Mental Instability: A Critical Aspect in Assessing Decline of Player Performance

Rudhra Mukund¹ and Amritashish Bagchi²*

¹Student, MBA, ²Assistant Professor, Symbiosis School of Sports Sciences, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, Maharashtra, India

*Corresponding author: amritashish.bagchi@ssss.edu.in (Bagchi)

Abstract

Background: Mental stability is a key tool that is capable of improving the quality and longevity of a player’s career. The world is witnessing a tremendous rise in the number of cases on poor mental health due to various factors. The objective was to understand the importance of keeping a tab on mental health. Awareness towards this subject has increased over the years, making it easier for individuals to find a way to express their thoughts and feelings in the right manner. Mental health experts have expressed that building trust is very important for an individual to express their thoughts. Financial constraints, personal issues, relationships, pressure, fear of failure are a few of the many factors that affect the performance of a player. It is extremely important for a player to understand the importance of mental well-being and not ignore it by turning a blind eye towards the issue. Methods: Data was collected through systematic literature review. Conclusion: Mental instability plays a major role in assessing the decline of player performance in sport. There are many factors that contribute to mental instability in a player’s career. It is critical and important for administrations and federations to address mental health at the right time, in order to ensure well being of a player.

Keywords: Sports Psychology; Mental well-being; Player Performance; Mental Health; Mindset


1. Introduction:

Recent studies show that sportspersons are often diagnosed with mental instability, causing a massive decline in player performance. A sportsperson tends to indulge in multiple activities throughout the day. For instance, an individual who participates in any kind of sport has the responsibility to both train for the tournaments as well as maintain consistency of the highest level. This study is particularly targeted towards the sportsperson’s mental well-being and to ensure they understand and talk about it to mindset coaches or sports psychologists in order to avoid decline of performance. There is a positive correlation between resilience and hardiness, as the ability to handle difficult situations, is a key contributor towards success of an athlete. The focus of this study is also to make individuals understand that mental health must be prioritized on equal terms with physical health. In sports, the symptoms can be identified through on field performances. Associations and Federations must understand the
value of mental health and give it top priority. If athletes within such organizations are not provided with access to timely or adequate mental health care, it could lead to decline of the quality of athletes being produced which is not good in the long run. Wrong sleep cycles could also lead to mental health issues and is one of the many factors in assessing the decline of player performance. Developing an understanding in a structured manner of the mental health and psychological wellbeing specific to elite athletes has to improve in order to witness high quality performance at all stages of an athletes career. Such an understanding is the need of the hour and is required to provide guidance for sport practitioners—including coaches, medical staff and sport psychologists—in developing the coping abilities of elite athletes and, in turn, improving their emotional and mental wellbeing. With the rapid growth of diseases all across the world and the resulting change in world dynamics, along with sports personalities having to change with time, it is important more than ever to be buoyant with the existing scenario all around the world. Making utmost use of your imagination and visualization skills is also a key contributor to positive intent and high performance.

The research project can be referred by anyone from the psychological or mental wellness industry looking to gain an insight on how good psychological mentors can increase efficient performances. It is also possible to envision the direction towards which the mental wellness industry is heading. This project can be of assistance to sports psychologists, players, mental wellness and life coaches and so on and so forth. Students who wish to pursue their career in the sports psychology field may also refer to the study to gain industrial insights. The objective of the study was to understand the importance of staying in the right frame of mind to improve performance on the field.

2. Material & methods:
In order to generate information and facts, a systematic literature review was conducted to discuss, understand and analyze the experiences that professional athletes of the highest level have gone through with regard to mental health. The study focuses predominantly in the area of mental wellness and psychology which remains as the scope of content.

Andrew Flintoff, one of the biggest stars produced by England cricket in decades battled mental health issues that forced him to draw curtains to his International career in 2010. Freddie, as most of us would call him, was at the peak of his career with top performances with bat and ball, especially with major contributions in the Ashes 2005 and 2009 series. In an interview with Professor Green, he mentioned that he knew something was wrong for a long time and just tried to run away from it rather than addressing the issue. He used excessive drinking and indulging in a lot of alcohol as a medium to escape from his feelings. He then spoke to a few biggies from the industry and realized that it is something a lot of people face and is not the only one. He was scared if all the people who followed his career closely would turn their backs towards him, only to realize that the exact opposite happened. People started talking to him more than ever before and share their stories which made him feel comfortable. In an interview with BBC, he clearly specified that a work like stigma should not be associated with mental health issues. He was on pills most of the time and said that medication helped him feel normal after a few
weeks, just like how it would for any normal human being. Flintoff was a rare talent and could have possibly played for a longer period only if the issue was addressed in the right manner and not the option he chose of excessive drinking. It is extremely important for players to know that it is completely normal to go through depression or any kind of mental instability, the key is to know how to handle it in the right process and ensure it does not affect your playing career. Andrew Flintoff, retired in the year 2010 as he did not know how to deal with the issue which led to decline of his performance and lack of intensity and zeal to play the game further. He made a comeback in 2014, returning to Lancashire for a T20 match. Post that he played for the Brisbane Heat in the Australian Big Bash league but failed to make a mark and make his presence felt. He announced his second retirement post that season. This is a clear indicator that mental instability led to the decline of the player’s performance which also cut short is playing days as a cricketer.

Glenn Maxwell, another fine talent had taken a break from the game sighting mental health as a reason behind this decision. He began his professional cricketing career with Victoria in the T20 Big bash league and made a big name for himself. His name was doing the rounds all across the world cricket community as a terrific hitter of the cricket ball. He was magnificent with his batting, a sound fielder and a handy bowler. His performances speak for himself. But if you take a close look at his performances post 2018 and compare it pre 2018, you will see a tremendous difference. He played for Delhi daredevils in the IPL 2018, scoring only 142 runs at an average of 14 and not a single score of 50+. Maxwell was then accused by Al Jazeera’s documentary with match fixing allegations which he completely denied and said he would never get involved in such practices that would spoil the reputation of the game. Post this, he was dropped from the Australian Test squad for the Tour of UAE. He was unable to come up with any great performances, post 2018 except for an odd performance here and there. In October 2019, he decided to take a break from the game due to mental health and was highly appreciated by the cricket community across the globe. There was a clear decline in performance due to mental instability which required him to take a break from the game.

3. Results and Discussion:

The higher you climb the ladder in a sport, the more are the chances for you to experience mental instability. All the factors increase due to added pressure to perform. As we can see, both Andrew Flintoff and Glenn Maxwell were doing extremely well for themselves and had already made a mark in their respective careers. The symptoms started to show in their performance on the field and their mannerisms in the dressing room or how they felt about themselves from within, forcing them to either retire or take a break from the sport. There are certain factors that are the cause for decline in player performance, such as sleep cycles, excessive socializing, financial constraints, peer pressure, fear of failure, unstable mindset, lack of support, conscious of being judged or getting over overwhelmed by certain situations. Athletes must understand that they are the best versions of themselves and not let fear of failure or consciousness act as hindrance in their performances. They must realise that it is impossible to stop people from judging them on their performance. Expectations will always be part and parcel of a player’s career, it is for the players to understand their role and go about achieving targets in the manner that suits them and not what the audience wants. Positive mindset is the key to success of an athlete in the long run. Goals and targets must be set for themselves and not based on people’s wants and wishes. It is an important factor to keep in mind as nasty comments on
various factors by experts can often tend to affect a player’s mind. The diet of an athlete should consist of balanced meals and most importantly, under the guidance of an expert in nutrition who understands the body of the particular athlete. Every athlete has a different body structure and metabolism. Therefore, diet plans must consist of adequate amount of protein, carbohydrates, fats and vitamins but priority has to be given to the athletes body type before deciding on the percentage of consumption of all this\(^6\). In the same way, sleep patterns and socializing must be in control at all given times because it has always played an important role while assessing the quality of performance\(^19\). Athletes tend not to seek support for mental health problems, for reasons such as lack of understanding about mental health and wellbeing, fear of being judged as there is a perception of talking about mental health as a sign of weakness. There is a co relation between anxiety and tension, both go hand in hand with each other\(^{14}\). Sleep cycles are clearly important for an athlete to feel fresh and ready. A lot of athletes tend to have the wrong sleep cycles because of untimely match timings and tough and intense practice sessions. Regular naps and a good sleep hygiene is a must and has to be understood by an athlete and must not be taken for granted\(^4\). Lack of confidence is common in such situations. It is natural for a player to feel out of place and not have the right amount of confidence to deliver high quality performances. Confidence plays a very vital role in a player’s career. The longer the career, the higher the chances of experiencing mental instability\(^{15}\).

We must all understand that athletes are always on the move towards achieving excellence in their field, these setbacks not only create awareness but also make them better at problem solving and learn to manage setbacks in a much more courageous manner. Excessive drinking is a solution that most athletes go towards\(^{29}\). It is critical to have the right guidance in order to handle it in the right manner. There is enough evidence to show that athletes are often vulnerable to mental health issues\(^{20}\). All sports federations and associations need to come to a common understanding and ensure that adequate effort is put in towards understanding the mental aspect of a player and not turn a blind eye to such issues. There is a rapid growth in the demand for mental wellness experts in today’s day and age and is only going to grow with time. Talking to mental health experts at the right time is a must and should be prioritized by players and team managements. Addressing the issue on time has always proved to be beneficial and can avoid the decline of a player’s performance, giving the player a chance to excel in their career for longer periods of time. Team managements must stay in constant touch with players even during non-playing days and keep a tab on their mental state of mind. From the findings, we are clearly able to come to an understanding that sports are extremely competitive and it is easy to succumb to pressure while being a part of a very challenging environment\(^{26}\). There are a number of factors that play a role in the mental aspect of a player’s career. Mental wellness experts must be given a lot of priority and should always be in constant touch with players. Mental health plays a significant role in a career and all steps must be taken to ensure that it does not reduce the number of years from a player’s career. It can be solved and must not be a hindrance in player performance and more importantly not be a critical aspect in decline of player performance. It is very natural for players to experience all the factors that are discussed above\(^{23}\). Players should not feel ashamed about experiencing it. The sooner they understand the importance of talking about it with an expert, the better it is for their own career. Coaches and players must be given the freedom to express any kind of thoughts that arise in their head. Players must avoid trying to handle the mental illness on their own as seeking professional help is a much more
viable option during mental instability. Players and managements must be in constant touch even during off seasons as mental instability could occur at any given time during a player’s career. References suggest that mental illness is prevalent among professional elite athletes and if guided in the right manner, the athletes come out much more confident and knowledgeable about mental health. Besides having rigorous training schedules, continuous travel and staying away from home and family is also a major contributor towards feeling mentally unstable\textsuperscript{(13)}. Athletes are known to be away from home for most part of their playing career which leads to mental illness. Increasing confidence of a player and giving them a clear understanding seems to be a critical step towards attaining stability\textsuperscript{(14)}. Nonetheless, this research has made us understand that athletes are vulnerable to mental health and early rectification is a must. We have also come to an understanding that there are way too many factors that can be a hindrance in a player’s career. The risk of an elite athlete to experience such mental instability is very high in comparison to the general public, a major reason being high pressure situations and plenty of time spent away from home. Therefore, making it even more important for coaches and federations to understand that it is not only important to develop mental stability but also ensure that it is maintained throughout the life span of an athlete’s career. Very often, focus is on the development, whereas, research has clearly shown the importance of maintenance of mental health through various factors.\textsuperscript{(21)} Both sporting factors and non-sporting factors could contribute to mental instability. Sporting factors basically mean excessive training, burnout and non-sporting factors compromise of fear of failure, confidence\textsuperscript{(1)}. To be proactive and manage to identify the issue in the early days rather than avoiding it and delaying the process is one of the most important factors that must be understood by an athlete\textsuperscript{(28)}. Since the sporting career of every athlete is limited, there is a level of eagerness and urge to perform constantly and be at their peak always. Research has clearly indicated that emotional and psychological well being of an athlete is a critical aspect while addressing the thought of retirement\textsuperscript{(17)}. Decision making in the case of retirement consists of quite a few factors but well being is a major factor in the thought process of an athlete who is looking at retirement from a sport. These factors must be critically analysed and watched by coaches, support staff and team management as most of the rectification and identification can happen with thorough analysis at all times of an athlete’s career. Research on this topic has shown that there are way too many barriers and a reluctance to seek professional help is visible among athletes. There is no structure for players to understand the importance of mental health and its side effects. More often than not, athletes tend to neglect the issue only because they have never learnt or come across anyone addressing mental health. Poor understanding of mental health is one of the major reasons that have been stated by athletes for not seeking professional help at various stages of their career\textsuperscript{(11)}. There is a negative attitude towards mental health professionals and athletes believe that the problems could vanish with time and there is no necessity to approach a specialist\textsuperscript{(24)}. This stops them from accepting that they are going through mental instability. To understand yourself and have the openness to talk is very important and athletes must be given adequate support and help in order to talk about it.\textsuperscript{(22)} There is a clear sense of athletes accepting each other and being there for each other during such times. Athletes tend to get much more comfortable talking about it to each other rather than seeking professional help and very often that is where the mistake lies\textsuperscript{(30)}. It is critical to understand that mental health related issues can be handled only by a qualified psychologist\textsuperscript{(25)}. Approaching a friend and talk about threats, hindrances, future goals is not an issue but when an athlete is facing mental instability in the form of depression, stress, anxiety and various issues, professional guidance is a must\textsuperscript{(12)}. A key finding was that athletes are not able to understand the difference between talking to friends about being upset or tired, and symptoms of possible instability in the mind which
is related to mental illness\textsuperscript{(27)}. It is also understood that players who are able to visualize and see themselves achieving their goals and targets perform much better in tough situations, as they are able to remove the negative images in their head and convert it to positive images\textsuperscript{(18)}.

4. Conclusion:
The objective of the study was to understand how critical it is to address mental health issues, in order to avoid the decline of player performance in sport. There is a clear need to develop facilities and techniques to minimize these barriers that an athlete faces in the span of his or her career. The right approach must be used to facilitate the right approach towards seeking help for mental instability. It is very important for administrations to give prior importance towards creating a positive environment for coaches, players and support staff with mental health professionals. Efforts must be put in towards building health relationships among all of them in order for the environment to stay health and generate good results. Programs and seminars should be made available to all athletes and federations to create better awareness of mental health and it's impact on player performance. Athletes believe in opening up only if the source is trusted, therefore, utmost priority must be given towards building strong bonds among all the concerned people. Trust is a major factor and the issue has to be dealt in a sensitive manner. Being mentally stable has always proved to be successful in achieving high level of performance. Despite all limitations, a clear understanding can be derived that mental instability can be a very critical factor in assessing the decline of player performance in sport.

Ethical Clearance: Not applicable
Source of Funding: Self-funded
Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest among the authors

References:
7. Atherton M. Freddie Flintoff health: 'Didn't understand what was happening to me' - signs of condition [Internet]. Express.co.uk. 2020 [cited 23 August 2020].
Available from: https://www.express.co.uk/life-style/health/1325816/freddie-flintoff-health-latest-cricket-depression-symptoms-signs


