Psychological Barriers of Young Athletes and Importance of Sports Psychologist in Youth Sports

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Abstract

Background: The objective of the study is to discuss the different psychological barriers involved in youth sport. The study determines the factors which can lead young promising athletes to give up on sport or facing serious injury. The study also evaluates the importance of sports psychologist in the field of youth sports. Some of the most important implications of sport psychology are found in the children’s sports arena, where participants are plentiful and are highly involved.

Methods: The following study is a qualitative analysis of the responses which has been collected through Martens (1977) Sports Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT). The age group selected for this study ranging from 14 years to 18 years old.

Results: It was found that young and promising athletes tend to go through competition anxiety, stress and self doubt which may further results into opting out of the sport or physical injury which disrupts their performance.

Conclusion: A sports psychologist can help those young athletes to deal with different psychological setbacks and enhance their performance. Findings reinforce the importance of educating those responsible for the development of youth sport in the country about the role of sports psychology in youth sport.

Keywords: Youth sport development, Sports psychology, SCAT

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1.Introduction:

In sports science and professional athleticism dealing with the mind is the final frontier and every other system has been utilized extensively for the betterment of athlete’s performance. Kinesiology, the study of human kinetic movement has been used rigorously to improve the player’s movements. Blood samples of the sample athletes were tested as well11. Through his findings he further concluded that only the mind of the athlete seems to have been ignored when considering the primary input of any athlete. However, he explained sports psychology, as the concepts of psychology being applied to the athlete’s mindset during different sporting situation. It is the scientific approach that explains what certain things athletes do in certain situation and what is the reason behind during it12. Psychology was, is and will always be a fundamental segment of sports.

Sports psychology is another part of sports sciences which involves application of the science of psychology to the athletes irrespective of sex in any athletic situation. She further stated, it may also be explained as an attempt to study a person’s reaction in any sporting situation in order to analyze, define, describe, alter and modify and eventually predict certain behavior through variety of psychological means.
Sport psychology as a science that deals with the emotional aspects behind the physical performance. With respect to competitive sport it is to make an effort to explain and forecast the behavior of any athlete in the environment of competitive sport and athletic situation. The science of sports psychology does not end with the athlete on the field of play only. It tends to affect other spheres of the competitor’s life starting from the field of play to the athlete’s everyday activities which in turn affect sports performance. Keeping in consideration today’s sporting scenario and extreme professionalism sports psychology is a must for all the athletes. Sports psychologist and Psychiatrists work with athletes to make them better.

Sports psychology has to play a vital role in achieving any nation’s sporting goals. Few of the roles that sports psychology may play in optimizing success are listed below.

Because the whole temperament of the athlete is included in the game, one of the sports psychologist’s key functions is in the forum of the athlete’s behavioral control. In terms of behavioral control it means that sports psychology practitioners by changing unwanted attitudes can improve the performance of an athlete. The sports psychologist focuses with the individual’s internal tension and desires, giving him/her definitive choices of progress or loss in the game. They must be viewed as individuals who understand their distinctions and each athlete must be treated in a different manner owing to their different backgrounds.

Sports Psychologist is also involved in crisis management. Crisis is considered an acute situation with emotional reactions that impair or mark the performance of athletes. Ensure athletes optimum output-under competitive scrutiny, incorporating specific therapeutic criteria before, after and during competitions. The athlete is helped by the sports psychologist to block stress. Thoughts that prevent self-doubt, resist emotional thinking and inhibitory self-declarations which can influence the success of sports. The psychologist often brings up mental training and this includes our understanding of certain causes, which affect the athlete. It is the socioeconomic class, the family, the economic context, its religious stance, physical acceptance, its political history, its social standing and its belief structure. The sport psychologist frequently leads to the enhancement of the success of an individual, in order to promote the learning cycle.

This can be achieved through team bonding by performance assessment and supervision. Sports psychologist enhances communication among athletes which also facilitates contact between the competitors and the public. Interpersonal contact for athletes can also be involved. It is a critical position. It is necessary to remember that connectivity is really essential in our separate communities, jobs, etc. It is not supposed to be known to the person or to know. To maintain a cordial relationship, you should tell the person what to do. When interactions have been developed, partnerships and therapy arrangements that differ from one individual to another may be created. Treatment can simply involve talking to the person who may help restoring the confidence of the athlete, if the person is not sure of his or her own personality, healthy mental attitude towards pain should be created. When inspiring players, the sports psychologist can leverage his experience about human behavior. This time it does not involve inspiring the participant through training by different preparation strategies, supplying them with details about success in preparation and even letting them have a voice in their training schedule.

Another significant area in which a sports psychologist works to enhance athletic success is pain control. Stress management in athletes is developed. Different techniques can be used in stress management. Discipline for athletes is intentionally taught. This sporty discipline allows the person to develop a high level of self-esteem that improves performance, creates trust and makes the
athlete feel satisfied to engage in sports. Self-esteem athletes may become steadily empowered and successful.

Psychology in sports is said to teach an optimistic, compassionate and responsive individual\(^7\). Abilities as construction capabilities in their own right. These and many other areas are important for the development of sports by sports psychologists’ thus boosting peak efficiency.

Understanding Youth Sports: Youth sport refers to organized sports programs for children less than 18 years old. The three most important objectives in a child’s development can be associated with youth sporting activities\(^8\). Being physically and mentally fit is the primary concern in today’s youth. Sports can be an excellent tool to promote physical fitness which thereby leads to improve in the comprehensive health of an individual. Secondly, sports tend to impart a lot of life lessons which are essential for growth and progress. Skills like adaptability, teamwork, discipline and many other aspects of psychosocial development takes place majorly through sports\(^9\). Sports serves as an extremely crucial and momentous in evolving and experiencing motor skills which further help in carving future athletic starts. Thereby we can perceive the physical and psychosocial benefits that sports facilitate in the youth population. Besides these sports and physical activities have huge impact on a human’s metabolism. Physical activity aids building muscular and bone strength, vital capacity, flexibility thereby reducing chances for cardiovascular diseases, obesity, hypertension and life threatening conditions. Children who see themselves as successful at sports have brighter future expectations for success in sport than those who perceive themselves as unskilled, which lead to further participation with constant motivation. Studies also show that patterns and routines of physical activities built during the early days in life affect and influence the habits during the adult days largely sports also helps to boost immunity and protect for conditions like cancer, depression diabetes etc. Apart from individual growth, sport to a great extent provides a sense of social welfare, increased friendship among co-workers, community building and enhanced leadership skills. On the other side youth sports at times ends up in college drop-outs and delinquency among youth. Though sport is beneficial and pragmatic in a lot of ways, yet its productivity does not come automatically. For example, though we see a large number of youth populations actively taking part in sports, yet the rate of obesity is extremely high in a few countries. A closer look reveals that increased sporting injuries and food disorders among young athletes is also a matter of concern in the present days. The athlete’s mental conditions also take a toll on them, resulting in the creation of extremely pressure, reduced self-esteem and increased vulnerability. This has shown detrimental consequences on the confidence of the athlete. Further increase in violence and aggression among today’s youth is noticed among athletic population also.

A hike in attrition rates are noticed mainly in the course of adolescent years due to the through negative experience endured by the athletes. Studies evidence that a third of the total participating athletes tend to retrieve from sports between the age of ten to seventeen annually. Thus a gap is created between the expected and achieved outcome due to the pessimistic and gloom-ridden realities of sport projects. The key area for sports psychologists is to fill up this void by working in aid to one another by enhancing the positive effects and subsiding the negative ones. Especially sport programmers for youth should target to largely promote and shoot up the physical and mental health of the community in both professional and recreational spheres. This specifically highlights the essential role of sporting academies in crafting healthier and more competent programs to have further positive outcomes. Young and talented athletes go through at least a decade of hardships before they reach the level of elite athletes. In many cases because of the inability to handle such hardships and struggles many talented athletes quit their sport. The athletic career is a long and wide journey during which an athlete must go through different transitions in sports and other spheres of life as well. Young athletes are not a miniature version of elite athletes rather they are

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all completely different from each other and demanding different types of psychological support. Struggles in the form of mental setbacks starts at a very young age for athletes. Competition anxiety, self doubt, wins centric participation, external psychological pressure from parents and coaches are some of the mental barriers they need to overcome in order to perform to the best of their ability. Getting professional help from sports psychologists during the early day of the young athletes can help them tackle such problems and thus help them before a better athlete. Sports Psychologists can help them learn and implement different mental skills which shall be used in different athletic situations and other spheres of life as well.

In order to measure the competitive anxiety among the young athletes, an adoptive form of sports competition anxiety test was used. The purpose of the study is to understand the different psychological barriers in youth sport and thus justifying the fact sports psychologists help a child become a better athlete with right scientific psychological approach.

2. Material & methods:

2.1. Selection of the subjects: The study deals with the youth sport specifically, so the age group targeted for the research is between 14 years to 18 years of age (boys = 57 and girls = 43). Total participants for the research was 100 (n=100). The subjects were performing various sports: cricket, swimming, football, basketball, cycling on a regular interval and was actively taking part in amateur and semi professional tournaments. Subject breakdown in terms of sports i.e. i) Cricket (n = 37; boys = 21 & girls = 16) ii) Football (n = 35; boys = 28 and girls = 7) iii) Basketball (n = 14; boys = 4 & girls = 10) iv) Cycling (n = 8; boys = 8) v) Swimming (n = 6; boys = 2 & girls = 4). Non-athlete participants can give out biased data thus it was not taken into consideration.

2.2. Selection of the variables: The variables used for the above study consist of different psychological barriers young amateur athletes go through before, during and after a competitive sporting event\(^{(10)}\). The variables are competition anxiety, self doubt, stress, and motivation obstacles. Sports Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT), a standardized questionnaire has been used to collect data from the subjects.

2.3. Data collection: Academies, coaching centre and clubs of the above discussed sports i.e. cricket, football, swimming and basketball across Kolkata, West Bengal was contacted. Coaches and assistant coaches were briefed about the study and were requested for a data base of the athletes who train and practice in their institution. The data base provided by the coaches and assistant coaches consisted of contact numbers of the players/ parents/ guardian. Further procedure comprised of contacting the athletes and parents of the athletes via phone call and WhatsApp application. It followed by briefing of the research topic and asking for the consent of the parents regarding participation of their sons/daughters in the research. The athlete’s parents have been informed by the research author about the purpose of the research and its methods. It was also informed that necessary ethical steps will be taken which is required by every other study involving human subjects. The parents or the athletes can pull out of the research at any moment they wish to. The questionnaire for the research topic was circulated via WhatsApp and email. Total of 142 questionnaire were circulated (boys = 87 and girls = 55) out of which 100 participants (boys = 57 and girls = 43) responded back.

- Response rate for boys = 65.51%
- Response rate for girls = 78.18%
Snow-ball sampling technique used for the above study. The data was segregated in two equal groups. The first group (Group A) consisted data of the athletes who have played/represented at any of the following three levels i.e. State Nationals, School Nationals, Nationals and District. Total respondents of Group A is 50 (boys = 32 and girls = 18). The second group (Group B) consisted data of the athletes who haven’t played the above three levels but participated in other local amateur level tournaments. Total respondent from Group B is 50 (boys = 25 and girls = 25). The sole purpose behind this bifurcation of the data is to have a similar kind of athletic mindset among all the participants which shall further eliminate the possibility of biased data.

For the measurement of competitive anxiety among the athletes participated Marten’s (1977) Sports Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) was used. SCAT is administered to determine competitive trait anxiety because it is a situation-specific inventory designed specifically to measure the trait of competitive anxiety. The test-retest reliability coefficient of SCAT is 0.77. The SCAT contains 15 items, 10 of which measure symptoms associated with anxiety. The five items that are not scored are included in the inventory to reduce the likelihood of an internal response-set bias.

2.4. Statistical Analysis: Total score of both the groups were calculated on the basis of the questionnaire. A comparative analysis between the first group and the second group was done in SPSS. Independent Sample T-Test was performed. The level of Significance was set at 0.05.

3. Results and Discussion:

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![Figure 1. SCAT Mean Score of Group A & Group B](image)

In Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances the significance (Sig.) value came to be 0.245 which is greater than 0.05 thus making it eligible for carrying out Independent T-Test.
Followed by the T-test the Sig. value came to be 0.000 which is lesser than 0.05 thus indicating that there is a significance difference between Group A and Group B.

Mean SCAT score of Group A = 24.88

Mean SCAT score of Group B = 18.62

According to Marten’s Sports Competition Anxiety Test (SCAT) any athlete scoring more than 24 are prone to suffer from sports anxiety and self doubt. The average score of Group A and Group B are 24.88 and 18.62 respectively as shown in the above Graph 1.0. The mean score determines that both the groups tend to suffer from competition anxiety but there is significant difference between the groups which has been shown through statistical analysis using SPSS. Thus we can conclude from the fact that whether it is a semi pro athlete or an amateur athlete competition anxiety is a major problem among all the young athletes. These further can lead to giving up on the sport entirely or serious degradation in performance. To minimize this issue first it is critical to understand first why children/teenagers participate in sport. Parents and coaches play a vital role in building up a sportsman like characteristics during the early days of any young athlete.

Children mainly indulge in sports to enjoy and have fun, to improve skills and ability they already have, to be with their peer group, to feel the thrill and excitement of contesting, to become fit. Parents and coaches should keenly notice that why exactly one particular children is participating in sport and secondly whether that children is having fun while participating in the sport. As a coach or a parent one should never ask them to compete to win rather ask them to compete to have fun. The primary goal of youth sports shouldn’t be to create a winning environment. It should focus on creating an atmosphere which provides an opportunity of mass participation, concentrating more on the ‘Fun’ factor of the sport, child-centric and work towards developing the skills of each and every athlete individually. Learning and developing new skills keep the young athletes motivated and simultaneously helps them to enhance previously learned skills. Furthermore, a young athlete experiencing positive attention and receiving a constructive feedback will contribute towards his/her continued participation. If given positive environment and a sense of belongingness, the children will always strive to try harder. More is the effort, more and more new skills are achieved. It is very obvious that winning makes everyone happy but it is not the epitome of success. Children should focus on performing individual activity instead of who won or lost. Success in sport should be measured in terms of personal growth and development, enjoyment out of the participation, skills learned and not by who won the contest. If parents and coaches help young minds to develop the above qualities, we would rather see a child play for a not so good team rather than sitting on the bench for a decent one. Win-at-all-cost mindset should not be incorporated with young athletes. Developing a positive sporting culture and nurturing the young talents should be the main focus of youth sport.

The prime reason behind dropping out from sports include overemphasis on winning the contest, negative environment, lack of opportunities, imbalance between social life and athletic life i.e. studies and other co-curricular activities.

Over 35% of the total number children around the globe who take part in youth sports quit after the first year of competing at a national level competition. 85% of the children who continue to play dropped out of organized sports all together between the ages of 10 and 17. The major reason for such a staggering figure is the fact that the young athletes are more focused on the part of winning the competition and not learning new skills and take happiness out of it. This kind of action develops immense mental set back which after some point becomes overwhelming for the young athletes to handle leading him/her to go through sports anxiety. Additional reason for a
young athlete to quit his/her sport, when pressure is being enforced by parents/coaches/peer groups\(^{(19)}\). The parent or coach yelled at the child for making mistakes during a competition or a training session. The verbal abuse associated with such behaviors creates a feeling of self-doubt within the child athlete\(^{(20)}\). It makes him perceives that his/her abilities are not good enough to play and compete which ultimately makes them quit their individual sport. The moment they think that they are not good enough it creates low intrinsic motivation within the child. Coaches, parents and peer groups adds more to the problem when they single out players/teams based on excellent performance with external rewards namely, Man Of the Match (MOM), good teams, best batsman, best swimmer, etc. This leads to demotivating and degrading the average and below average players and adding competitive stress to the athlete/team who received the award. Sport is not supposed to be an external medium to give stress to the young athletes rather it should be something they have fun while performing it. Once it becomes the other way around, children tend to quit the sport.

Understanding the different aspects of child participation in youth sport and the reasons why most of the young athletes tend to quit sport, it can be validated that sports psychologists are a must in youth sport and grass root level. With a deeper understanding of psychology of sports, a sports psychologist can help children to develop skills like mental toughness, goal settings which can be long and short term, managing and setting their expectations, positive visualization, and positive self-talk. Life skills like these apply both on and off the field. Discussed below are some of the ways a sports psychologist can help a child become a better athlete.

Sports Psychologist can help the young athletes to eliminate fear i.e. fear of losing, fear of embarrassment, and performance anxiety. Sports Psychologist can teach them mental skills such as confidence, focus, composure during pressure situation, believing in them, handling game intensity and trust in athletic ability.

Help prepare for a competition by applying the different mental skills mentioned above to specific situations in the field/court. Sometimes facing a serious injury can leave mental scars in the mind of a young athlete. Sports Psychologists can help overcome such injuries and make them comeback. Another way a Sports Psychologists can help them is to improve the efficiency and quality of training sessions. Many young athletes due to academic pressure do not get enough time to train. Sports psychologists can help such athletes to make the most out of their training time by understanding principles of performance and motor learning.

Sports Psychologist can have interactive sessions with parents regarding the different scientific approaches of sports psychology and how they can contribute towards making their sons and daughters a better athlete. Coach is perhaps the most important member of any team, it is very essential to maintain a great working relationship with the coach. Sport psychology can build a healthy relationship between the coach and the athletes and nurture it.

An issue that every athlete faces at some time irrespective of age and sex is the paradox of success. Especially with the young athletes, when one of them becomes successful, there are more distractions and more pressure pulling at that athlete. A Sport psychologist can help that athlete to address such problems, stay focused and help them continue to sustain their best performances. Sports Psychologists can help avoid too much focus on early specialization as young athletes are often not physiologically, socially, mentally and cognitively prepared for that early specialization.
4. Conclusion:
Young competitive athletes are not miniature elite athletes; they are a distinct client group to whom sport psychology practitioners increase in delivering the services. The objective of the study was to prove the fact that young athletes go through sports anxiety and sports psychologists can help them overcome such barriers. The statistical study of the data collected from the participants’ show that young athletes aging 14 to 18 suffer from competition anxiety. The results of the study also suggest that providing sport psychology services inside the athletes’ daily training routine and within their training groups, and informing and involving this environment (parents, coaches and others) as much as possible, is extremely important. It can be concluded that if sporting organizations (private sector and government sector both), academies, coaches, parents and sports psychology practitioners (SPP) work in a collaborative manner, it is more likely more and more youth will experience positive outcomes through sport, in particular better psychological development, improvement in physical health and lifelong recreational or elite level sports participation.

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