

REVIEW ON MENTAL STRENGTH IN SPORTS

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ABSTRACT:

Mental toughness refers to a collection of psychological characteristics which are central to optimal performance. Athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists have consistently implicated mental toughness as one of the most important psychological characteristics related to success in sports. Over the last few decades, numerous studies have been conducted to examine the role of mental toughness in sporting success. However, its conceptualization and measurement are without consensus. The purpose of this study is to systematically review some of the emerging definitions and conceptualizations, and examine how mental toughness could be nurtured. This review considers both qualitative and quantitative approaches to the study of mental toughness with the specific focus on the models and the development of the measurement of this construct. Although these discussions center on the general aspects of mental toughness, we believe many of the issues have relevance to scholars and practitioners who are interested in the measurement of psychological variables as they pertain to sport, exercise, and other performance or achievement contexts.

KEYWORDS: *Flexibility, Mental Strength, Meditate Regularly, Psychological Characteristics, Think Positively,*

INTRODUCTION

As a sport psychologist it isn't unusual to come across a common myth that sport psychology services are for elite athletes only and thus, must make a hole in your pocket. As a practitioner, my goal is to reach the grassroots level as much as possible because mental toughness is a skill that can be developed right from the beginning[1]. Like the physical training of any athlete is a non-negotiable component of the training routine, similarly, adding mental toughness training makes sure the athlete's mind is also being trained to endure the competitive demands. This is because it is possible to learn how to develop a champion's mind of a champion! To begin with, being mentally tough can mean various things. All athletes are a unique mix of strengths and weaknesses, so are the demands of each sport[2].

Some athletes may require building self-confidence, some may need to learn pressure handling, some may need to work on improving their attentional focus, etc. As the nature of participating in any sport is dynamic, for an athlete to sustain in the competitive realm the foundation needs to be impeccable. Like the old saying goes, 'if you want the building to be

strong, work on formulating a durable base to begin with'. Teaching an athlete to be mentally tough is to teach them to push themselves beyond their existing comfort zones, not just physically but also mentally[3]. The purpose of this manuscript is to review those studies examining the construct of mental toughness and its relationship to sports performance. This paper is divided into specific sections including the early views on mental toughness, contemporary mental toughness research applying qualitative approaches, contemporary mental toughness research using quantitative approaches, and research on the relationship between mental toughness and other psychological variables. Conclusion and future research recommendations in these areas are also discussed.

DISCUSSION

Mental toughness in sport is the ability to pull through competitive pressure and consistently perform at your optimum skill level. Mental toughness is not always the perfection or excellence, moreover, it is the mental ability of an athlete to consistently replicate the execution under tough circumstances[4]. It is a skill like a cover drive, bicycle kick, or a forehand topspin, you can choose to practice and sharpen it regularly. In any sport, mental preparation plays a huge role just as the athletes physical training. An athlete who works regularly on training his or her mind usually is found to perform to one's potential truly. The role of a sport psychologist or the mental trainer is to initially understand the athletes need, the personality, and the external demands placed on the athlete. Depending on this a customized mental training routine can be formulated and worked out with the athlete on a regular basis[5].

To become a mentally tough athlete is a continuous process and a few things can be implemented:

- **Winning Attitude:** A strong sense of self-belief is a great way to begin any practice session or a tournament. Athletes must pay close attention to building a bulletproof and challenging mindset by training like a champion.
- **Pressure Management:** Athletes should have a full understanding of how he or she behaves under pressure to be able to perform unfazed by it. Self-awareness, developing strategies beforehand, and simulation training can be implemented to handle pressure.
- **Laser Focus:** A funnel approach of one's concentration can make skill acquisition or implementation fairly smooth. The athlete should learn to focus completely on the task at hand rather than letting external circumstances affect shot delivery.

An expert consultation on developing such routines can be beneficial and much more effective as sport psychologist are trained professionals in this area. Training your mind is an everyday thing and thus, athletes can be mindful themselves[6].

The Problematic Sides of Mental Strength:

To be clear, purposely treating an athlete badly, no matter the age (youth to adult), in an attempt to improve mental strength, is not being recommended. It is not helpful to berate and/or bully someone in an attempt to develop their mental toughness[7]. This type of treatment can occur from a coach, a teammate, parents, and even fans. Sometimes, there are signs that the manner in which someone is going about trying to build mental strength is not working. Consider a change if the athlete shows these signs:

- Lowered confidence.
- Increased negative emotions.
- Increased irritability.
- Increased isolation.

Remember there is a big difference between challenging an athlete to improve and berating one. This is key in building positive mental strength.

6 Ways to Promote Mental Strength in Sports:

1. Think Positively:

One of the simplest ways to become mentally stronger when one is under pressure is to take note of what is going well. Negative or critical thoughts about oneself during a difficult situation usually only add to the mental stress. This is the opposite of what one wants. Positive thoughts, on the other hand, increase a person's resilience to what's going on. Positive thinking, over the years, has evolved into a skill that is often misunderstood. Thinking positive means knowing when to analyze a game and be honest about what is going well. In the middle of a game, getting down on yourself and highly critical may not be the best time or best strategy to help mental strength. For example, an athlete who is angry at a call can use positive self-talk to keep the anger at a manageable level. This can help stop the anger and other damaging emotions from taking control. No one wants to be removed from the game because they lost control of their emotions. Positive thinking, such as "I can do this if I stay cool," can assist[8].

2. Meditate Regularly:

Based on a growing body of research, meditation is showing promise with helping individuals enhance mental clarity, reduce stress, and improve self-control. Many athletes are reluctant to try meditation due to misconceptions. There are different types of meditation. Sitting cross-legged in silence or chanting "om" are not the only ways to meditate. For those who avoid meditation because they have hyperactive minds, there's a type of meditation for

them. It's called mindfulness meditation. With mindfulness meditation, one doesn't try to silence their thoughts. They focus on what's going on in their minds and around them while breathing deeply and being aware of thoughts but not reacting to them. It is a great practice for building attention and awareness, which are part of mental strength[9].

3. Use Imagery of Success:

Before entering the game, high-level performers often use imagery and see themselves playing well and winning. You might imagine yourself staying level-headed and focused throughout a game. Because it has already occurred in one's mind, and the move has been rehearsed, it can be easier for the body to follow through. If you are feeling a lot of pressure and mental stress, take a few minutes to visualize coping with the pressure in the way you want to in the actual situation. Create a mental plan so you know what to do when the pressure feels high. See yourself being pleased with the way you managed the situation.

4. Push One's Limit a Few Times Per Month:

Many top performers find ways to push themselves and venture out of their comfortable routines. This helps lay a good foundation for mental strength. There is no greater teacher of confidence than to see yourself do something you doubted you could. Trees get stronger with the wind. If they stood still they would not be as strong. Likewise, a person might quit more quickly when faced with a problem because she has not been in situations that made her uncomfortable. Find ways in sports practice, or other areas of your life, to challenge yourself, and take note of how you feel mentally after these experiences. Chances are high you will feel more confident if you can push through the challenge. For example, a friend of mine challenged me to skydive. I initially was certain I could do this and remained pretty calm. I think I was probably a little too casual about it. But then it got real when we set the date and paid for it. Arriving at the company seemed easy but when I was getting on the plane, I had a moment of "what am I doing?!" When I was done I was thrilled that I did it and it made me stronger in some way. I broke through my own sense of panic. So, find your own challenge[10].

5. Develop a Sense of Commitment:

When one feels a sense of commitment, to oneself or a team, they feel more motivated to accomplish a task regardless of obstacles. This is a mental strength. A great question is to ask yourself "WHY" are you doing something? How does this why help motivate you? A sense of commitment can mean showing up on time no matter the hour or circumstances. You might do this to show leadership and as a personal commitment or you made to do this in order to lead by example. The hope is that the commitments you choose help you act for the larger good, such as team success over individual success. One activity an athlete can do to strengthen commitment is to write and list what responsibilities come with their position or sport. Then make a plan to commit to fulfill those responsibilities[11].

6. Improve Adaptability and Flexibility:

In general, people can be resistant to change. This is similar to being comfortable with your routine and what you know. However, being inflexible and slow to adapt to changes slows the process of building mental strength. Athletes often work on physical flexibility as a means to play better and avoid injury. Mental flexibility provides similar benefits. A flexible mental game is needed for handling unexpected training challenges, such as changing weather conditions, new routines, and even coping with other people. A flexible mind might mean looking at the same situation from multiple perspectives and challenging your own assumptions. A great example of flexible mindset is not assuming a game is done. Have you ever felt momentum shifts, where one team suddenly starts to overtake the other when they were losing? It can feel like a force occurred and the other team gets stronger and stronger. Those momentum shifts can be related to mental strength.

Final Thoughts:

Developing mental strength is essential for top performance in sports. Many athletes who are at the top of their game are mentally strong. They can stay level-headed during stressful moments. Even when the odds are against them, they don't give up. Some people have naturally developed mental strength through tough life experiences in addition to being challenged in their sport. However, no matter how old one is or what one's background is, they can improve this muscle. Implementing the tips listed above will help one develop the mental strength for sport and life[12].

CONCLUSION

The study of mental toughness has advanced since the adoption of more scientifically rigorous approaches, but there are still a number of limitations and theoretical descriptions that should be considered when interpreting their findings. Most contemporary researchers suggest that an individual's mental toughness will be determined by both inherited characteristics and by learning, experience, and environment influences. Research into the relationship between mental toughness and performance has consistently shown that better performances of both cognitive and motor skills are associated with higher levels of mental toughness and those elite athletes have higher mental toughness than lower level performers. One of the key advances toward a greater understanding of mental toughness appears to be the development of valid and reliable measurement instruments. Past studies used other psychological variables such as emotions, affections, perceptions or pains as a potential mechanism for psychological mental toughness in competitive sports situations. Therefore, this issue should be considered as the future direction of study because there is still room for further development of potential mechanisms for confirmation.

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