Global Academic and Scientific Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies (GASJMS)

Volume 3 | Issue 4, 2025

Journal Homepage: <u>https://gaspublishers.com/gasjms/</u> Email: <u>gaspublishers@gmail.com</u> ISSN: 2583-8970

The Case for Psychological Skills Training for High School Athletes

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Received: 20.05.2025 / Accepted: 18.06.2025 / Published: 25.06.2025

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15735472

Abstract

Original Research Article

This paper showcases the viability of psychological skills training (PST) for high school athletes by highlighting the extant literature about the program. PST is defined as an intervention that aims to facilitate improvement in athletic performance. The effectiveness of PST is well-established among elite-level athletes, specifically those in the professional, collegiate, and Olympic ranks. By reviewing previous studies on PST in high school settings and among youth athletes, emotion regulation, imagery training, self-talk, and pre-performance routines are identified as among the psychological skills that optimize improvement in athletic performance. PST has also been established to be effective in enabling life skills and personal development. A consulting model and a training model were discussed to serve as frameworks in the design and implementation of PST programs for high school athletes.

Keywords: Athletic Performance, Emotion Regulation, Imagery Training, Self-Talk, Life Skills

Citation: Santos, J. C. (2025). The case for psychological skills training for high school athletes. *Global Academic and Scientific Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies (GASJMS)*, *3*(4), 170-172.

The Case for Psychological Skills Training for High School Athletes

The intent of this paper is to demonstrate the viability of psychological skills training (PST) program for high school athletes. It highlights empirical evidence on the effectiveness of PST interventions in high school setting.

What is PST? Vealey (1988) described psychological skills training (PST) as the "techniques and strategies designed to teach or enhance mental skills that facilitate performance and a positive approach to competition" (p. 319). Inasmuch as athletic competitions are physical in nature, mental skills are necessary to be able to execute athletic abilities under tremendous pressure that characterizes sporting events. Hence, the main argument for PST is that the *mind* needs training in the manner the physical body does. Specifically, athletes need to learn coping skills and cognitive strategies to be better prepared in meeting the challenges of athletic competitions (Gould et al., 2014).

Extant literature showed that athletes at the collegiate, professional, and Olympics levels are the usual targets of PST interventions. Despite of the advancement in the field of developmental psychology, the developmental challenges and changes being experienced by still-developing young athletes are rarely considered in the delivery of and research in sport psychology services (Henriksen et al., 2014). As such, the case for PST programs for youth athletes had been previously raised. Vealey (1988) argued that PST programs are suited for youth athletes because they can easily adapt the skills taught in the interventions. Gucciardi and colleagues (2009) added that PST programs are beneficial for young athletes on and off the sport.

How effective is PST? The effectiveness of PST interventions for performance enhancement had been confirmed by several authors, most notable being the metaanalytic study of Brown and Fletcher (2017). From an initial sample of 3174 research papers, they selected 35 unique experimental studies using a set of rigorous criteria. The chosen papers have (1) sample participants at any age that competed in sport at any levels, (2) reports that included statistical data that calculated effect sizes, and (3) used parallel or crossover randomized experimental designs. Brown and Fletcher found that psychological and psychosocial interventions had moderate positive effects on athletic performance at post-intervention. They also concluded that interventions that were delivered by coaches have larger effects. They added that the effect of the interventions may last at least a month after the end of the PST programs. Interventions of the studies included in the metaanalysis ranged from 1 to 4 weeks. But Brown and Fletcher's (2017) study did not address which psychological skills were observed to be effective. Andersen (2009), however, had previously referred to relaxation, self-talk, imagery, goal setting,

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and concentration as the 'canon' of PST because these psychological skills are commonly utilized as components of interventions for athletic performance enhancement.

Does PST work among high school athletes? From a theoretical standpoint, the intent of PST programs for high school athletes is supported by the assumptions of Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model (Balyi et al., 2013), a framework for training athletes of all ages and all types and has influenced the policies of many national sports associations around the world (Ford et al., 2011; Lloyd et al., 2015). LTAD is a chronological and age-based model that addresses human developmental needs in sport and physical activity. More importantly, it is anchored on existing literature on human growth and development such as the concepts of 'windows of opportunity' and 'sensitive periods,' grounded on academic and scientific literature, and based on what people in the field, including the coaches and athletes themselves, have experienced to be effective, such as the design and implementation of age- and gender-specific youth athlete development model (Balvi et al., 2013; Ford et al., 2011; Llovd et al., 2015). The model argues that psychological skills training can begin as early as age 12 for boys and age 11 for girls.

Emotion regulation (Vast et al., 2010), imagery training (Simonsmeier & Buecker, 2017), self-talk (Chang et al., 2014), and pre-performance routines (Gröpel & Mesagno, 2017; Hazell et al., 2014; Perry & Katz, 2015) had been verified to improve high school athletes' sport performance. PST has proven its efficacy on personal development as well. A study of three international high schools revealed that psychological skills learned in sports are transferable to other domains of athletes' lives such as in academics and their lives in general (Hayden et al., 2015). The *International Society of Sport Psychology* (ISSP) for its part called for the inclusion of PST programs that aim to facilitate better life transition of youth athletes (Schinke et al., 2016).

Indeed, PST matters outside the realm of athletics. A survey of high school coaches cited several problems they have about their athletes, such as poor communication and listening skills and lack of motivation (Gould et al., 2006), which can be addressed by a PST program that is centered on life skills and personal development. Considering also that only a small number of high school athletes will eventually compete in the intercollegiate levels, and even smaller in the Olympic and professional ranks, the idea of implementing PST programs will help youth athletes prepare for life after and beyond sports. PST programs can likewise help athletes prepare for the loss of the athletic identity that is magnified during the competition years. A PST program can be designed in a way to facilitate both personal and athletic development.

What are the social psychological factors that affect youth athletes' performance? Jõesaar et al. (2012) concurred that environment plays an important role in the engagement and consequently in the performance of young athletes. Specifically, their findings showed that perceived autonomy support from coaches and task-involving peer motivational climate are significant predictors of athletes' intrinsic motivation. White and Zellner (1996) also examined the role of setting and gender in motivation. They determined that high school athletes were more ego-oriented than intercollegiate athletes, while female athletes are more task-oriented than male athletes in both high school and college levels. Sheridan and colleagues (2014) also confirmed that support from coaches, parents, and peers affects young athletes' experiences. These effects can be both positive, such as increased motivation, and negative, such as quitting from sport. They ascertained that coaches were the most prevalent provider of social support.

Visek et al. (2009) introduced the Youth Sport Consulting Model (YSCM) as a framework for the implementation and delivery of sport psychology services for youth sport teams and athletes. The model has six phases, namely, (1) Practitioner Considerations, (2) Initiating Contact, (3) Doing Sport Psychology, (4) Wrapping Up the Season and Consultation, (5) Assessing the Consulting Relationship, and (6) Termination and Continuation. Except for the first phase, all other phases are almost similar to the established protocol, clinical or otherwise, for practitioner-client relationship in sports. Practitioner Considerations apply to the exploration of the practitioner's interest in working with specific populations and setting up professional boundaries and philosophy. Working with certain age groups of athletes calls for appropriate approaches and skills that may not be suited for other age brackets. One of the strengths of the model is that it pays attention to the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development of youth athletes, whose developmental markers and milestones vary compared to their adult counterparts.

What are the best practice recommendations for high school level PST programs? In their research involving experienced sport psychology consultants as participants, Foster, Maynard and cohorts (2016) posited that practitioners working on PST programs for youth athletes should (1) have the necessary interpersonal and consultancy skills, (2) know how to relate to youth athletes by using appropriate language and establishing rapport, (3) be competent in using various medium of practice delivery (i.e., visual, physical, technological), and (4) facilitate high level of engagement. In addition, successful interventions involving competitive youth athletes require that they (1) "should be equipped with a holistic skills package that enables them to handle a number of existential challenges; (2) are embedded in an environment (coaches, experts, teammates, etc.) that should be involved in the interventions; and (3) interventions with young athletes should maintain a long-term focus" (Henriksen et al., 2014, p. 245). Finally, from an evaluation standpoint, Visek et al. (2009) emphasized the need for the use of outcome indicators from multiple parties (e.g., parents, coaches, athletes) to achieve a clear understanding of the effectiveness of the PST program or service provided.

CONCLUSION

The Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model is the overarching framework for the appropriateness of PST programs in high school. On the other hand, Youth Sport Consulting Model (YSCM) can be used as a guide for the implementation and delivery of PST programs. Extant literature

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has demonstrated that PST interventions are effective for performance enhancement and personal development of high school athletes. Emotion regulation, imagery training, self-talk, and pre-performance routines are psychological skills that showed to have predictive power in improving athletic performance. PST interventions can also be used to facilitate personal development and life skills development. Among social psychological factors, setting and social support are crucial in the performance enhancement of high school athletes.

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