2020).

Methodology

The present paper is a narrative review of the role of psychological skills training in improving the mental health of sports persons in the post pandemic era. A thorough and comprehensive exploratory search of available literature was conducted on various databases including Web of Science. Google scholar was also explored using keyword searches "psychological skills training", "mental training", "mental health", "covid*" OR "corona*", "resilienc*", "wellbeing", "pandemic" and "sports". Psychological skills training has been construed as a set of performance enhancement skills and techniques which are aimed to be performance oriented (Ford & Arvinen-Barrow, 2019). Manual searches of the reference lists which were found in the primary articles were also conducted. Given the limited number of studies in this area, a narrative review is considered more suitable than a systematic review (Mcuiiffe et al., 2021).

Literature Review

Ford and Arvinen-Barrow (2019) define PST is a set of performance enhancement skills and techniques which are aimed to be performance oriented. PST is commonly defined as the methodical application of arousal control, concentration, confidence, goal setting, imagery, motivation, and self-regulation to boost efficiency (Ford & Arvinen-Barrow, 2019). It works both within and outside of the performance environment. The term psychological skills training (PST) was coined to describe approaches used to educate or enrich psychological abilities that assist in performance and facilitate a positive attitude towards sport competition. A key concept of PST is that sports persons are generally mentally healthy, but they may require cognitive abilities and techniques to cope with the diverse demands of sport competition (Rameshpandian & Rajeswaran, 2021). Imagery, relaxation, and self-talk, for example, may be utilized to cope with combative tension, improve attentional control, and elevate self-confidence. An analogy that is

frequently used is that psychological talents, like physical skills, may be taught and learnt to a certain extent (Vealey, 1988).

PST comprises of three phases, (1) educational phase i.e. the understanding of PST, (2) acquisition phase i.e. how to use PST and (3) practice phase i.e. putting PST to practice. However, if the player does not comprehend then impact of PST on sports performance, PST is considered the least effective, thereby making the educational phase the most crucial part of PST (Brookfield, 2009). Thus, PST is an educational approach that views psychological skills as teachable (Vealey, 1988). The four fundamental mental strategies commonly practiced in sport psychology interventions are imagery, goal-setting, self-talk, and physical relaxation techniques, containing a mixture of these approaches (Vealey, 2007; Rothlin et al, 2016; Barker et al, 2020).

Adverse impact of isolation, caused by Covid-19, on sports persons include decline in mental skills such as concentration and motivation (Sugihartono et al., 2021). PST techniques such as relaxing improves an individual's attentional concentration while when making erroneous judgments or blunders in perception and decision-making. As a result, relaxing allows performers to maintain optimal levels of activation rather than experiencing sudden spikes as a result of mistakes. Imagery improves motivation and perceived competence by allowing performers to visualize themselves effectively accomplishing certain motor, perceptual, and decision-making tasks (Thellwell et al, 2006).

PST is largely derived from cognitive behavioural therapy. Land et al (2022) developed the Psychological Skill Inventory - Law Enforcement (PSI-LE) that measures several skills cardinal to PST namely, attention management, winning mindset, combat breathing, muscle control, mental practice, physical recharge and self talk. The study was orchestrated on 576 law enforcement officers. The success of the PST programme can be evaluated directly by comparing improvements in the application of psychological skills to programme results, such as resilience, job satisfaction, and wellbeing. First responders who engage in PST programmes are able to master a bundle of psychological skills to boost their sense of control and capability to manage stress and emotions under stressful conditions (Land et al, 2022). Additionally, inquiry into the viability, legitimacy, and effectiveness of recommending that a sports division coach get certified and overseen to administer cognitive ability programs is required, as Hut et al. (2021) indicate that coaches are possibly ideal for overseeing PST interventions considering their understanding of the coach-player dynamic (Hut et al., 2021). Thus, proper mental training has the capability to shape a sports person's perspective and cognition such that they do not succumb to pressure (Palazzo & Arnaud , 2013). The key to achieving peak performance in sports is mental resilience (Forrester , 2018), which can be built via appropriate

psychological skills training (PST). Various PST tactics such as goal setting, visualization, mental preparation, self-talk, and relaxation are used to build and strengthen psychological talents in order to refine performance and/or well-being. PST's prime purpose is to help people take back control of their thoughts and emotions. The method varies from performance to performer depending on the demands of each individual. There is no such thing as an ideal PST package; each programme is customized to the person's psychological state and the sport (Brookfield, 2009).

Conclusion

The prime objective of our study was to study the effects of the pandemic and its aftermath on the psychological well being and mental health of sports persons while also recommending corrective action in terms of PST to enhance athletic performance. The COVID-19 virus has had a tremendous effect on the sports sector and on the psychological and physical health of individuals. Sports persons have encountered, and continually confront, a wide range of psychological challenges and stressors, such as social isolation, career disruptions and de-training. The need to develop and enact coherent measures to resume and advance sporting endeavours in a manner that prioritizes the health and well-being of sports persons and the protection of coaches, staff and spectators, is clear. Imagery, Goal Setting, Relaxation and Arousal Management are four most prominent psychological skills training methods used by sports persons. PST can be used as a means to improve stress management in sports persons to cope with the anxiety, stress and mental pressure that comes with their sport, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. Suitable mental training can aid sports persons to achieve optimum performance and will in turn develop resilient players. Mental resilience is a critical factor for any player to achieve a gold medal performance; it is not something a sports person inherits but must acquire through time.

Scope for Future Research

The COVID-19 virus has had, and is projected to have detrimental effects on the sports sector and individuals' mental and physical well-being. Given the paucity of research in this field, this study, on the detrimental effects of Covid-19 on sportspersons' psychological health is an issue that merits research. Sportspeople have endured and continue to face an array of psychological obstacles and hardships, especially considering that mental health has traditionally been a taboo subject for sports persons. Many players are of the opinion that keeping their psychological issues hidden is preferable to rejection and scrutiny about their performance. Therefore, the need to develop and enact coherent measures to resume and advance sporting activities, in a manner that prioritises sportspersons' mental health

is germane. To further strengthen the literature in this field and help sportspersons maintain psychological fitness, future studies must expand on the present study.

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Corresponding Author

Puja Khatri can be contacted at: pujakhatri@ipu.ac.in

Author Biographies

Puja Khatri is a Professor at University School of Management Studies, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi. She is a trained and certified Behaviour analyst with specialization in Psychometric Profiling. She is an expert in the area of Research Methodology, Scale Development and validation and Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling. She is well versed with various software packages like SmartPLS 4.0, R, AMOS, SPSS, etc. Her areas of specialization include well-being, happiness, business communication, disruptive technology, generative AI and leadership (to name a few). She has conducted several workshops in the area of research methodology, scale development and validation, higher order structural equation modelling, data analytics, self-assessment, personality assessment, behavioural profiling in Institutions of repute. In her rich 24 years of experience in industry, teaching and research, she has published more than 160 impactful research papers with top academic journals like *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *Journal of Intellectual capital*, *Journal of Management History*, *Asia Pacific Business Review*, *Labour & Industry*, among several additional journals indexed in the ABDC listing, Web of Science and Scopus. Additionally, she has authored 6 books in the areas of personality assessment, mind and management and positivity. She has been awarded as 'Best professor in Organisational Behaviour' by ET Now in December 2019. She has also featured as most Inspirational woman in August 2019 in the Inspirational women category (academia), by We are the city. She also serves as guest editor for the European Journal of Innovation Management (ABDC- C category, Scopus and Web of Science Indexed) and Journal of Content, Community and Communication (Scopus Indexed).

Atul Shiva is presently working as Assistant Professor of Management in Jaipuria Institute of Management, Noida, Uttar Pradesh. His area of specialization is Behavioural Finance and Business Analytics and has teaching experience of 18 years. He is a certified trainer in SmartPLS Software from Northern Institute of Technology, Technical University of Hamburg (TUHH), Germany. His leading publications are in National and International Journals like *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, *Journal of Financial Services Marketing*, *Qualitative Research in Financial Markets*, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, *Journal of Management Development*,

among others. He has conducted more than 60 research methodology workshops on PLS – SEM in SmartPLS Software (duly sponsored by the developers of SmartPLS from Germany) in reputed institutions of India. He also serves as guest editor for the Journal of Content, Community and Communication.

Vidushi Dabas is a research scholar at University School of Management Studies, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi. Her research interests include Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management, with a keen focus in the field of Artificial Intelligence and Sports. She has published impactful research with reputed journals like Journal of Knowledge Management.

Harshleen Kaur Duggal is a visiting faculty at University School of Law and Legal Studies, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi. Her research area pertains to Organization Behaviour and Human Resource Management, with a keen focus on student well-being and employability. She has published impactful research with reputed journals like *Journal of Knowledge Management*, *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *Journal of Intellectual capital*, *Journal of Management History*, *Labour & Industry*, among others.