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Coach Strategies to Enhance Athletes' Psychological Readiness for Competition

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Abstract

Objectives. This study examined whether structured coaching strategies can improve athletes' psychological readiness for competition. Psychological readiness—such as self-confidence, emotional control, concentration, and the ability to manage anxiety—is widely seen as an important factor that supports competitive performance.

Materials and Methods. A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design was used. Forty competitive athletes (16–20 years old) were randomly assigned to an intervention group (n = 20) or a control group (n = 20). The intervention was a six-week psychological coaching program that included goal setting, imagery practice, positive self-talk, and pre-competition routines. Psychological readiness was assessed using the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2) and a validated Psychological Readiness Scale. Data were analyzed with paired and independent sample t-tests, and the effect size was reported using Cohen's d.

Results. Athletes in the intervention group showed a clear improvement in overall psychological readiness after the program ($p < 0.01$). They also reported lower cognitive and somatic anxiety, along with higher self-confidence. In contrast, the control group did not show meaningful changes ($p > 0.05$). The overall improvement in psychological readiness produced a large effect size ($d = 0.89$).

Conclusions. The findings indicate that structured psychological coaching strategies can meaningfully strengthen athletes' psychological readiness for competition. Coaches are encouraged to include mental skills training as part of regular practice to support athletes' performance in competition.

Keywords: Psychological Readiness, Coaching Strategies, Competition Anxiety, Mental Skills Training, Athlete Performance

Introduction

Psychological readiness is often a deciding factor in how well athletes perform, especially in competitions where pressure, expectations, and emotions tend to rise(Birrer & Morgan, 2010; Didymus et al., 2021). Athletes who are mentally prepared usually compete with more confidence, stay focused longer, and can manage their emotions better (Cools et al., 2015; De Bosscher & De Rycke, 2017). In contrast, when psychological preparation is weak, athletes may feel overwhelmed by anxiety, lose concentration, and end up performing below their actual ability (Haney Aguirre-Loaiza, 2025; Miller et al., 2011).

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In sport psychology, readiness is commonly linked to several mental aspects, such as self-confidence, concentration, emotional regulation, and anxiety control (Hanton et al., 2004; Nurfani et al., 2022). These aspects shape how athletes respond to stressful situations and how they handle competitive demands(Hamer, 2023; https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2019.1636402 et al., 2020). Because of that, mental preparation should not be treated as something secondary; it needs to be trained in a planned way, just like physical and technical skills(Burton & Rodgerson, 2001; Dima et al., 2020). Studies on mental skills training show that strategies like goal setting, imagery, relaxation, positive self-talk, and pre-competition routines can help athletes build stronger mental control and perform more consistently (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; Curtis et al., 2024).

Coaches have an important role in developing this side of athletes (Adebiyi, Natasha F, n.d.; Hamer, 2023; Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Coaching is not only about physical conditioning and technical improvement, but also about shaping mindset, motivation, and coping strategies. Since athletes interact with coaches regularly, coaches are in a strong position to introduce mental skills in a practical way and guide athletes to use them during training and competition (Albalad-Aiguabella et al., 2025; Dello Iacono et al., 2021). Several studies have reported that coaching-based psychological programs can reduce competitive anxiety and improve self-confidence, which are both closely related to performance outcomes.

However, in many settings, coaching programs still focus more on physical preparation than psychological development. Mental training is often discussed only when athletes face problems, rather than being included as a routine part of training plans. As a result, athletes may enter competitions physically ready but mentally unprepared. This situation shows the need for more research that tests structured coaching interventions aimed specifically at improving psychological readiness in competitive contexts.

Based on this background, the present study examines whether a structured psychological coaching program can improve athletes' readiness for competition (Song & Zhao, 2024). The program includes goal setting, imagery practice, positive self-talk, and pre-competition routines delivered in a planned format over several weeks (Cumming & Ramsey, 2009; Iswana, 2019). The findings are expected to provide practical input for coaches, particularly on how mental skills training can be applied through regular coaching strategies and whether it leads to measurable improvements in athletes' psychological readiness.

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Novelty: This study offers a coach-friendly, step-by-step program model that is integrated into regular training sessions and evaluates its impact using measurable readiness indicators, making it easier to replicate in similar competitive settings.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Athletes who receive structured psychological coaching strategies will show significantly higher psychological readiness than athletes who do not receive the intervention.

In line with this hypothesis, the study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a structured psychological coaching program in strengthening athletes' psychological readiness for competition.

Materials and Methods

Study Participants.

This study involved 40 competitive athletes (male and female) aged 16–20 years who were recruited from local sport clubs. Athletes were included if they: (1) had been actively training and competing for at least two years, (2) had experience in regional-level competitions, and (3) had no diagnosed psychological disorders. All athletes gave informed consent before the study started. Participants were randomly divided into two groups: the intervention group (n = 20) and the control group (n = 20) (Sugiyono, 2017).

Study organization.

A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design was used and conducted over six weeks (Sugiyono, 2017). The pretest was carried out one week before the program began, while the posttest was conducted right after the six-week period ended. The intervention group received a structured psychological coaching program that was combined with their regular training. The program covered SMART-based goal setting, guided imagery of competition situations, positive self-talk training (cognitive restructuring), breathing and relaxation techniques, and the development of pre-competition routines. Sessions were held twice a week, with each session lasting around 30 minutes. Meanwhile, the control group continued their usual physical and technical training without any structured psychological coaching.

Statistical analysis.

All data were processed using SPSS version 26. Data normality was checked using the Shapiro–Wilk test. Changes within each group were analyzed using paired sample t-tests, while differences between the intervention and control groups were tested using independent sample t-tests. Effect size was calculated using Cohen's d. The level of significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

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Results

Table 1. Psychological Readiness Scores (Mean ± SD)

Variable	Group	Pretest	Posttest	p-value
Psychological Readiness	Intervention	62.45 ± 6.12	74.80 ± 5.34	0.001*
Psychological Readiness	Control	63.10 ± 5.88	64.05 ± 6.01	0.312

As shown in Table 1, athletes in the intervention group experienced a clear increase in psychological readiness after the program ($p < 0.01$). Meanwhile, the control group's scores stayed relatively similar from pretest to posttest and the change was not significant ($p > 0.05$).

When looking at the CSAI-2 components, the intervention group reported lower cognitive anxiety ($p = 0.002$) and somatic anxiety ($p = 0.004$), along with a noticeable rise in self-confidence ($p = 0.001$).

The effect size also supported the strength of the intervention, showing a large impact (Cohen's $d = 0.89$).

Discussion

The results support our hypothesis that structured coaching strategies can improve athletes' psychological readiness (Wangsa Chandra & Djulaeka, 2024; Yang et al., 2024). After completing the mental skills program, athletes in the intervention group showed higher self-confidence and lower anxiety than those in the control group.

This pattern is in line with findings from sport psychology research showing that mental skills training works best when it is blended into daily coaching, not treated as a separate add-on. When coaches consistently apply psychological techniques during training, athletes tend to handle emotions more effectively and feel better prepared when entering competition (Dello Iacono et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2024).

The effect size in this study was large, which suggests the program had a meaningful impact in real training settings, not just on paper (Bompa et al., 2009; Dello Iacono et al., 2021). It also highlights an important point: psychological readiness is not something fixed. Like technique or fitness, it can be trained and strengthened through regular practice.

In terms of application, coaches can start by adding short mental sessions into the weekly training plan. The sessions do not need to be long, but they should be structured and

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delivered consistently so athletes can actually build the habit and use the skills in competition (Mulya et al., 2025; Yaroshenko et al., 2024).

Future studies should consider longer intervention periods and include performance-based outcomes, such as match results, statistics, or coach evaluations, to better explain how improvements in psychological readiness translate into competitive success.

Conclusions

This study tested the hypothesis that structured psychological coaching strategies would improve athletes' psychological readiness for competition compared with regular training without a planned mental program. The findings supported this hypothesis. After six weeks, athletes in the intervention group showed better psychological readiness, seen in higher self-confidence and lower anxiety, while the control group showed no meaningful change.

These results match the sport psychology literature discussed in the introduction, which notes that mental skills training—such as goal setting, imagery, positive self-talk, relaxation, and pre-competition routines—tends to work best when it is practiced regularly and integrated into daily coaching. The large effect size also suggests that the program had a strong impact in real training settings, not only in statistical terms.

Overall, the study highlights that psychological readiness is not a fixed trait. Like physical fitness and technical skills, it can be improved through a clear program and consistent practice. From a practical perspective, coaches can apply these findings by adding short mental training sessions to weekly practice schedules. The sessions do not need to be long, but they should be structured and carried out consistently so athletes can build routines and use the skills during competition.

For future research, it would be useful to run longer interventions, involve larger and more varied athlete groups, and include performance measures (such as match statistics, competition results, or coach assessments) to better explain how psychological readiness is linked to competitive performance.

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Conflict of interest

If the authors have any conflicts of interest to declare.

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