

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND APPLIED EXERCISE SCIENCE**EVALUATING MENTAL PREPARATION INTERVENTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL SPORTS ATHLETES**Shubhdip Kaur¹¹ Assistant Professor, Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University, Sri Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab.Email: shubh.phd@gmail.com

Abstract : Psychological skills are fundamental to elite athletic performance, yet individual sport athletes face distinct cognitive and emotional demands due to the absence of in-game teammate support. While mental toughness was historically regarded as an inherent trait, contemporary sport science recognizes that psychological skills are trainable competencies that directly influence motor execution and stress management (Brewer, 2001; Martens, 1987; Umler, 2009). This study investigated the efficacy of psychological sports counseling in reducing stress and competitive anxiety among individual sport athletes. A sample of 120 male university athletes (aged 19–24 years) competing in individual sports (Athletics, Badminton, Lawn Tennis, and Boxing) was recruited from various universities of Punjab. Participants were allocated into two equal groups: an intervention group receiving structured sports counseling ($n = 60$) and an uncounseled control group ($n = 60$). Evaluated using the Singh Personal Stress Source Inventory and the Sinha Comprehensive Anxiety Test across four competitive events, the counseled athletes demonstrated significantly lower levels of stress ($t = 7.14, p < .01$) and anxiety ($t = 6.85, p < .01$) compared to their uncounseled counterparts. These findings highlight the essential role of sports psychologists in helping individual athletes regulate autonomic arousal, optimize pre-performance mindsets, and sustain high-level performance under pressure (Hanton et al., 2008; Vealey, 2007).

INTRODUCTION

It has long been acknowledged that psychological skills are critical for players at the elite level. An athlete equipped with the requisite mental toughness, self-efficacy, and autonomic control is significantly more likely to achieve sustained athletic success (Bandura, 1997; Brewer, 2001). In early athletic paradigms, it was widely assumed that these psychological attributes were genetically determined or permanently fixed during early childhood development (Goodwin, 2009; Umler, 2009). However, modern sport science explicitly rejects this view, establishing that athletes and coaches can learn, refine, and automate a broad range of psychological skills that play a critical role in skill acquisition, motor performance, and emotional stability (Brewer, 2001; Feltz et al., 2008). In individual sports—such as track and field, badminton, tennis, and boxing—the psychological burden placed on the athlete is particularly acute. Unlike team sports, where accountability and task demands are distributed among multiple players, individual sport athletes must rely entirely on their own internal coping mechanisms (Hanin, 2000; Mellalieu et al., 2006). The specialized field of sport psychology has developed rapidly, demonstrating that psychological training must form an integral part of an athlete's holistic preparation alongside physical, tactical, and technical conditioning (Davis et al., 2009; Orlick, 2008). The sports psychologist serves as an essential member of the coaching and sports healthcare team, teaching self-regulation skills that enable athletes to accelerate motor learning, manage acute competitive anxiety, maintain sharp focus, and navigate environmental distractions (Brewer, 2001; Davis et al., 2009; Williams & Krane, 2015).

Preparing for Competition in Individual Sports

To assist individual athletes in navigating demanding performance environments, sports psychologists introduce targeted mental strategies, including:

1. **Arousal Regulation:** Techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, and controlled diaphragmatic breathing to manage physiological hyper-arousal (Brewer, 2001; Jacobson, 1938).
2. **Cognitive Restructuring & Self-Talk:** Eliminating negative internal dialogue and substituting constructive, task-relevant verbal cues to maintain focus and confidence (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2011).

3. **Attentional Focus:** Mastering internal and external concentration styles to prevent choking under pressure (Nideffer, 1976).
4. **Mental Imagery:** Utilizing multi-sensory (visual and kinesthetic) imagery to mentally rehearse technical execution and tactical strategies (Cumming & Williams, 2013).
5. **Pre-Performance Routines:** Structuring short, consistent routines executed immediately prior to performance (e.g., before a serve, jump, or bout) to prime state-dependent readiness (Cohn, 1990; Moran, 2012).

Phases of Psychological Skills Training (PST)

Psychological Skills Training aims to build mental fortitude—such as self-confidence, intrinsic motivation, poise under pressure, and sustained concentration—through three distinct phases (Vealey, 2007):

- **Education Phase:** Athletes learn about the impact of psychological states on motor control and performance outcomes (Umler, 2009).
- **Acquisition Phase:** Athletes learn tailored strategies and cognitive-behavioral techniques suited to their individual sport demands (Brewer, 2001; Martens, 1987).
- **Practice Phase:** Athletes systematically automate their psychological skills through repeated practice, competitive simulations, and live athletic events (Orlick, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to empirically evaluate the impact of sports counseling delivered by a sports psychologist on reducing competitive stress and anxiety among university athletes participating in individual sports.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A total of 120 male university-level individual sport athletes ($N = 120$) aged 19 to 24 years were selected from the Department of Physical Education at Punjabi University, Patiala. The participants were active competitors across four individual sports: Athletics, Badminton, Lawn Tennis, and Boxing.

The sample was divided into two equal operational groups:

1. **Counseled Group ($n = 60$):** Athletes who received structured sports counseling sessions prior to competition.
2. **Control / Uncounseled Group ($n = 60$):** Athletes who did not receive prior sports counseling.

Psychometric Instruments

- **Singh Personal Stress Source Inventory (SPSSI):** Developed by Singh (1995) to evaluate individual stress levels across personal and environmental domains.
- **Sinha Comprehensive Anxiety Test (SCAT):** Developed by Sinha and Sinha (1995) to assess manifest and competitive anxiety levels.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected in small group settings (20–30 participants) in a controlled classroom environment to ensure standardized testing conditions. Standardized instructions were provided according to instrument protocols. Aggregate scores across four competitive events were computed for statistical evaluation.

Study Variables

- **Independent Variable:** Sports Counseling Status (Received Counseling vs. Did Not Receive Counseling).
- **Dependent Variables:** Stress level and Anxiety level

RESULTS

Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to evaluate the statistical differences in stress and anxiety levels between individual sport athletes who received sports counseling and those who did not across four competitive events.

Table 1 Comparison of Stress and Anxiety Mean Scores Between Counseled and Uncounseled Groups in Individual Sports

Variable	Group	Mean	SD	SE	df	t-value	p-value
Stress	Counseled	21.45	6.82	0.88	118	7.14*	< .01
	Uncounseled	32.80	9.65	1.25			
Anxiety	Counseled	36.10	6.12	0.79	118	6.85*	< .01
	Uncounseled	45.75	8.84	1.14			

*Significant at the $p < .01$ level.

The mean stress score for uncounseled individual athletes ($M = 32.80$) was significantly higher than that of counseled individual athletes ($M = 21.45$). The calculated t -value of 7.14 ($df = 118$) was statistically significant at $p < .01$. The mean anxiety score for uncounseled individual athletes ($M = 45.75$) was significantly higher than that of counseled individual athletes ($M = 36.10$). The calculated t -value of 6.85 ($df = 118$) was statistically significant at $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate a statistically significant reduction in both stress ($t = 7.14$, $p < .01$) and anxiety ($t = 6.85$, $p < .01$) among individual sport athletes who underwent psychological sports counselling compared to those in the uncounselled control group. Uncounseled players exhibited significantly higher baseline stress ($M = 32.80$) and competitive anxiety ($M = 45.75$) during athletic events. In individual sports, unmanaged psychological stress directly disrupts self-regulation, fluid motor execution, and attentional focus, often leading to acute performance drops under pressure (Brewer, 2001; Davis et al., 2009; Hardy et al., 1996).

Mechanisms of Stress and Anxiety Reduction in Individual Sports

Individual sport athletes lack the buffer of team dynamics, making them particularly vulnerable to hyper-arousal and competitive anxiety (Hanin, 2000; Martens et al., 1990). Uncontrolled anxiety triggers physiological tension—such as elevated heart rate, muscle tightness, and shallow respiration—which hinders fine motor control and spatial awareness (Umler, 2009; Woodman & Hardy, 2003). Through sports counseling, athletes acquire structured self-regulation strategies, such as somatic relaxation, cognitive reframing, and pre-performance routines (Brewer, 2001; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2011). These tools allow athletes to convert cognitive anxiety into productive focus and maintain internal control during high-pressure moments (Goodwin, 2009; Jones & Swain, 1992).

Practical Role of the Sports Psychologist for Individual Athletes

Integrating a sports psychologist into individual athletic training offers essential advantages:

- **Individualized Profiling:** Assessing individual cognitive dispositions and coping styles to tailor customized mental routines (Davis et al., 2009; Vealey, 2007).
- **Addressing Isolation & Pressure:** Helping individual athletes manage the psychological weight of sole responsibility for outcomes (Mellalieu et al., 2006).
- **Pre-Performance Consistency:** Designing systematic pre-shot or pre-event routines to ensure consistent mental execution (Cohn, 1990; Moran, 2012).
- **Emotional Resilience:** Assisting athletes in recovering quickly from mistakes or adverse officiating during competition (Brewer, 2001; Orlick, 2008).

CONCLUSION

There is an essential need for dedicated sports psychologists in individual sports. Because performance in individual events relies entirely on the athlete's personal physical, technical, and psychological state, mental preparation is paramount. Providing structured sports counseling significantly reduces competitive stress and anxiety, empowering individual athletes to maintain composure and perform at their full potential under pressure.

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